

[A bit of an]

A to Z of bi group running

By Jen Yockney, with help from Alison.

"A shame there isn't an A to Z of how to run a group" someone said on the uk-bi email list many moons ago. Nothing like a challenge, is there? Within a day, there was one.

A - advance work. Set a target of getting the first meeting in say four months, and start now with contacting local LGB, sexual health projects, womens centres, community centres, centre of voluntary action and so on. Get advice on setting groups up, info about local council and community funding sources to cover room hire costs. Ask if they know of friendly journalists on the local paper. Then when you're finally up and running, other community bodies will already have heard of you, and it will be that much easier to gain profile and members.

B - BCN magazine. "Tell us you're trying to get things going. When you are set to have the first meeting, let us know in advance and we may be able to include a flyer in with copies of the magazine going to subscribers in your area, or plug you in the news pages," say BCN, who are to be found at www.bicommunitynews.co.uk

C - calendar. Planning ahead for the full year - dates of meetings, possible topics to discuss, going to BiCon and local Pride festivals. It gives you something to look forward to. Also factor in that you meet at say 7.30 at the community centre each month, and will go to the pub by 9.30!

D - defeat. Agree that if after say 6 or 12 months you don't have one regular new member, or some similar target, you will shut up shop and try some other approach like infiltrating the local lesbian group.

E - exhibit yourselves! Go to LGB conferences, events, and community group fora in your town. Take flyers. Throw bundles of them at people. Amaze them at the active and exciting new bi community group here in Blogstown.

F - f---ing. You may want to consider telling the people who run the group that they aren't allowed to get involved with the group users. Or that such a rule applies for newcomers' first few nights along at the group. If they aren't happy with this, you need to ask if they are trying to run a group or just get laid. But that goes beyond the people running the group - are your group users here to make friends, talk about bi issues

and maybe get involved in awareness raising, or is the group there to help them find lovers?

G - gay phonedines. Tell your local Lesbian & Gay switchboard you exist. Tell national L&G helpline you exist at www.queery.org.uk too. They will both then refer people to your group, so you will gain a trickle of members that way.

H - heterosexuals and homosexuals. Work out what your ground rule is about whether this is a bi-only safe space, or whether people can bring partners along who aren't bi. An example is that Manchester lets members bring non-bi friends along the first time for support if they feel nervous, but after that they can't attend. But non-bi partners are welcome at the pub after or on social meetings during the month.

I - internet and email. Get an email list going through services like yahoogroups. Consider whether it should be moderated so it doesn't fill up with junk from people looking for hot bi babes for threesomes rather than people who are actually interested in your group. It's worth creating a livejournal for your group, so you can be found there, but email lists are more accessible for most people.

J - jumping on people. Not literally! Making sure that the subjects of discussion and balance of the conversation at group sessions doesn't focus on a few individuals within the group and / or their particular interests. While respecting the right of members to be shy, quiet types, try to ensure they all get a chance to speak or raise issues.

K - keep at it. Accept it's going to be a long haul to get things going and to get regular attendance beyond the core team. The Liverpool group set themselves a target of going for a year and seeing if attendance built in that time to a level that made it worth continuing. Too many groups fold when no-one comes to the second meeting and the organiser loses heart. It takes time.

L - local listings. Most famously London has Time Out, but most places have local fortnightly or monthly what's on magazines. Get plugged as a new exciting thing. Go back for a followup story a year later. There may be other kinds of listings zines in your area too - small press things or ones just targeted at the voluntary sector.

M - mobile phones. A cheap pay as you go phone provides a handy information line for people to get in touch and find out coming dates etc. You can just use it as a recorded information service or choose to answer it

at certain times of the week. But know your limits here on confidentiality, counselling skills and so on, before you start trying to solve peoples personal problems over the phone: have local switchboard numbers to quote instead.

N - newbies. Plan how to seem welcoming to new members. Assign someone to greet them when they first come to the group, tell them about what will go on, give them info about things like BCN, bicon and so forth, and answer basic questions or concerns. Rotate newbie duty amongst the core group unless someone is really good/bad at that sort of thing!

O - one-off. If you don't have a core group or can't find a regular venue, try organising a single day of bi awareness work with local LGB groups, like having a bi day in the local student LGB awareness week. The official catalyst for Manchester Bi Youth group was a one-day event we got the local youth service to host. Of course there was a hidden agenda to get enough people along that it would prove the need for a regular bi youth group (so the one-day event sparked a group which ran for three and a half years)

P - posters. Make a few simple posters ("Bi Bloggstown. A new social group for bisexual people and those who think they may be. For information email blahblah see our web page blahblah or write to us at Bi Bloggstown c/o an anonymous address.") and get them put up in friendly places like womens centres, LGB centres, radical bookstores, etc.

Q - queer press. It's worth trying to get listed in places like g3, the Pink Paper, Gay Times and Diva. There may well be regional gay press in your area like Shout, OutNorthWest, Fyne Times, Scotsgay. Call it three stamps, three emails, no great effort really. Keep note of who you contacted though – it's good to tell them you closed down if the group folds, to save other people the trouble of getting in touch with a long-folded group.

R - realism. You can't be there for all the bi's in your town and solve all their problems. Define your group, is it a coming out space, a support group, a social group? Don't over-reach yourselves and don't feel that you have failed if someone comes to your group who needs a different kind of support or environment.

S - setting groundrules. From meeting one, agree basic rules about respect for diverse cultures, confidentiality and so on. Remind people of the rules at every session.

T - twinning. Find another bi group nearby and lean on them for ideas and support. E.g. Liverpool borrows Manchester's mailbox facility since they can't afford one of their own yet.

U - umbrella. The umbrella organisation for LGB community groups is the Consortium. Once you've been running a few months, affiliate -- you'll get to attend networking conferences for free and thus make good new contacts and pick up advice, training, ideas for funding etc. www.lgbtconsortium.org.uk

V - venue. The most essential thing! Try local gay pubs which may have spare rooms or be willing to let you congregate in one area on a regular basis, say Saturday lunchtime or whatever. Try local sexual health projects, LG community centres, and so on. Contact the local centre for voluntary services and ask for help and advice -- it's what they're there for. Ask for donations each meeting to help cover the costs of photocopying, posters, room hire and so on.

W - www. Get a web page with a sensibleish URL (something along the lines of www.bibloggstown.org.uk). Web sites draw in lots of members for the effort involved. If you don't know how to set one up, ask on bicon.livejournal.com – you can be fairly sure that someone'll offer help.

X-rated: You have to persuade people that you're not, that is, and a few people will assume this. Which is where the groundrules and the tone of your publicity will mean a lot. It's also worth emphasising the point to potential meeting places, who might otherwise assume you want to hold an orgy... (The Sexual Freedom Society in Edinburgh had this problem at one stage, and ended up changing its name.)

Yourself: As in look after yourself. Someone has to be at every meeting, but it shouldn't have to be one person - as soon as you can, start to groom your successor, because you'll want them sooner than you think...

Zoos, and cinemas and restaurants and... Outings make a pleasant change from sitting in a room talking about coming out for the fifth time, and some people prefer them to pubs which can be smoky and not very child friendly. And they're easier to organise than meetings, so fill in the gaps with fun stuff and cheer yourselves up.

*Originally published in Bi Community News magazine
www.bicommunitynews.co.uk*

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