

Methods of Asking

Build your case.

Going straight to a yes or no question—especially “Do you want to join?”—can cut off a conversation and result in a “no” before you’ve had an opportunity to build an effective case for joining PTA. Therefore, begin by asking nonthreatening, open-ended questions, such as, “You may be aware that parent involvement is important to a child’s success in school. What type of parent involvement activities would you like to see at your child’s school?” Always be respectful and aware of the prospective member’s time. If someone is late for a meeting, don’t corner him or her in the hall. Instead, find a time to talk that is good for both of you; 15 minutes is usually sufficient. Don’t forget to ask for the membership. It’s easy to get into the conversation, enjoy the rapport, and then forget to make “the ask.”

“The ask” should be powerful, personal, and meaningful.

Typically, membership “asks” are made to large groups of parents—often at a Back-to-School night or assembly, for example. You can help the success of that “ask” by making eye contact with parents, asking if they have questions, and sharing why PTA is important for your school. Most important, be sure to tell parents, “When PTA gets involved, children benefit; when you get involved in PTA, the child who benefits most is your own.”

Use the “backpack express” only as a supplementary route for recruitment.

For decades, PTAs have placed invitations, event announcements, and PTA communications in children’s backpacks, hoping these materials would make it safely home to the parents. This method may have worked better when parents felt more obligated to join PTA, but those days are past. Faced with many choices of where to spend their resources, parents will weigh their involvement in PTA against other competing interests. If other groups make face-to-face “asks,” explaining in detail why the parents should be involved, while PTA is sending home fliers that may or may not make it out of children’s bags, then PTA is not going to win as many members. The “backpack express” can certainly be used as a reminder, just as e-mail can be used to follow up. However, if it is the only method of recruitment, your membership efforts will not be seen as personal, powerful, or meaningful, and membership may actually decline.

Overcome objections

Most objections to joining PTA fall into one of four areas:

- Time
- Impact
- Perceived value
- Cost

Following are some suggestions for responding to those objections.

Time. When parents say they don't have time to join PTA, what they are probably saying is that they don't want to volunteer dozens of hours each week. Some people think that to be a PTA member you have to be a volunteer. Therefore, you need to explain that PTA appreciates everyone's membership, whether or not the member volunteers, because each member increases PTA's ability to advocate for children. It's true that PTA cannot operate without volunteers, but if you emphasize volunteering and dissuade individuals from joining altogether, you'll never have them as members or as volunteers.

Impact. Parents want to know if their membership in PTA is going to have a positive impact, if it will benefit their children. You can tell them, emphatically, "Yes!" Decades' worth of research shows that when parents are involved, students perform better in school. They receive higher grades and test scores, have better school attendance and lower rates of suspension, are more likely to graduate high school, and are more likely to pursue postsecondary education. Children of involved parents also exhibit increased motivation, better self-esteem, less drug and alcohol use, and fewer instances of violent behavior. Those great benefits come from parent involvement, a major focus of PTA.

Perceived value. Explain to prospects what they receive for their membership dues. In addition to materials and benefits from the local and state PTA, members receive these benefits from the national PTA organization:

- Online access to select articles from *Our Children* magazine
- *The PTA Parent*, an electronic newsletter published biweekly that covers parenting topics
- *This Week in Washington*, an electronic newsletter produced when Congress is in session that explains national legislation affecting families and public education
- Exclusive discounts, offers, and promotions from national companies
- Free e-learning courses on PTA basics, as well as on subjects such as conflict resolution and goal setting, that can be applied to members' personal lives
- Discounted member rates for the PTA National Convention and on subscriptions to the print version of *Our Children*
- Access to join the Member-to-Member Network, the grassroots advocacy system that connects PTA members with members of Congress

People like to join organizations that make a difference in the lives of others, are educational and beneficial to the community, allow them to network with successful people, and provide opportunities to have fun. Highlight that your members have opportunities to mix with diverse individuals through local PTA activities. Emphasize once again that the number one benefit of PTA membership for parents is the ability to help their children. For many parents, that is reason enough to join.

Cost. PTA membership is one of the most cost-effective investments parents can make in their children's education and schools. For an average of two cents a day, parents can help improve their children's school experiences. And, as a result, PTA members are better connected to their schools, are better informed, and have access to money-saving discounts and benefits.

Scripts for Overcoming Objections

Objection #1: "I don't have the time!"

Possible replies:

■ "I can certainly understand that. It's not the amount of time you can contribute that's most important, but rather your commitment to help PTA make a difference in the lives of children. You don't have to be a volunteer to be a member. Our members are involved in many activities in addition to PTA. We value their time and strive to use it effectively." (Give examples of events or projects that might appeal to this person.)

■ "Your time is valuable, and we certainly value any time you could provide. However, we understand that you may not be able to make a commitment of time. Please consider joining to show your support of our efforts; you can decide how much time you invest in volunteering. We will keep you informed of our activities, and we welcome your input."

