

Success Keys From One of America's Best Nets?

There are fun nets and there boring nets. Some are well attended, others have many no-shows. Here's what keeps a remarkably high percentage of California's popular Goldcoast Net coming back week after week.

By Ernie Sloan W6ND and John Portune W6NBC

In the rural agricultural town of Santa Maria on California's central coast, 75% of eighty+ regular net members show up every single week. Unheard of, you say? Not so. 66 made at least one straight two month period during the year. This earned them an attractive attendance certificate (different each year), suitable for framing, figure 1. But beyond than that, 22 didn't miss a single net all year! They received the bonus of a handsome name and callsign button, figure 2.

THE GOLD COAST NET RADIOGRAM <small>VIA AMATEUR RADIO</small>							
NUMBER 2011	PRECEDENCE HIGH	ICE	STATION OF ORIGIN W6NBC/W6ND	CHECK	PLACE OF ORIGIN SANTA MARIA, CA	TIME FILED	DATE JAN 1, 2012
TO ERNIE SLOAN AMATEUR RADIO STATION W6ND					THIS RADIO MESSAGE WAS RECEIVED AT AMATEUR STATION _____ PHONE _____ NAME _____ STREET ADDRESS _____ CITY AND STATE _____		
THE REGENTS OF THE GOLD COAST NET OFFICIALLY ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR FAITHFUL WEEKLY ATTENDANCE, MONDAY NIGHTS, 7:30PM, ON THE VAN LYONS MEMORIAL REPEATER, 146.70 MHZ. STOP							
TO QUALIFY, YOU CHECKED IN ALL WEEKS FOR 6 OF THE 6 TWO-MONTH PERIODS FOR THE CALENDAR YEAR OF 2011. STOP							
REC'D	FROM GOLD COAST NET	DATE JAN 1, 2012	TIME	SENT	TO CENTRAL COAST HAM	DATE JAN 1, 2012	TIME
THIS MESSAGE WAS HANDLED FREE OF CHARGE BY A LICENSED AMATEUR RADIO OPERATOR, WHOSE ADDRESS IS SHOWN IN THE BOX AT THE RIGHT ABOVE. AS SUCH, MESSAGES ARE HANDLED SOLELY FOR THE PLEASURE OF OPERATING. NO COMPENSATION CAN BE ACCEPTED BY A "HAM" OPERATOR. A RETURN MESSAGE MAY BE FILED WITH THE "HAM" DELIVERING THIS MESSAGE TO YOU. FURTHER INFORMATION ON AMATEUR RADIO MAY BE OBTAINED FROM A.R.R.L. HEADQUARTERS, 205 MAIN STREET, NEWINGTON, CN 06111				THE GOLD COAST NET MEETS EVERY MONDAY EVENING AT 7:30 PM ON THE VAN LYONS REPEATER, 146.700 MHZ, PL 127.3. THE REPEATER IS LOCATED ON VIEW HILL, NEAR US 101 IN ARROYO GRANDE, CA. CHECK-INS CONSISTENTLY RUN OVER 75%. BESIDES A ROLL-CALL OF 70-80 MEMBERS, THE NET FEATURES LOCAL HAM RADIO NEWS, INFORMATION AND EDUCATIONAL FEATURES FOR AMATEUR RADIO OPERATORS ON THE CENTRAL COAST OF CALIFORNIA. WWW.GOLDCOASTNET.COM			

Figure 1: 2011 Good Attendance Certificate based on an ARRL Radiogram. Last year's was a repro of a First Class Radiophone License from 1960.



Figure 2: Name and Callsign Button for not missing a single net in 2011. That's the repeater in the background.

What sustains our net, one of the most popular in the USA? Here are the clues. Maybe you can use some of them on your own net and/or share your techniques with us.

A Well Perceived Purpose

The number one key to a successful net, has always been that nobody, faithful or not, takes regular time out of a busy schedule for an activity that doesn't serve them. So think about your net. If it has a long list of no-shows, why does it exist in the first place? If members do not perceive its purpose as a value to them – devise one. The mere exercise of checking in week after week is not enough.

At our weekly net coffee klatch, we developed the following list of reasons why our members keep coming back.

