

Hire student nurses? Get better results at the NSNA convention!

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Let's talk about hiring new graduate nursing students. This may be of more interest to large hospitals than those in the clinics for several reasons: hospitals are facing acute nursing shortages, they have more resources to mentor and train the graduate nurse, and most new graduates are initially interested in acute care experience.

Even if you work in a clinic, read on. The principles should still apply.

Nurse recruitment challenges

It is not news that healthcare organizations are scrambling to find nurses. It is not uncommon for midsize hospitals to be utilizing 100+ traveler nurses. In fact, I was recently contacted by an agency that was looking for housing for 150 traveler nurses. These were all to work at one hospital. The agency was hoping to up the appeal of the location by providing centralized housing for the travelers.

Hospitals are spending big bucks on filling these positions. There are big advantages to having "your own" nurses rather than depending upon outside agencies. These advantages include economic, quality, and culture.

This means that hospitals get very creative in looking for nurses. If they don't already exist, they create weekend option programs, re-entry programs for nurses who have been out of the workforce, and student nurse mentoring/development programs.

Most hospitals already have a student nurse program. If there are local nursing schools, the hospital should have a close relationship with them including allowing the faculty and students onsite for clinical studies. However, when that is not enough, we need to reach out to other sources of nursing students.

Student nurse convention

One big source of potential nursing graduates, is the NSNA (National Student Nurse Association) Convention. It is next scheduled for April 12-16, 2023 in Nashville, TN. This attracts many student nurses and I believe the largest reason is to interact with potential employers and compare “packages”. I mention this now because it is only six months away. If you are going to participate, you need to lock that in now and develop a winning approach.

Every hospital I have worked at had a robust student nurse program. We always sent recruiters to the NSNA convention and might get an interested candidate or two. Tepid but probably typical results.

Discovering our ineffectiveness

About a decade ago, we were again desperate for nurses. Looking at the past results, we asked ourselves why it was so difficult to get students to even make an onsite visit. We were an organization with a national reputation, southwest location, and very competitive compensation.

In analyzing the challenge, we realized the following generalities about student nurses:

- **Most were young**
- **Most were single**
- **They had developed relationships with fellow students for 2-4 years**
- **Those willing to relocate were interested in social opportunities and “adventure”**

We decided to change our approach at the NSNA convention. Obviously, we were seeking only those who would consider relocation. We decided to change our approach to reflect the above factors that we had identified.

Taking a big risk and going for broke

Typically, our recruiters would interact individually with students. Those interested would be individually scheduled for an onsite visit at which we try to “sell” them on the organization. In reality, that meant that each candidate visited

our hospital and city alone. Other than the time we spent with them at our facility, they were alone in the city. What they discovered about the location was dependent upon their ability to explore. If they accepted a position, they would relocate alone, orient to a new job alone, and develop an “outside” life alone.

This did not seem to be a winning approach with their current lifestyle. We decided to take a different approach.

We promoted a 2-day/3-night event scheduled for June and promoted it to student nurses. They would all come out together and participate in the same event. This event included airfare, lodging, transportation, meals, and several optional fun events designed to wow them not only with the hospital, but with the location. We are going to sell them on a cool lifestyle that included great employment, social opportunities and adventure.

Here is what the event looked like:

- Thursday PM - arrive and transport to hotel
- Friday AM - meet at hotel, transport to hospital
- Friday AM - tour of hospital, overview of student nurse program included state board prep
- Lunch with nursing managers
- Friday PM - choice of activity - horseback riding, session at spa, bus trip and shopping in historic area (each event capped at \$200/participant)
- Friday dinner - mountaintop restaurant overlooking the city
- Sat AM - breakfast with CEO
- Sat AM - HR overview of benefits/comp
- Sat AM — Visit to unit of interest
- Sat PM - on their own

Rather than try to get a student nurse to come alone, we appealed to groups of students. They already knew each other and we hoped this would make the event more fun. As the students visited the various booths, we noticed that they often were with friends or in groups. We shared information on the scheduled event, and invited to whole group to come out together.

3 requirements

We only had three requirements of the students:

- They could not have already committed to another organization'
- They had to have a scheduled graduation prior to the event
- Nursing program faculty had to confirm that they were in good standing and on schedule to graduate

The cost

The cost was going to be significant. We were still paying the cost of sending recruiters to the convention, booth costs, and sign-on bonuses. We ended up bringing 20 student nurses out for the event. The total cost of the event was approximately \$100,000. This included airfare, lodging, meals, transportation, and an allowance of \$200 for each participant for the optional event.

The results - did it work?

The interest was phenomenal. We had a great time. Since many of the participants knew each other, there was a relaxed atmosphere from the beginning. We intentionally ended our events in the early evening. While shuttling the students around the city, we just happened to drive through the area containing most of the city's nightspot and casually pointed this out. Coincidentally, the hotel was located within walking distance of these clubs. This would give those interested a chance to check out the weekend activities on their own. They were all adults so we left it up to them whether or not to check out these opportunities

We ended up with 6 of the 20 students choosing to come and work for us. One of those was unable to pass state boards, so our final count was five new hires.

We ended up spending about \$20,000/new hire plus sign-on bonus. While this was costly, we considered it a success. We had been spending a bigger amount on salaries of travelers and agency nurses. That doesn't include the advertising and other costs of searching for nurses.

The takeaways

First, I think creating and promoting an event is a better approach than trying to convince each student nurse individually. I think the students were more relaxed knowing that we would not be focused on them individually. Holding a single event with multiple participants creates allows you to market the organization and locality one time to all rather than individually to each student. This will allow you to really emphasize what you have to offer via group activities. Second, there is a group energy. When one or two become very vocal on how cool the hospital or locality are, it helps sell the whole program. Third, students began asking each other if they were willing to come out here together. Some may be timid about relocating alone, but will do so with a friend.

Finally, the cost could be reduced. In hindsight, we may have had just as much success with a one day event.

It doesn't have to be the NSNA convention

You may not attend the NSNA convention. I only mention it because it is coming up and now is the time to reserve space.

This event-based approach would work with any nursing school or program. This is especially true with programs that may not be local. Contact a placement specialist at any nursing school and offer them information on an event you have scheduled at your facility. They are motivated to place their graduates and are generally happy to promote your event. You could even gear the event to the students of a specific school.

Whether you go with what we did or not, consider creating some sort of group activity. Big or small, I am convinced the students will be more willing to participate. Remember, you need to sell them on more than your wonderful hospital. When not at work, they will be spending the rest of their time living in your community. Show them why that will be great experience.