Objection #2: "I don't have any children in school!"

Possible replies:

■ "You don't have to have children in school to belong to PTA—anyone who cares about children belongs in our organization. It is important that we all have a voice in the decision-making process relating to the laws and regulations that affect children. You can have that voice through PTA. Every child needs you. You *will* make a difference."

■ "Many of our members do not have children or have children that are grown up. The common ground is the belief that we can collectively make a difference that will affect our next generation. Our future depends on preparing all children. Don't you agree?"

Objection #3: "I don't agree with a lot of the PTA positions!"

Possible replies:

■ "The only way to avoid disagreement is to adopt a 'do-nothing' policy. As a grassroots organization, our policies are determined by a democratic process. We welcome your involvement in this effort. It is through members like you that our direction is determined."

Objection #4: “Your organization doesn’t really do anything!”

Possible replies:

■ “I cannot speak for what may have happened in previous years, but let me bring you up-to-date on what we are doing now.” (List current activities, programs, accomplishments, etc.) “As you see, we are a very active group, doing many things that benefit all our children. On a state and national level, PTA has been instrumental in many initiatives from which all children have benefited. We have a long history of accomplishments.” (Have a list of accomplishments at the state and national level available for reference.) “We need time, funds, and goodwill from people like you to keep it happening.”

■ “PTA has nearly 6 million members across the country and a history of accomplishments going back more than 100 years. Locally, we have been able to influence positive changes for children, such as _____ (list accomplishments). It is only through the work of our members that we are able to make a difference. That’s why you are so important to us. Join us and help us advocate for our children.”

■ “There is so much for us to do, but we need people like you. Join us and help us do even more.”

Objection #5: “Not right now—maybe later!”

Possible replies:

■ “If you put off being part of PTA, you may miss out on having your voice heard when it is needed most. Our members are the heart of the organization and, by participating in PTA activities, determine the course of action we need to take. Please make the time to put children first.”

Objection #6: “I just can’t join another organization. I belong to too many already!”

Possible replies:

■ “I know that there are many good organizations to belong to, and it is difficult to support them all. But I think PTA is very special. Let me tell you a little about what we are doing. I find it helps to have information when I’m making a choice.” (Talk about the value of PTA.) “Remember, PTA works to prevent problems and, of course, address those concerns that affect us right now. We really need people like you in PTA.”

Additional Tips for Making “The Ask”

Be yourself. If you’re genuine and your reasons for joining ring true, people will be more likely to join. Don’t be afraid to explain why you became a member, and why you believe PTA is a good organization with which to be associated.

Be enthusiastic. When you show excitement and enthusiasm about PTA, it’s infectious. But if you are uninspired, your listeners will be too.

Offer them a challenge. Tell prospective members what PTA has accomplished in the past, and challenge them to contribute to the bright future of PTA at your school.

Draw on your own recruiting experiences. Reflect on your own experiences with good and bad membership recruitments, and try to emulate techniques that work for you.

Don't apologize. You don't have to apologize for respectfully asking people to join an organization in which you believe.

Come prepared. Showing up is half the battle; being organized is the other half. Your attention to detail strengthens the PTA's reputation and demonstrates respect and concern for a potential member's time.

Don't put off "the ask." Many people want to put off the "unpleasantness" of asking for membership dues until the very end of a meeting or event. If you leave the important business of membership until the end, you may run out of time to answer questions and overcome objections, and you risk having people leave before you have a chance to ask them to join.

Bring backup. Bring another PTA volunteer to help you. People join for different reasons, and giving people the opportunity to talk to another member might help sell them on PTA. Ask the volunteer to give a testimonial as to why he or she joined and what the experience has been like.

Make lemons into lemonade. Sometimes even the most reluctant person can be turned around. While some people may just be looking for an excuse not to join, others may have a legitimate concern that's keeping them from joining. Maybe they volunteered last year but were never thanked. Maybe they had a conflict with another member. Try to find the source of their reluctance. Don't let concerns or complaints go unresolved.

Don't be argumentative. Sometimes you just have to accept "no" for an answer. While it's OK to clarify any misgivings or misinformation someone may have about PTA, be respectful of other opinions and choices. An argument will be remembered long after your membership drive is over. If you show you understand why someone can't join right now, you won't turn him or her off to joining later.

Don't take rejection personally. If the person you ask to join PTA says "no," don't take it personally. He or she has simply decided not to take advantage of the opportunity you have offered. Be sure to ask again later—the answer might be different. Feel good about all the people who say "yes." At the end of the day, you will have done a great deal of good.

Follow through. If you promise someone an answer, provide one in a timely manner. If you agree to meet, be there.

Say thank you. Everyone appreciates acknowledgment. It is possible that the potential members you are approaching were members elsewhere for years. Thank them for their support. Thank nonmembers for their time. Thank everyone for his or her attention. If prospective members know their membership not only makes a difference but also is appreciated, they will be more likely to join.