



## UNDERSTANDING HOW THE PROGRAM YEAR WORKS

The local Troop is everything. Trail Life happens at the Troop level. For a family to be involved, there has to be a Troop nearby to join.

Troops are started in, and belong to, local churches. Pastors select leaders who then guide their Troop. Troops that plan and carry out a full and exciting program always grow and thrive. Troops that don't...don't. Families in thriving Troops stay involved, and tell their friends. Families in the latter group drop out—and then tell their friends.

At Trail Life USA, we are all about starting, then strengthening, Troops that will thrive long-term. We have just scratched the surface of involving interested churches, chartering the ones that “came to us”. We provide tools—human (volunteer) and created resources (developed by the Home Office)—to help Troops carry out our shared mission.

Every Troop's calendar looks the same—it's like a big circle. Whether leaders and participating families know it or not, it's formed by natural seasons, and then governed by expectations of larger movements (Trail Life USA being one of them). Troop “program years” naturally begin in August, with the start of a new school year; and end in July, once all have held their Summer Adventures, finished family vacations...and get ready to do it all over again.

This annual cycle begins when 5-year olds (whether they are in Trail Life USA or not) start kindergarten, and it doesn't end until they finish their education and enter the workforce, full-time, as adults. But then it begins all over again, about 10 years later...when they have a five year-old kid of their own!

We make sure Troops are ready to handle all of the annually-repeated events that happen throughout each calendar year. We prepare them for their mid-August' “kick off” by providing planning tools to make sure they are ready to go. Interested parents will not “join the trail” in September if the Troop's program is not planned and ready in August.

But Troops must also plan out a viable budget—how they will pay for their year full of exciting adventures (and all related Troop costs) they have planned. This is known as the Troop's Annual Planning and Budgeting process. Supporting this effort is one of the most important things we do, well before the start of each program year. We'll begin to promote it in April—to tell them what it is; we'll educate Troops in early May—explaining why it's important; then we'll train them, providing the tools (the how), both online and through Roundtable gatherings, in May and June; so they can carry out the planning (and budgeting) process in June/July—before their formal Troop meetings start up again in August. Planning ahead is so important! We backdate all repeating annual campaigns in similar fashion. Here's the next example...

Now the summer is over and kids are headed back to school. Assume that the Troops have planned and budgeted, and are ready to recruit new members. Remember the annual cycle? Parents expect kids to join sports, clubs, and organizations in early September—as soon as a new school year starts. Trail Life USA!

So Troops must be prepared to market their product to youth and their families leading up to their September “Open House” event. We do this through a time-proven campaign that we call “Join the Trail”. Like Planning and Budgeting, we have a plan, a timetable, and support materials to make Troops successful in recruiting new Trail Life families. Troop leaders should use the *Join the Trail Planning Guide* that is part of the 4-part Planning Guide series that the Troop Ministry Liaison receives each. Starting in May, we promote—tell Troops what this is about; we educate Troops in June—why it’s important; then we train them in July, providing the tools (show them how) so they can carry out at least 7 “marketing hits” (promotional strategies) to reach local families. Quantifiable results—new applications—come in throughout September and into October.

Where were we? Oh yes, October—the perfect time, according to our cyclical calendar, to begin a fundraiser! Excited new families, now connected and fully on board, understand that for their robust program year to be filled with adventure, they must carry out one really great fundraiser! Troop leaders will have all the tools they need to have a successful sale in hand with the *Fundraising Guide* that is part of the 4-part Planning Guide Series they receive each year in April. And if they earn enough, families can envision the rest of the year filled with fun outings—not weekend after weekend enduring bake sales and car washes instead of what they were promised: outdoor adventure. It’s of utmost importance that we keep that promise...and making sure families can afford it is a key component. Troop members join for the adventure, but they stay when they feel accepted and connected, understand the importance of their involvement, and are not overburdened with high (or unexpected) expenses.

Which brings us to the most important “membership booster” of all—retention—which is a direct result of program support. Even the best-planned recruitment campaigns might net a maximum 20% increase in membership. That sounds like a huge number—but not compared to the other 80% that will drop out if not supported correctly. That’s why all of the other Home Office-coordinated efforts throughout the year (same time, every year) exist—to retain those members! Leader trainings, Operation Christmas Child, Area-coordinated events (like Roundtables and Camporees) and Summer Adventures, are all placed on calendars at the right times to provide support when it’s needed most. Other Home Office emphases that retain youth include Trail Life Connect (Troop management) tools, FAQ’s, advancement materials, and Chartered Organization tutorials. Volunteer support comes from Direct Service Advisors (who serve as coaches for leaders), who stay in regular communication with Area Team members—subject matter experts in Training, Camping, Advancement, Activities, Membership, Finance, Community Service, and more. Troops should also offer “2nd chance” campaigns, whether it’s recruiting or a fundraiser or service projects. All of these efforts provide something extra to supplement a Troop’s monthly camping trips and weekly meetings—and result in higher youth retention.