

Discover the Strengths of Your Small Band Program

Randy T. Gilmore, Owner/President, Marching Show Concepts, Inc.

Everyone knows education is about learning. Learning more than we know now and becoming someone we are not yet. “At its fundamentally flawed core, the aim of almost any learning program is to help us become who we are not.” (Tom Rath, *Strengths Finder 2.0*.)

If I were to ask you why you are reading this article, your answer would most likely be some variation of; “I want to improve my program” or “To learn how to make my small group of students sound like the bigger bands in our area.” Learning. We want more. We see others succeeding and we want it for ourselves and those within our sphere of influence. Year after year we visualize our trophy cabinet overflowing with awards for our small band competing against the big guys, only to open our eyes to a dusty, mostly empty, display case.

The old maxim, “You can be anything you want to be” resounds in our core and yet, how often does that ideal hold true for you or for your band? We idolize those who do personify this rags to riches sort of fairytale (since they are so rare), but the truth of the matter is, those who discover and cultivate their strengths are much

more likely to succeed and fulfill their dreams than any others.

That’s why you’re reading this. You know there is more. You still have hope. If we only look at our failings or inadequacies, we will easily miss the gold mine of opportunity and hidden pathways into unlimited possibilities and success.

Instead, we need to recognize and acknowledge our strengths. What strong point can we exploit and build upon so that any weaknesses or inadequacies are obscured or minimized? Finding and exposing these strengths is what sets you apart from every other “me too” competitor vying for the attention of the judges and/or your audience.

Developing, identifying, and incorporating your unique strength into all you do will give you differentiation from, distinction from, and advantage over everyone not only in your competitive class, but also the concession stand and the kid throwing water balloons at half-time. Therefore, don’t be hurried when searching for this precious gold. Think about what you do best. Think about what your competitors do, or don’t do, and how you could do it better.

For example, you have a small program, but it’s solid. You have some upcoming sophomores who are really talented. How can you use these strengths to your advantage? Smaller groups can create an atmosphere and build on certain qualities that may be more difficult, or even impossible, for larger groups.

Selecting a program that is achievable with a small group of musicians is an initial and important step. Musical arrangements that are well written and that have a strong storyline or theme are preferable choices in an effort to create an intimate, defined setting.

A singular theme also contributes to a sense of unity in a small group, which is very difficult to obtain with a large number of performers. It’s all about making connections. One thought leads to another and soon we have a story. If you are a highly competitive band, your message will probably be directed toward adjudicators and the trained eye of the highly immersed bandsman. On the other hand, if your primary venue is the football crowd during half-time, you must communicate your message in a much more familiar and entertaining manner.

Discover the Strengths of Your Small Band Program

Determine your audience's expectations and level of familiarity with your intended message.

One more thought on creating a theme, i.e. telling your story; "Remember that a story must start with a status quo, have conflict or some challenge that must be overcome and/or resolved, and end with a different status quo — something has changed, something new has been learned, and/or a problem has been solved." (Chris King, professional storyteller)

Once you've established your theme, you must grab the audience and judges' attention. The playing of a familiar cadence, melody or an interesting solo is helpful in establishing this relationship between the band and its audience. The point is, you must make an understandable and distinguishable sound. Proper pitch and a good, balanced and blended sound will go a long way in turning heads toward your group.

Using props and backdrops to create an intimate setting is another effective way to draw in the audience. Not only will careful prop placement build a sense of connection between the audience and the group, but props also enhance your theme.

"It's a bird, it's a plane, it's..." It's the fastest moving thing on the field! This is where everyone's attention will be focused. Keep this in mind at all times, force the audience's eye toward an intended focus at every moment of your performance. Create eye-catching color and motion to ensure everyone's attention is focused where you want it, not on someone in blue jeans pulling flags off the field.

You've got some extremely gifted individuals this year? Provide opportunities for these students to exhibit their individual talents. A few awesome individuals giving a great performance can far outweigh fewer numbers or the mediocrity of others.

In addition, clever use of the color guard is a powerful dynamic. Flood the field with color by using oversized swing flags. Try to avoid separating the color guard into smaller groups. The idea is to create a powerful statement with a few individuals, so the more color and unity of motion the better. Also, using the color guard to fill any negative space is an effective way to make the performance area look exceptionally full.

Monetary resources (or lack thereof) are often cited as a major reason for a lackluster program. Focusing on our deficits will only lead us toward an uneventful dead end. Monetary need should, instead, inspire creativity and a closer look at what strengths are available to exploit. Rather than looking at what we don't have and losing more of what we do possess, it is time to mine out our strengths and invest energy into developing our strongest attributes.

Take advantage of your unique features and capitalize on the assets available to you. You may not be able to be everything you want to be or even fill the trophy case, but you surely will find greater satisfaction and increased value in who you really are. Perhaps, you'll even uncover a talent or potential no one even knew was there!



Randy served ten years as a nationally recognized high school band director and assistant marching band director at West Chester University. Over the past 21 years Randy has developed Marching Show Concepts as a nationally known company for quality marching band products and exceptional one-to-one services. Randy exemplifies an expertise and standard of excellence that is well known and respected throughout the music industry. He is an accomplished clinician, adjudicator and drill designer who continues to display his talents in the MSC collection of products and services.