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**Podcast Summary: The art of the loving invitation
or how to get busy family members to come to a
family reunion**

I'm Edith Wagner, editor of *Reunions magazine* and for this podcast, I've been given permission to read an article from *Reunions magazine* by its author, Leslie Lindeman.

**The art of the loving invitation
or how to get busy family members to come to a
family reunion**

If you're organizing a family reunion for 150 relatives, you can't worry about a few of them not showing up. But if your family is smaller, a dozen or so, the absence of even one member leaves a gaping hole in the team picture.

If you're planning for just a handful of families, anything less than 100 percent attendance means your get-together won't rise to the level of "reunion." Rather, it will be remembered for who wasn't there.

So how do you get all these people – your siblings, parents, nieces and nephews – to the same place at the same time? They can't take time off from work. They can't afford it. Their kids are scheduled to the hilt. The skiers don't want to go to the beach. The surfers don't want to go to the mountains. Persuading them seems like a daunting task, and it might be.

If your family is reasonably intact and you still have sentiments for one another, then you have an ace in the hole ... a card you can use to build a winning hand. Beneath our worries, concerns, excuses and considerations, we all really do want to get together. We want to share meals, enjoy each other's children, hear the old stories, look into each other's eyes, go to sleep under the same roof and remember why we love each other so much. If that's where you want to end up, then, this is where you must begin.

These nine tips will—we hope!—keep wind in your sails as you make the journey.

1. No matter how much they protest, whine and complain, they really do want to get together.

2. Let go of your expectations.

You may encounter a family member who is utterly compliant, completely grateful you're taking the organizational lead and just wants to know when and where to show up and how big a check to write.

What's more likely, however, is that family members will not be jumping to attend *your* reunion. They may not want to actively plan the event, but they will want to be in on the deliberations. Presenting them with a *fait-accompli* – here's where we're going, here are the dates – is likely to be met with reluctance, perhaps even ire, even if your intentions are purely good. If you try to begin the conversation from a neutral standpoint, if your agenda is fixed (although hidden), you're in for trouble. They may

do dumb things from time to time, but your relatives are not dummies, and they can tell where you're coming from.

3. Offer a menu.

A menu means choice and Americans love choice. As the coordinator of the conversation, you'll have to keep the process of elimination moving along so things don't disintegrate into a never-ending discussion. It may seem like the menu approach will be a longer, more frustrating route, but the seemingly more direct "one offer, take it or leave it" road too often heads off a cliff.

4. Consider – Ask – Listen

This approach works best for small reunions.

The important thing as you kick off the conversation is to let each family member know you've thought about them. You've considered their likes and dislikes because you care about them and you want them to feel wanted, to be excited about showing up and to have a good time. When people feel considered, the pull is almost irresistible.

But you're not clairvoyant and though you know these people well, misunderstandings happen. To be sure you are thinking accurately about what they'd like in a family reunion, ask them. For instance, if Barb and Ron are the mountain biking family, let them know that one of the campgrounds you talked to rents bikes and has great trails. The lake has a sandy beach, important because their daughter Ashley loves to swim. But a lot of the food

will probably be grilled. Is Jill the teenager still eating vegetarian, or would she enjoy grilled salmon? What else would you guys like in a campground?

The next step is to listen. Your initiative will create interest, probably enthusiasm, and also, excuses. A better word for excuses is, “considerations.” It’s human nature to resist leaping up, screaming “Hallelujah! Here’s my money! Count me in!” The sales process – and don’t delude yourself, the role of reunion coordinator is a sales position – is uncomfortable at times for most people. Move forward deliberately so people don’t feel pushed, and do significantly more listening than talking. By listening you’ll discover the ingredients that are missing for each family member.

5. Let them handle their own considerations.

Don’t abandon them with their misgivings. Let them know you’ll work to alleviate their concerns. But know too that when people are in touch with something they want – and hopefully you’ve stoked their desire – they are usually able to remove whatever obstacles are in their way. Therefore, don’t be surprised to hear statements like, “It’s a little bit more than we were thinking of spending, but I think we can find a way to make it work.”

6. Start early and go easy on the “pressure throttle.”

Yes, the process can be like herding cats and it may take months, perhaps a year, depending on how many nuclear families you’re working with and how complicated the logistics. Where children are involved, know that

summer schedules tend to firm up in February. In-laws, families, dream trips, sports and other extra-curricular pursuits, all compete for precious holiday break time, so get going with your conversation far in advance. You can keep the pressure light by making preliminary agreements well in advance. Ask everyone to agree on a deadline of Martin Luther King Day to decide which summer week will be set aside for the reunion. Then set a deadline of St. Patrick's Day for an agreement (with deposits) on whether you'll go to the lake house or the mountain lodge.

7. Be relentless.

If you are relentless, yet kind, eventually, your persistence will be seen for what it is – hard work born of a true spirit. People know that it's tough to be the one making the next phone call, and the next, and the next, in pursuit of getting everyone together. If you're willing to do it relentlessly for no reason other than the good of all, it will dawn on them that you're not going to stop and that what they really want, in their own heart of hearts, is to find a way to join you.

8. I am so very, very sorry.

Coordinating a family reunion is not easy and from a very legitimate point of view, it should be. In a slightly better world, we would all grow up in big houses with wraparound porches in safe, tree-covered neighborhoods full of kids and nearby parks to which everyone would ride their bicycles and the streets would be full of happy

dogs and people who know each other's names. And we would return to these homes for decades for family get-togethers several times a year and the back doors would be open and the coffee would be on the stove and you'd never know which happy relative would walk in next. But that's not the world we live in.

It's a struggle to create reunions that work, just as it is to lose weight, stop smoking, manage a career you love, maintain a healthy marriage and raise strong, smart, happy kids. Good things take work.

9. It's worth it.

Paraphrasing one popular poet, "Nothing feels better than blood on blood." Phone calls, emails, IMs, videoconferencing – these are the modern tools we use to get us through our modern absences. But sooner or later there is no substitute for standing close enough to feel a child's breath, hear familiar voices in the next room, see young children climbing into old laps. In these moments, anticipated and planned for and especially the ones that fall wordlessly from heaven, we rediscover the beauty of one another and the love that has sustained us from the beginning.

About the author

Leslie Lindeman, Pasadena, California, is an advertising-marketing-public relations writer who has helped organize many family reunions. He is the father of two children.