

UNITED STATES POWER SQUADRONS®
Basic Public Education Committee
How to Promote Boating Courses to the Public

Do you think the America's Boating Course 3rd Edition (ABC3) serves only to promote safe boating? Well, it does promote safe boating, but it also serves another *critical* function: gaining new members to continue and enlarge our boating education promotional efforts. These two goals for our public courses coexist nicely, creating a win-win proposition for both students and our squadrons.

We need new members to attend member courses, serve on squadron committees, and assume leadership roles as officers. Where do they come from? Our public boating education classes! Nearly all USPS members join by way of our public classes, despite the fact that other avenues of qualification have recently been opened to them. Now that we offer the public a continuum of education from ABC3 through our Advanced Grade (AG) and Elective (EC) courses, with evolving on-the-water education complementing classroom courses, our opportunities are terrific.

If your squadron is typical, you lose 10% to 20% of your membership every year. Unless you replace those members, year after year, your squadron will die. Our expanded educational public programs will if properly promoted come to your rescue.

Here are some ideas for you to consider to promote your squadron's public courses and help keep your squadron healthy and growing. The primary reference for public relations (PR) is the USPS PR and Marketing Log Book (PRO-LOG) available on the USPS web site home page.

Timing

When you offer a public course may be critical. Most squadrons have limited PR funds. Be opportunistic with your promotional effort: pick starting dates for your public classes that closely follow events related to boating activities:

- **Boat Shows.** Staff a booth; share it with other squadrons in the area. USPS PRO-LOG shows three 8-foot booths and two pop-up canopies available for use.
- **Harbor Parades or Season Opening Day.** Staff a booth; handout flyers; use and decorate a member's boat, etc.
- **Parades for Holidays and Celebrations.** (e.g., Labor Day, 4th of July, Memorial Day). Join in to increase awareness of your squadron; build a float; plaster an auto with signs; staff a booth; walk along the parade route passing out flyers and giveaways (some of which you may be able to obtain free from your state boating law administrator).
- **National Safe Boating Week.** Summer classes *do* work. In summer, people think about boating. If your squadron is not scheduling summer public class, you may be surprised at how effectively they attract students.

Location

One key to a full public course classroom is where the class is held; select a place with good, safe parking. Students don't want to come to an unsafe location; they're there for fun, not unexpected, unwanted, or undesirable excitement.

- **Yacht Clubs** are excellent venues, usually at no cost if you make a special effort to include the club's members and offer the idea that non-club-member students may become future club members later.

- **Marine Stores** may have a separate conference or meeting room—and may be willing to promote the course for you, as well, to bring students/customers (back) into the store.

New and Used Boat Dealerships using incentive programs such as the BRUNSWICK Program where the dealer markets student materials and the local squadron conducts the boating classes. (Review the BRUNSWICK program on the Educational Department Web site.)

- **Banks and S&Ls** are often happy to provide free meeting rooms and good after-hours parking; this is a public service that enhances these institutions' community involvement.

- **Schools** often charge a custodial fee, but you may pass that fee on to the students as a facilities charge in addition to the charges for course materials.

Class Hours

The best time to start and end your class is determined by your students, that is, your customers:

- Students coming straight from work may find starting at 1800 or 1830, and ending at 2000 or 2030 works best, but students coming from home may prefer a 1900 or 1930 starting time; from what locations are your students most likely to come?

- For students with young families, or who must be at work early in the morning, ending class on time is imperative; keep your instructors to a time schedule and end every class session on time.

- In suburban areas, consider weekend classes; many who work in the city might be happy to attend on Saturday—or even Sunday—classes to save their weekday evening time for commuting, resting, and family activities.

- Afternoon courses may be an excellent opportunity to attract retirees, and may provide a rewarding activity (and a merit mark) for “retired” instructors, or those preferring not to drive after dark.

Prepare a questionnaire about class schedules, hours, and locations; ask your students to complete it at the beginning of every public course to help you plan future classes.

How Often Should You Offer Public Courses?

