

Santa Tactics

The Basics:

Each family and each child wants their Santa experience to be special, to be touched in some very personal and very unique way. They want to “hear” and to “feel” the spirit of Christmas. Santa is an authority figure with all the special trappings of an authority figure---clothing, setting, idiosyncratic mannerisms, a forum for dispensing wisdom and a loyal servant class attending to his every whim. Although “talking heads”---television evangelists, politicians and parents---can be a bit tiresome, Santa rarely is because he’s not seen enough to cause boredom in the listeners. Besides, he’s the giver of presents and worth cultivating for fifteen minutes or so. Why take chances and annoy the guy?

So the setting is important as is the clothing as is the message. There are synergies here that need to be recognized. But perhaps the most important commodity is the big guy himself since his message, his delivery and his conviction are critical to a truly successful Santa Experience.

The Length of the Santa Encounter:

Accept that a unique Santa Encounter must be private (far from prying eyes), personal (that is, for the children and their family only) and long enough to have the desired impact. Experience would suggest that fifteen minutes would be best for up to four children with thirty minutes required for from four to ten kids. Difficulty and therefore time is increased with audience size. If twenty extended family members show up, anticipate a slower presentation.

The Setting:

“Santa’s Grotto” needs to be in a removed though accessible location, a place that can be transformed for an entire month into the setting for this special “Santa Experience.” Some have suggested that you translate a “sacred space” into The Grotto---convert someplace like the boardroom, specialty dining room, or Manager’s Office into Santa’s place. Wherever you go, make sure that there’s a gate at the entrance with a “Gate Keeper” to operate it since the anxious might be inclined to wander in on their own. Give the practical a special look---make the gate dramatic, have a sign for Santa’s Grotto, outline the gate with twinkle lights. The Helper will be critical to keep parents and children diverted when the show goes late or some complication arises. They’re your first line of public relations defense and should be chosen and used wisely. This character prepares the children by affixing nametags to each child and by explaining the basics---time involved, etc.---to the parents. The Gate Keeper alerts Santa’s Handler to a new arrival with the ringing of the bells. Incidentally, parents “glow” less while they’re waiting than they do when visiting Santa, so make sure this person is adept at handling moaners and groaners. Thick skin can be an asset in this location.

The second helper is Santa’s Handler---helping the big guy dress, organize the families and deal with photos and resolve the unexpected. This person invites families at the gate into the “inner sanctum.” They can either lead them up and in---a lot of work if Santa’s there for hours--- or they can stand at the curtain over the entrance to the Grotto and invite them in with bells and whistles. Once in the room, they position the adults on seats and benches while Santa attracts and embraces the children. Toward the end of the “Santa Experience,” the Handler positions the audience for and then takes the parting photograph, bundles up the crowd and moves them out of the Grotto. Absent their gentle encouragement, it might sometimes be the case---in fact, it might often be the case!---that the parents and children don’t get Santa’s hints about leaving. After the crowd departs, the Handler helps Santa remove his hair, beard and bells, supplies the towel to wipe down, then quickly helps The Big Guy put everything back on for the next family to enjoy. Absent that help, Santa’s hair might go on backward and his five o’clock shadow might be seen.

So what should the Grotto be like? Lots of pine trees, lots of twinkle lights, big sleigh behind Santa filled with wrapped boxes and exposed toys, Christmas music wafting through the air, reduced lighting overhead, steaming cider for smell, a red carpet running from the entry to Santa and a white carpet for the floor. Bring the ceiling down a bit by draping white tablecloths horizontally slightly above adult height. Make the space intimate. The room should be kept very cold to invoke the idea of the North Pole while helping the Big Guy keep cool in his outfit. Imagination here is critical. The difference between the rest of the club and this space should be dramatic and almost shocking. It should be self-contained with no outside light coming in to spoil the mood. The focus should be on Santa but the aesthetics are the absolutely essential supporting cast.

Santa's look demands special attention. Unless the guy is naturally overstuffed, you'll need to have leg and chest padding specially tailored to Santa proportions. These will heat the Big Guy up dramatically unless you wrap his chest with an ice pack vest. You'll need two extra vests with four sets of ice packs since he'll need refreshers every two hours or so. The extra vests are needed because they get wet against his chest and once wet become counter productive. It may seem cold at first but the alternative is a hyper ventilating Santa.

The suit is critical as well and should be to his exact dimensions. This is a high impact item and should be of the highest possible quality.

The two most uncomfortable items are the beard and the wig. As the flesh warms, pores open and every artificial hair is felt probing into the skin. Ugh. Make sure that the two fit perfectly and can be quickly removed. Being able to take them off for fifteen seconds, wipe one's face and then put them on again is a huge psychological boost for The Big Guy.

Accessories need consideration. Black boots with fur trimmed booties are needed as are bells on each of the boots. A pair of brass eyeglasses, frames only. Santa should also have bells on each wrist---sound can be used creatively throughout the act---and a large bell or string of Christmas bells to ring as the children approach and enter the room. The hat should be big and flopsy, almost over the eyes, since it's a dramatic part of the Santa Look. Bags of gifts should be on the floor to either side of Santa's bench---benches are far better than chairs since you can get more people on them, Santa can move about more easily and they look more "communally inviting" than a single large chair---wrapped chocolate candies should be in a nearby basket and a basket of apples and oranges should be on the floor for look and utility, should the need for such gifts arise.