1. Fun and sociality
2. Recognition and contact
3. Discipline
4. News, education, and events
5. Consistency

Fun and Sociality

Ham radio is a technical pursuit. It also serves well in emergencies. But at the Goldcoast net we feel that hams engage in our hobby far more often primarily for sociality. If you believe a net should be a matter-of-fact military-style exercise, or a purely “techno-geek” forum – fine, but our opinion is that your attendance will be low. A bald test of radio equipment, laced with sterile-sounding procedures and even tactical or phonetic callsigns, does not make an interesting net.

Hams generally don't think about their buddies as Whisky Six November Bravo Charlie, but W6NBC or just NBC (That's me). Even during emergencies, overly-formal jargon can be counterproductive. Stiffness does not equate to efficiency. Instead, our four regular net controllers emphasize warmth, casualness, friendliness and sociability. More than anything else, the Goldcoast net is fun and relaxed.

Take a frank look at your net controllers. Are they people that other people “enjoy” talking to? Do they have good speaking skills? Or are they frustrated drill sergeants or worse yet, opinionated “technical gurus?” That is, is their personality warm, professional, open, flexible and positive? Are they personable or are they grinchies? Can they tell a good story at the right moment, within limits of course, or are they “all business?” If so, it may be time for a change.

Further, does your net put on fun and friendly outside social events where members can meet each other? This is vital. We

gather for an all-net breakfast at an inexpensive restaurant every three months and it is always well attended.

There's a one-item swap table and give-away items such as magazines or surplus equipment. And we load out equipment, such as an older HF transceiver to a new General. We also meet weekly for a coffee klatch. And in the summer we may have a picnic, swap meet or an auction. Social interaction is far more than window dressing for a successful net. Many think of our net much like a radio club on the air.

Recognition and Contact

Frequently overlooked on nets is the basic human need for personal recognition. It's very important, especially for certain age groups. Simple personal acknowledgement may actually be the ONLY reason some check in regularly. It's the high spot of their week just to hear their name called. Get to know which of your members attend for this reason and take a moment to engage them briefly in more than just a check in.

In fact, we believe that a small personal comment or question should be a part of EVERY check in. At a bare minimum, address the not only by callsign but also by name. It "lights them up" and brings them back. The purpose of a successful net is not just to mechanically call roll, it is touching human beings.

Further, always thank them for checking in. They want to know that you appreciate them. Strive also to remember their personal interests. This is an excellent way for net controllers to evoke brief individual chit-chat. Personal comments are never a waste of time. Especially, don't forget to mention their accomplishments such as upgrading to a higher ham license class!

We have also had good success with randomly picking out a single member each week and giving them a couple of minutes for a short synopsis of their life and ham experience. The other members always enjoy this. Many feel a need to get to know

the local ham community better. It's not just Joe or XYZ, but a real person.

Further, foster a sense of community. In small towns especially, net members naturally do this. Many feel responsible for their neighbors. And isn't that what your net members are, neighbors? But if the tone of your net feels like boot camp, they won't come back.

Also, many of them highly value "health and welfare" news of other members. In civil disasters, H & W is a major part of ham traffic. We received a nice e-mail recently from a member saying that staying in contact with his ham friends is the main reason he comes. Stay sensitive to this.

For example, a elderly member recently got his Technician License at a local ham license testing session and was very proud of it. Soon he was on the net every week. Sadly, not long after, he developed serious health problems and became a silent key. Many members, including me, were happy via the net just to have known him in a small way in his last days.

Discipline

But from a different perspective, a certain amount of net discipline is equally important, even on a casual net. Here is a prime example from Goldcoast net experience. Four years ago we doubled net attendance overnight by initiating accurate attendance records and putting them on the net's Web Site (goldcoastnet.com). Among other benefits to the net it lets us send out yearly recognition certificates and other good attendance bonuses.

Another productive method is to accept early AND late check-ins. We provide them a handy form on the Web Site. They may check for just one week or for several weeks in advance, and even one day late. It lets them show their interest but still be free to go on trips, vacations and to fulfill family responsibilities. Many have in a remarkable variety of ways, including e-mail, letters and of course word of mouth. Echolink by cell phone is

now common. We expect one day to even entertain a Carrier Pigeon check in.

However, right along with making it easy to check in, we do scrupulously also keep our roster free of members who check in indifferently. We make it plain in the weekly preamble, that we stop calling them after four straight misses. We've found that a long roster of of no-shows is discouraging to the regulars. Haven't you ever chuckled at a net that continues to call a silent key for weeks? Then we only put members back on when they later check in three times in a row. Both these rules make it clear who is truly interested in the net.

