



Melrose Kitchens Tour Fundraiser

The Melrose iRaiders started with good prospects for grants and donations but no cash in hand. We needed to bring in at least enough money to ensure that we could buy the robot kit and admission to the regional competition, as well as tools and supplies – about \$9K.

Our faculty team lead, Marty Morse, is a boat captain in his summer life. One of his clients organizes an elaborate and very successful kitchen tour, and he suggested that we try a simpler version. We thought we'd give it a shot.

Objectives

- ◆ Raise money for the team – as close to \$9K as possible.
- ◆ Offer a worthwhile experience to the tourists.
- ◆ Engage and educate the community about the team and the US FIRST organization.
- ◆ Offer value to those who sponsored us.

Good Results

- ◆ We brought in over \$7,000 including ticket sales and business sponsorships.
- ◆ We sold over 250 tickets. The tour was well attended and everybody was smiling.
- ◆ Lots more people know about and support the robot team. “I’ve heard all about your high school program. I’d like to donate all the plexiglass for your robot.” *Melrose Glass*
- ◆ Tourists and kitchen hosts reported that student hosts were very articulate about the team and the program.

Costs

Under \$150 (and many hours). We paid for about 40 acrylic stand-up frames to display business sponsor names and balloons to mark the houses. All our printing was donated.

Process

- ◆ Pick a date
- ◆ Line up 10 very good kitchens.
- ◆ Advertise heavily.
- ◆ Solicit local business sponsorships.
- ◆ Solicit local food vendors to provide refreshments at each home.
- ◆ Solicit any business involved in the construction or remodeling of a given kitchen.
- ◆ Sell tickets through the team and local real estate agencies.

- ◆ Station a student at each home to welcome tourists and talk up the team.
- ◆ On the tour, have the kitchen owners talk about their kitchens and answer any questions.
- ◆ After the tour, provide email updates of the team's progress to hosts and sponsors.

Keys to Success

Advertise, advertise, advertise

We tried to get the word out as much and as often as possible. Lesson learned: start earlier.

- ◆ **Backpack campaign.** 8-1/2 x 11 flyers went home with every Melrose elementary school child. This required a lot of printing, bundling, and distributing – may not be feasible for all teams.
- ◆ **Newspaper notices.** We put four notices in the *Melrose Free Press* with increasing impact; the last two were on page 2 with nice big photos. By the time we were done, the editor was a friend and fan. We also had one very lucky break: a focus article in the feature “Melrose People” when the original “guest” had to bow out.
- ◆ **Poster campaign in downtown Melrose.** Posters were designed by team member Cole, printed by Cole's Dad, and posted by the team in as many shop windows as possible. All posters were hung in time for the Melrose Halloween event, sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce. In this event, Main St. businesses hand out candy to throngs of kids in costumes and their parents, all passing by window after window displaying our posters.
- ◆ **Email campaign.** We sent email messages to our hundred closest friends and asked them to forward to their hundred closest friends, etc. We are not sure how far these messages got – we received no feedback from anyone on the street.
- ◆ **Realtor's broadcast email.** One of the realtors did us the favor of sending a notice to one of her broadcast email distribution lists.
- ◆ **Notice on local TV station.** We displayed a notice on MMTV, our local station, three nights before the event.
- ◆ We did NOT get the prized visibility of the kiosk in front of City Hall or a banner across Main St. In both cases, we were much too late – two months too late for the kiosk and 10 months too late for the banner (who knew?) It pays to start early. We have already reserved the week for the banner in fall 2009.

Timing

Choose a date that doesn't conflict with another major event in the community. This means planning ahead a couple of months and consulting the powers that be in your community. We consulted with the Melrose Chamber of Commerce.

We chose a fall date (November 16) largely because we got squeezed, but it worked out well. It wasn't too hot or cold, and people were comfortable indoors and out.

Get good kitchens

- ◆ **Go for variety.** Try to line up an interesting range of kitchen sizes and types. We figured that 80% of the tourists would be women, and many of them would be looking for ideas for their own kitchens. We advertised that one kitchen included a 1920's Napanee Dutch Kitchenet, a smaller kitchen that used some very innovative and affordable storage and space designs, and another that was a serious kitchen for a serious cook (all tools at your fingertips). And of course, we included a few enormous, splashy, expensive kitchens.
- ◆ **Tap other resources for information.** We already knew of a couple of impressive kitchens through personal contacts. For the rest, we asked local realtors for suggestions. Alternatively, we could have asked local builders, but did not. We put the names and numbers into a spreadsheet and started dialing. Once the homeowners understood who we were and what we were asking, most of them said yes immediately – they were flattered to be on the tour. Most did not even have kids at Melrose High School, but were happy to support the team. We only had to call 15 people to get 10 kitchens.

Treat your kitchen hosts like royalty

The more interest and appreciation you show, the more gracious they will be. Also, if they have a good experience, they can be references for potential kitchen hosts on future tours. A few of our kitchen hosts baked for the event.