As often as your squadron can manage! Offer ABC3 at least 6 times a year if possible. Intersperse monthly USPS University Seminars. And offer your Advanced and Elective classes to the public concomitantly to conducting them for your squadron. Many people are flexible in scheduling outside activities; if you haven't publicized and offered a summertime public course during the past few years, you may be missing out on an outstanding opportunity.

Here's another idea: a scheduled January/February class may provide an opportunity to sell Christmas gift certificates for that class. Boater's kids may be eager to send Dad and Mom to a class as a Christmas gift, and love to attend a Boating Safety for Kids class while their folks are in the classroom for ABC3.

Promotion

Not all advertising costs money! Review the many ideas in the PRO-LOG) found on the USPS web site home page. Here are some examples, many of which are free:

- **Boating Publications** often include a calendar of events, but remember that many publications require a long lead-time, perhaps 90 days or more.
- **Local Area Publications** often provide space for class and event listings at no charge (check their lead times to assure your schedule will be published before the class begins).
- **Newspapers** usually publish articles about open-to-the-public activities beginning a day or two after the publication date, but this may be too late for some potential students; ask for the article, but ask to be included in an earlier-published community calendar, too.
- **Newspaper Advertisements** cost money, but they can be very effective; don't forget to contact your district PRO to place your class information in District and adjacent squadron newsletters.
- **Window and Counter Posters** may be ordered from USPS Headquarters (PRO-LOG) at no cost; place these in the locations listed below—*after* you receive permission to do so:
 - √ Marinas
 - √ Boat Yards
 - √ Yacht Clubs
 - √ Marine Supply Stores
 - √ Libraries
 - √ Boat Dealers
 - √ Bait & Tackle Shops
 - √ Boat Rental Shops (PWCs, sailboats, runabouts, charter companies, etc.)
 - √ Park Districts
 - √ Schools
 - √ Shopping Centers
 - √ YMCA and YWCA Bulletin Boards
 - √ If the USCG has a boating education information office in your area, send a flier to that office
 - √ Squadron members' places of employment
- **Free Flyers** for our safe-boating courses, in four-color, may be ordered from USPS Headquarters (PRO-LOG), and your squadron may print announcements with your ABC3 class; distribute them by:
 - √ Placing them on cars at launch ramps, *after* you receive permission to do so.
 - √ Handing them out at boat launching ramps, (be extra careful to avoid interfering with launching activities)

√ Using them as counter handouts at any of the locations discussed above (consider ordering holders for the four-color boating course handouts from Headquarters)

√ Placing them on public bulletin boards at stores, schools, offices, etc., (obtain permission first) together with USPS posters.

√ Using them as handouts at meetings; at squadron meetings, ask all attendees to give one handout to one person they know who is interested in boating, and ask for help distributing extra copies to the locations described in the preceding paragraph

Tip: Join with neighboring squadrons to publish schedules for all squadrons on a single flyer, sharing the cost and the distribution effort.

• **Mailing** announcements or flyers costs money, but can be very effective. Send these to:

√ Students who didn't complete your last public course

√ Centers of influence, i.e., Commodores of Yacht Clubs, Presidents of boating groups, Training Director US Coast Guard, etc.

√ Other squadrons and CG Auxiliaries in your area; knowing your course schedule, they can direct prospects to your course (remember your squadron needs to reciprocate)

√ Governmental Units responsible for patrolling the waters in your area such as: harbor and marine police, sheriff's department, and park rangers, etc.

• **Radio and TV Stations**, depending on your location and availability may be willing to help:

• **Radio.** Send copies of the 10, 20, 30, and/or 60 second spot Public Service Announcements (PSA) with public course details to local radio stations; an outline is contained in the publication by the National PR Committee entitled, *How to Run A Successful Public Relations Campaign for the USPS Boating Course*

√ Identify Stations you've heard discussing local events in the past, and send a letter offering to provide your squadron's best public speaker to talk about boating safety during National Safe Boating Week, Opening Day, etc.

