

# Building your Youth Exchange “Business” from the Inside Out

Let me start out with a classic, philosophical question ... why are we here? How is it that we find ourselves spending several days in Chicago ... in February? What happened to us that we, apparently with complete free will, choose to dedicate countless hours occupying ourselves in an activity that generates no income, but plenty of outgo? How did we become these Rotary Youth Exchange addicts?

I think I'll take a survey around the room. How many of you, after joining a Rotary Club, one day had a revelation and said to yourself, “You know, of all the opportunities for service that Rotary offers, I think I want one that will increase the number of teenagers in my life?” Probably not the standard path, I would say. Let's try some other ways that might have brought us here today ...

- If you yourself were an exchange student, please stand up.
- If your parents hosted one or more exchange students when you were a kid, please stand up.
- If one or more of your own children spent a year as an exchange student, please stand up.
- If your first involvement with Rotary Youth Exchange was as a host parent, please stand up.

What all of you now standing have in common is that your introduction to Rotary Youth Exchange was a directly personal one. OK, you can all sit down. Let me tell you how I got here.

It was just about 20 years ago. I had been in Rotary for 10 years, and my club had hosted exchange students several times during that period. My wife and I had gotten to know a few of those kids, and on occasion we even did something with

one or two, although we had never hosted. My favorite memory is of the boy from Chile that we took for his first attempt at skiing ... or rather, falling down often in the snow. But that's another story.

One day, I got a phone call from my club's Youth Exchange Officer. He said, "We have an exchange student arriving in a month or two, and we haven't been able to confirm the first host family yet. Would you and Sue be willing to host her for a couple of weeks while we work on that?" Good line, isn't it? I've used it a few times since then.

When I brought this up at home, my wife surprised me by saying, "Why don't we just BE the first host family?" At the time, our daughter was three years old. We had talked about maybe hosting an exchange student when she became a teenager, so this was a little bit early. But the decision had been made, and so shortly thereafter, we went from being parents of a 3-year-old to being parents of an 18-year-old. It was then, that Sarah Hope from Sydney, Australia walked into our lives, and changed everything. She opened our eyes to what amazing people these exchange students are. Through her, we met other exchange students, found an energy that we didn't know before, and discovered what would become a passion for two decades.

I suspect that every one of you can recall your own Sarah. Maybe it was a student you hosted, or one you got to know indirectly. Perhaps there was a dynamic young speaker at a Rotary event, or a friend of your own kids in school. It could even have been you. One way or another, we all caught the bug, and it's an infection that makes Youth Exchange people the most dedicated, energized, and hardest-working volunteers in Rotary or anywhere else. It's also what sustains us, when we run into challenging situations, difficult students, onerous rules and procedures. Because we know that this program attracts amazing young people, and each year's group will have more of those star performers that truly are our paychecks.

But how do we find them? How do we build our programs and promote these opportunities, when it seems harder and harder to do so? When the paperwork seems intimidating, and the economy takes its toll? Well, the answer is that those outstanding students, those stars of Rotary Youth Exchange, are still out there, in every school, in every community, and it is our responsibility, and our privilege, to open up the door for those kids, and make them aware of the live-changing adventures that we can offer.

The title of this program is Building your Youth Exchange Business from the Inside Out. And you might think that this refers to the heart, because certainly we've all been touched there by these young ambassadors. But there is another side to this topic, a concept that might really make a difference in how you manage your Youth Exchange program. And it starts with a question.

If you had to start a Youth Exchange program from scratch, what would it look like? If you could take the good ideas that others have offered you, merge them with some new ingredients of your own design, or perhaps borrowed from elsewhere, what direction would you go?

Ten years ago, I found myself faced with that opportunity, that challenge. After a decade of working with a well-established Youth Exchange program in New York, I moved to a Florida district that had none of that. Youth Exchange in my new district meant a handful of short-term exchanges each summer, and little more. Realizing that life without exchange students was not an option, it was obvious that something had to be done. But how?

The external plan was rather straightforward – visit a lot of Rotary clubs and a lot of schools, and spread the word as wide and as often as possible. Clearly, we have enjoyed a lot of success, and the wonderful Rotarians who became part of our committee, and those that have carried on these efforts in recent years, deserve plenty of credit for all of that. But I tend to believe that it was the internal approach, the management philosophy, if you will, that created the most critical part of the foundation of our program.

Part of that philosophy is a concept you may have heard me talk about before – the idea that in this Rotary Youth Exchange business, our customers are the exchange partners we choose to work with around the world, and the students are our products. When you build from the inside out, YOU make decisions about the size of your program, the direction it will go, and the partners that you will exchange with.

Let me offer a specific example. The first year that I was in Florida, we uncovered three outbound candidates, one of whom was a wonderful young lady who told me that she wanted to go to Spain. A common refrain, for sure, but, as I have discussed many times with our friend Tomasso Virdia, the reputation of the Spanish RYE program a decade ago was not exactly stellar. And so I told this young lady that our program did not exchange with Spain. Instead, we sent her to France, where she had a wonderful year, and became our first active Rotex member after her return.

The point is that she wanted to go to Spain, and that really did not matter to us. Why? Because Spain was not one of the countries that we wanted to exchange with at that time ... we do now, and the results have been good, so thank you Tomasso, for your efforts over the years. You see, our goal was to build a Youth Exchange program that would offer opportunities around the globe, one that would focus on quality exchanges, both inbound and outbound, and one that would decide its own direction.

From the beginning, we recognized, even if we hadn't yet put it into these terms, that the students and parents were not our customers. And it became clear to us that if we allowed student preferences to dictate our exchanges, then we would be little more than travel agents, and that's not what we are in this for. Our internal plan, our philosophy, was much more global than that.

We also came to realize, and this probably won't surprise you at all, that most of our outbound candidates know little or nothing about the countries they claim to

want to go to. During our interviews, we have a map of the world on the wall, with all the countries outlined, but not labeled. The students are told to point out their five preferred countries on the map. As you can imagine, very few get them all right, and while the purpose of this exercise may be to see how they deal with being wrong about something, it also points out quite clearly that the basis for their preferences is a little less than rock solid.

If you are building your program from the inside out, you will never say, “We’d like to exchange with you, but our kids don’t want to go there.” Because if you truly want to establish an exchange with a certain partner, you’ll do it, that country will be on your list, and you will indeed find students to send there.

If you are building your program from the inside out, you will never post a message on YEOtalk that reads, “I have a student who wants to go to ... wherever ... Please contact me about setting up this exchange.” Because your students don’t dictate your direction, and you don’t blindly grab an exchange partner from the first one to reply, or from a listing in the RI YE Directory.

If you are building your program from the inside out, you will recognize that the standards you set, and the quality you maintain, will be readily absorbed by the students, and they will proudly carry your banner overseas with them during their exchanges, and they’ll continue to carry it for years to come.

Every one of you in this room has been stricken with the Youth Exchange bug. This disease that we all share drives us to do great things for a great organization. Sometimes, though, our passion may take us in an unwanted direction, and we can end up following our hearts instead of our minds. My message to you today is to use both. Draw on the energy and love that are inside your heart, as you will need them to continue to sustain and grow your programs. And rely on your mind to shape that program in the way that you believe it should be. Together, we will all enjoy success in our ongoing efforts in building communities and bridging continents.