- ◆ We visited the homes in advance and admired every detail – and they were all quite striking. During this visit or by phone, “interview” the homeowners about their goals or history of their kitchens and use the information in the newspaper notices and map blurbs. This is also a good time to ask them for contact information for their designers/builders/suppliers so you can solicit them for sponsorship.
- ◆ We held a “match up” meeting before the tour to introduce the kitchen hosts to their student hosts. Students gave their kitchen hosts appreciation gifts (donated). (Students had picked their tour hosts from a map, usually based on proximity to their homes.) We also made a short presentation about the team, fundraising goals, and tour logistics. And we served coffee and homemade apple cake.
- ◆ Immediately after the tour, we emailed everyone to thank them again and to let them know how many people took the tour and how much money we made. We also asked them to post comments to our blog. (A few actually did.)
- ◆ We have kept kitchen hosts informed with occasional emails with team updates, renewed thanks, and finally, an invitation to the Boston Regional.

Set reasonable ticket prices

We charged \$20/person, which was high enough to confer value, but not unaffordable. One tourist commented that it was a good deal: “For \$20, I got an entire afternoon of entertainment.”

Ask local realtors to sell tickets

We found that local realtors are very interested and supportive of local events, especially house-tour-related, and they had already supplied tips on good kitchens. They were happy

to sell tickets, and welcomed anyone walking through their door. In fact, many of the brokers went on the tour and three realtors were also business sponsors.

Go after business sponsorships aggressively

In retrospect, business sponsorships netted the most gain for the least effort. Without any ticket sales, we still would have made \$2K. Next year, we will be more organized and focused about pursuing them. This is where our parents were very strong.

Offer value for the sponsorships. For our tour, each sponsor got some level of visibility in return for their contribution.

- ◆ Local business sponsor names were listed on a sign in each kitchen.
- ◆ Local food vendor names were displayed beside their food donations in each kitchen.
- ◆ Designers, builders, and suppliers for each kitchen had their names and logos displayed and were invited to leave business cards on the counters.

Talk to the decision maker. If the business owner is not in, leave your name and a printed form, then return or follow up with a phone call. We found that follow-ups by different people were NOT effective. . The same person should work with one business.

Go to places where you do business. If they know you, they are more likely to contribute.

Set a dollar value, but accept what they give. Most of our business sponsors agreed to a \$100 donation, but a few contributed less and a few even contributed more. We were grateful for all contributions and acknowledged everybody.

Involve parents

We had a core team of very dedicated parents who's persistence really paid off, especially in the business sponsorship area. We held two meetings for kids and parents, which helped keep everyone on the same page. Serve goodies.

Recruit a dedicated chairperson(s)

We had two co-chairs, one a non-working parent who could spend many hours, and one busy working parent who made the most of her available time. Both contributed greatly; the dedicated parent was the linchpin.

Close proximity of the homes

Each home was within a 2 or 3 minute drive of the next, largely because Melrose is geographically small – about 4 sq. miles. This made it convenient and not tedious to get from home to home. It would be harder to do this in a more geographically spread-out community.

Make good maps

We used a Google map with a highlighted route. In addition, we included a thumbnail photo and short blurb about each kitchen to entice tourists to the next stop. (See sample.)

Establish multiple start locations and distribute the maps there

When tourists purchased their tickets, they did NOT get maps. Instead, the tickets listed three starting addresses on the back. On the day of the tour, the tourists went to one of these addresses, picked up a map, and started the tour. This strategy allowed us to:

- ◆ Print the maps later in the timeline, which gave us greater flexibility
- ◆ Protect the privacy of our kitchen hosts until tour day
- ◆ Prevent people from taking the tour without buying the tickets
- ◆ Prevent a glut of tourists at a single start point
- ◆ Entice tourists without giving away the whole enchilada

Thank everyone publicly

We wrote a letter to the editor of the *Melrose Free Press* acknowledging everyone's hard work, generous contributions and gracious participation. We named names, including the Free Press editor, who almost fell off her chair, noting that most people acknowledge everyone *except* the paper. We now have a firm and positive relationship with her – good for next year. It's tricky, though – if you name names, it's best to name everyone.

Reasonable weather

Pray.

Scary Moments

Four days before the tour we'd sold 10 tickets. One real estate agent who had organized a black-tie gala earlier in the season reassured us with her story. Two days before her event she'd sold 6 tickets, but then there was a rush and the event was well attended. But we were definitely biting our nails until the tour.

How We Got Lucky

One of our parents is a printer. His company donated printing of all the posters, flyers for the backpack campaign, maps and tickets. This was very convenient and saved us a bundle.

Free, in-depth advertising. Our local weekly, the *Melrose Free Press*, runs a full-page feature called *Melrose People*. The week before the tour, the scheduled featured person was suddenly unavailable for an interview. The editor, who had been working with us on our notices, called to ask if the Kitchen Tour co-host would be willing to be the featured person, with the focus on the kitchen tour.

Hmmm, let me check my schedule . . . YES YES YES!

What Was Hard or Unproductive

Signing in at start houses. We asked tourists to sign a guest book (name, email, phone) when they first arrived at a start location with a vague idea that we could tap into this collection of interested people at some later date. We did get a few signatures but not a significant number.

Hard for the team to have the fundraiser precede the robot build – it was tough for the kids to put so much energy into a kitchen tour when they signed up to build a robot. This was especially tough for a rookie team that hadn't seen a full cycle and couldn't visualize what they were waiting for – it tested their patience.

Different people following up a single business sponsor. Having different people contact the same vendor for sponsorship only created confusion.