Indifferent check-ins vanished overnight and our totals immediately increased. Several members who had only been showing up only when they felt like it, are now regulars. They know we value the net as much as we want them to.

As I mentioned, we also added Echolink to the repeater, to permit remote live check-ins. One ex-local member, who now lives half way across the country, will receive his first good attendance certificate this year because of Echolink. We even provide a special check in segment just for Echolink users.

This has caused us to get check-ins from around the world. The most interesting came from WB6MIA, Fred, north of the arctic circle on a cruise boat near Norway! Our Echolink connection is cleverly designed to have no delay. Otherwise it would be hard for a remote member to break in. If you would like the details of how this was accomplished, send us an e-mail via our Web Site, goldcoastnet.com.

News, Education, Events and Swap Items

Thirdly, high on the list of net-promoting techniques is to have "extra" features beyond just check-ins. These needn't be lengthy, but should be something hams perceive as useful and don't want to miss. Ernie, W6ND, co-author here, initiated this several years ago with his entertaining "Question of the Week." It is not necessarily technical, but mainly for fun, though it is

always related to ham radio, trivia, history or little-known facts, or even just opinions. He'll be happy to e-mail you some of the questions he's used over the years.

Included in Question-of-the-Week fun is hearing Ernie get "bombarded" with cyber rocks for trying to fool us with slightly ambiguous wording. He says there are no trick questions, but we all know better. Several episodes have raised major "clouds of dust," but everyone had fun anyway. What's more, Ernie is "always" right. The answer in his envelope is "the final answer." Just remember, a net is not a meeting of the IEEE.

We also have a professional weather man, W7RAQ, John, who gives a quick synopsis of what's coming up next week. I, W6NBC, John, often write a 90 second item called "Ham Spot." Sometimes it's technical. At other times it is about a local ham's doings. Or it has been something new in ham radio just a change in radio law.

One Ham Spot stimulated a number of members to try out right after the net the digital modes on HF and the lesser-used bands like 30 Meters and 60 Meter. Another prompted several QSO's with the International Station when Col. Doug Wheelock was up there hamming.

Michael, KI6UAL, one of our regular net controllers is an avid amateur astronomer. He often writes a brief feature on interesting up-coming astronomical events and the activity on the sun. As many DXers know, the sun has been quite busy recently. So he always closes, in fun, by encouraging members to "pray for sun spots."

Be sure, though, to write out these little features as an actual script in order to keep them brief. Professional TV and radio announcers have long recognized the importance of the brevity of scripting. And while we are on the subject, edit the techno-jargon out of your regular net opening script or preamble. Yes, a tight net script is important, for brevity and professionalism. But there is no reason it can't be casual and friendly too. Your

preamble is not a briefing for white-knuckled pilots preparing to go on a bombing run.

Another major value to members are QST's and announcements of general interest. In this section, the controller calls for member announcements of club meetings, breakfasts, T-hunts, license testing sessions and other up-coming events. Many members depend on these to avoid missing out on important up-coming events.

Ernie, W6ND is also our trafficker in used ham equipment. A little of this each week goes a long way in keeping members coming back. Many enjoy listening for a possible bargain that they can't live without. The listings remain only for five weeks. Members may email or phone Ernie or tell him on the repeater what they have. Be particularly careful to keep the swap segment brief.

Consistency

We also have had suggestions to change the net, such as by calling the roster backwards. Take our advise – DON'T. As nice as variety may be, members depend on consistency. At times they can't listen to the whole net, but know when their turn comes up. Also start on time. Most of our controllers have atomic clocks in their shacks and begin on the dot. Additionally, we pre-announce the net, five minutes in advance, to prevent rag chews from springing up right ahead of the net.

There is no magic to a successful net, just effective keys. And we are truly interested in your input. If you have further ideas, that have increased the attendance at your net, please let us know. Further, and as a parting thought, think about the repeater your net runs on. Is it the most-popular repeater in your area? We feel that it probably should be. A low-coverage garage repeater won't likely sustain a successful net. Our net's repeater has a very wide coverage area.

Also, if you would like to take a look at our net script, examine our roster, see examples of the "Question of the Week," or

hear a shortened audio version of a recent net, you will find all this on goldcoastnet.com. The net meets every Monday night at 7:30 PM on the Van Lyons Memorial repeater in Arroyo Grande CA, on 146.7(-), PL 127.3. Why not even join us on Echolink, KA6BFB-R. Visitors are always welcomed.

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