• **NOAA Weather Broadcast.** In preparation for Safe Boating Week, send a copy of the 10, 20, 30, and 60 second spot Public Service Announcements (PSA) with boating class details, asking your squadron PRO to help by obtaining guidance from the PRO Manual available from Headquarters.

• **Cable-TV and Local TV Stations.** Send a listing of your squadron's boating class schedule for inclusion on their community calendar

• **PBS-TV.** Send your local PBS station a letter about your squadron's involvement in safe boating education, with a suggestion (and offer of help) to do an on-the-air program about safe boating on local waters, etc.

• **Telephone.** Ask a squadron member knowledgeable about the ABC3 class, and willing to discuss course details with the public, to be your squadron's telephone contact person and registrar. Arrange for a local telephone number for the public

to call with questions about the schedule of public courses and USPS in general, and to sign up to take a course.

- √ List the phone number in flyers and other PR and promotional materials
- √ Program an answering machine at the phone number with information about your squadron's public course schedule; if the machine's operation allows, include a *very brief* statement about the goal of USPS to save lives through boating education.

√ If affordable, buy a yellow pages listing. Review your local yellow pages to determine the best listing for your area (e.g., Education, Boating Instruction, etc.).

- **Boat/US Hot Line.** Check the class information they have listed for your squadron's boating classes (1-888-336-BOAT). If there are any errors, correct them by filing a new HQ-800, and HQ will forward your corrections to Boat/US.
- **Ask USPS Headquarters** for the current list of public courses (1-888-FOR-USPS); check the USPS public web page to ensure your squadron's class information is current and correct.
- **Internet / Facebook / LinkedIn and You Tube.** These media distribution sites are the fastest-growing methods of communications. USPS HQ Marketing will help you set them up and help populate them. Some squadrons report that 25% of their students come from inquiries about their course listings on squadron, district, and the national web pages. If your squadron isn't participating, you may be missing a great opportunity. The USPS web page lists information about public courses scheduled by squadrons across the country with distribution links to state and even BoatUS.
- **USPS Website Public Pages With Boating Class Schedules.** Check to see that the information listed for your squadron is current. Check the accuracy of the dates, locations, times, and contact person and phone number. If there are any errors, omissions, or additions, correct them using the "managing courses" tab on the Educational Department Home page which places you in the HQ-800 system.

SEO Reminders

Complete your class arrangements several months in advance to give your PRO adequate time to promote the class. Providing the information just a few weeks before a class begins does not allow enough time to get the word out to potential students. Be sure to consider the on-the-water (OTW) options for the class you are offering.

As soon as your class arrangements are complete, enter the information into the HQ-800 system: the sooner the better. The preferred data-entry method is online, via the USPS website, Educational Department Home Page. You will find complete, up-to-date HQ-800 instructions there by merely clicking on the pull-down tab "Manage Public Programs."

The online method automatically updates (a) HQ's database used for hotline calls, (b) the class schedules listed on the USPS public portion of the web page, and (c) Boat/US's boating information hotline. Online filing using the HQ800 System is also the best method to add to or correct earlier-filed information.

Webmasters

Maximize the utility of your squadron and/or district web pages; send your public course class schedule to the webmaster(s) for posting.

Squadron PRO

In most cases, your squadron's Public Relations Officer (PRO) is not a PR professional. A thorough and extensive assistance is provided in the PRO-LOG web site. It contains excellent materials in a single source, detailed manual. However, your PRO always needs help from other squadron members. Find out what your PRO is comfortable doing, and ask other members to fill in any gaps.

Why is PR so important? Because the future of your squadron is directly linked to your public course enrollment to generate new members. Without PR, your public courses will have no enrollment. Without publication of your continuum of boating education opportunities, you will have no students and no new members.

Approach your public course enrollment as you would any other job—with vigor and determination! The number of students in your classes will be the measure of your success. Keep your classrooms filled!

Good luck in developing, or enhancing, your squadron's PR activities to gain students in your boating classes. Please let us know how these suggestions helped. Also, tell us about any additional ways you find to get out the word about your squadron's public course schedule, and we'll share it with others. Let's watch USPS grow!