Make sure you have "sustainers" available---Hal's throat lozenges to soothe the throat, lots of Gatorade to prevent dehydration and a "relief jug" to handle the overflow. Avoid solid foods before and during the Santa Experience.

Santa:

Finding the right Santa will be tough. The character should have endurance since there will be long days and nights. He should know the kids and care about each of them. He should be able to improvise routines, keep the room entertained while providing an educational, amusing and heartfelt Santa Experience. My recommendation is to use the General Manager since anything less might be considered a hired hack. Santa can be a great symbolic moment and the character playing Santa should be equal to that moment.

With Santa selected, the Gate Keeper in place and the Handler ready to go, The Grotto is now ready for his first encounter. Let the Santa Experience Begin-----

A Three Act Play:

Good stories always have a beginning, middle and end. Santa wants to get kids and parents into the room and into the Santa Experience quickly and efficiently, take them through Santa School without a stumble then get the whole crowd out in the fifteen minutes allocated to each family. To do this well, that is without any of the steps being obvious, requires a “Three Act Play Mindset” which allows a routine to be followed even when specific parts of the script are altered in mid stream. The Santa Routine might go something like this:

The Arrival: Santa’s ringing his bells and stomping his feet even before the kids enter the room. The kids turn the corner and if they don’t scream in fear usually run to The Big Guy. He drops his hand held bells and gives each of the kids a big hug and greeting. If the parents enter with cameras in hand, he says there’s a photo opportunity and places the kids on his knees, thereafter hamming it up for the photo. He puts the kids on the ground, has them stand in front of him and then tells them that a Santa Moment requires that he inspects each of them for the Santa Buzz and then inspect the room for The Christmas Spirit. The Kid Inspection checks them out for The Buzz, which they’ll obviously lack. The other kids will be asked to put hands over the kid’s ears to keep in the spirit when transferred, he’ll ask them to close their eyes, nose and mouth and then he’ll count to three, at which point he’ll shake the hands vigorously, transferring the spirit. The results are obvious since the child will always smile and giggle. When each kid has received “the buzz,” Santa moves on to the room inspection. Remember to engage each of the kids in the room, as well as each of the adult. “Connecting” with them makes the experience more personal and therefore truly special.

Santa looks around the room to see if the Christmas Spirit is there and if the things needed for a Santa Moment are present. Then he’ll commence to give them Santa School Lessons---The Spirit is about Love, and the Santa Moment requires Love, giving love to others (hugs and a gift which is a symbol of the love---best to ask them if they know how to hug, then show them how a single piece of candy given as a gift can hold The Spirit of Christmas), giving love to family and giving love to friends. When he confirms that there’s love in the room, that there are gifts and hugs to give, relatives and friends (Santa is their friend!!!) to see, then he declares that a Santa Experience Can Begin!

The Santa Experience: The children then are asked to explain the spirit of Christmas (love) and to dramatize it by giving love to family and friends. Hugs and gifts are available. Kids are then energized by balling up their fists and repeating “Double Love” after Santa three times. Then they’re given a chocolate or candy cane, reminded that a gift contains the spirit of Christmas, then pointed to a parent or friend. They energize the person at a distance by pointing their fingers at them and sending out “Love Vibrations.” Then they “warn” the person that they’re coming to give them a “Double Love Christmas Hug” by raising their hands, throwing back their heads and saying after Santa---Momma (Poppa, etc.), Merry Christmas, here comes the love. They then run over to the person, give them a hug and the candy, then run back. Then Santa has them do it with a different type of candy, explaining that every love is different (though all are double love!) and therefore every gift must be different to dramatize that love.

When the gifts are given, Santa mentions that the people now have “The Glow” and the smiles are reflective of that new state of grace.

Then Santa says that the next stage requires a question, and if they lie while answering that question their noses will grow. They’re asked if they’ve been good this year, all the while having their noses watched by their brothers or sisters. Once confirmed, all are asked what their most special gift request is since Santa wants each of them to glow on Christmas morning.

Then Santa says that he’s sad since he doesn’t see them glow on Christmas morning when they open their gifts. But he wants to compensate by giving them each a gift to be opened now, thereby letting him witness the glow. Before giving the gift, he has them raise their hands and promise to be good till Christmas day. When done, he counts to three then all rip their gifts open.

The Exit: Once the gifts are opened, Santa says that he'd like three gifts. First, something to eat on Christmas eve. Second, a photo memory of them and their whole family. Last, once the photo is done, a "double love Santa hug" to give him the needed energy for the remainder of the day. Each of the kids hugs him, good byes are given and the troops exit. The hair and beard are flung off, face wiped down, fifteen seconds of freedom are enjoyed, then the whole process begins once again.

This routine can be changed and modified in any way but the sequence should be remembered. There needs to be a distinct beginning, middle and end. It's more fun that way, it's easier to improvise when needed and it satisfies our need for a "sequence."

Recovery:

The day long Santa Experience is traumatic. You need to be "up" for each encounter. Every three act play must be as good as the one which preceded it. Adrenaline flows, gushes, into one's system. Sleep will be difficult that night. You'll have Santa dreams. You'll have memories of heated flesh and beards that itch. Accept all that. Get some exercise the next day, eat some comfort food and read a good book. Two days later you'll have nothing but warm memories about the Santa Experience!