

Starting an A Cappella Group

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There's no need to learn the hard way! From conceptualization through your first performance, we can tell you the best way to find members, run auditions, structure your group, build a quick repertoire, and start performing.

Whether you are interested in starting a scholastic, post-collegiate or a professional group, from every level of casual to serious, these tips will help you find your way, establish a strong foundation, and keep you singing for many years to come.

PART 1: DECISIONS AND FINDING MEMBERS

A: DECISIONS

Clear Vision

Before you can do anything in life, you need a goal. Obviously, you want to start a group, but what kind of a group would you like it to be? How many members? What style of music? Casual weekend warriors or full-time pioneers? Hopefully the information below will help you come to some conclusions, and raise some important issues that you should consider.

Before you make your mind up, remember that you'll be in this group with a number of other members, and their desires will have to be considered as well. You'll need to be forthright about your goals, and also find out what your cohorts will want as well. Are you having trouble finding tenors, and the only interested one would like your group to include some folk music? Do you want to make the transition to full time soon, and your bass has a family and a job he won't leave? Your group will only be as solid as the foundation you lay, and that foundation is based on honesty and communication. Setting clear expectations from the start is an important step, as is knowing how flexible you'd like to be as the group progresses.

So: figure out what you want, and then make sure you create a group with at least somewhat like-minded individuals. If you don't, you'll have assembled a group that can dissolve at any moment.

Voice + Personality

Even more than with most endeavors, the people you choose for your group are your greatest resource.

Obviously their voices (with yours) make the music, but don't forget you'll be spending just as much time with them doing business as singing. Each individual's personality is an important component of the group, and the skills each member brings besides singing will comprise the breadth and depth of your business machine. In other words, you're not just choosing a few sets of vocal chords - you're deciding on your business partners as well.

But before you start scrutinizing each individual's voice, business acumen and interpersonal style, you need to decide a few things....

Number of Voices

First of all - how many people do you want in your group? Four is a good minimum number - there have only been a handful of successful a cappella trios (usually folk music). With four you can have the traditional SATB, SSAA or TTBB composition, which will allow you to sing thousands of prearranged songs. If you're looking to have a traditional, barbershop or doo-wop group, four is an excellent number.

A quintet will give you added versatility musically. Are you looking to perform more harmonically dense jazz arrangements or have one voice dedicated to vocal percussion? More and more nowadays, five is becoming the standard size for non-collegiate a cappella groups, as it allows for more complexity, and can provide a more complete background when a voice steps forward to sing lead.

Six or seven are sometimes a handful; you have too few voices to double parts (having only one part doubled is generally a bad idea, especially if you're amplified), you're going to be best performing fairly complex arrangements. Few fully-professional a cappella groups have sustained even a size of six, and those that have tend to tackle difficult music either with dense harmonies (many added chord factors - like Take 6) or with vocal percussion and complex textures (like the Swingle Singers). Six or seven can be a good number for groups with a permanent vocal percussionist (for this leaves a lead, a bass and vocal percussionist, and three or four people to fill out a background or contribute harmonies to the lead line).

If you're thinking about a group larger than seven, you're into small chorus territory. The members of your group will be perceived more as a unit than as individuals, and this alters how you approach the audience and your marketing angle. In very broad terms, if you'll forgive the analogy, you'll be moving more towards the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and away from N'SYNC or the Spice Girls. In other words, smaller groups are better for pop stylings, and choral groups tend to be more of an "arts organization."

The one prominent exception to this is the scholastic a cappella scene - college, university and high school groups often have an average of 12-18 members. Such a large group singing pop music won't work on a professional basis (too many mouths to feed, and probably no help from arts and choral organizations since you're not "cultural," etc.), but for a college group it's ideal - with 1/4 to 1/3 of the group graduating each year, there will be enough of a core to move into the next year without losing much steam, and one or two members can be absent from a show without major repercussions (also, you occasionally have people leave mid-semester due to bad grades or other pressures, so a larger group size will minimize the damage).

Thinking about specific numbers for your group is especially important for groups that hope to be hired for gigs or asked to travel for performances. Promoters and producers will likely view you as a unit instead of individual professional artists and a group with 4, 5 or 6 is going to be much cheaper to fly, house and feed for the duration of the event, than a larger group. Also, splitting a gig fee 5 ways is much more sustainable than 12. However, if your goals do not include abundant travel or living wages, find the magic number for what works for you and understand that the number may adjust up or down over time.

Gender

A simple enough question. You've got three choices: all male, all female, or mixed.

Early on, male groups were the most prominent lineup and, even today they continue to show momentum and slight advantage at catching mainstream attention (like Straight No Chaser or Naturally 7). Since the days of Gregorian chant, through barbershop and doo-wop, and even in today's vocal bands, men seem to enjoy singing with other men. With the use of falsetto, the male voice has a greater range than a female voice (on average, of course), and some people argue having a single-sex group makes vocal blend issues easier. Finally, there's a certain sex appeal a single gender group seems to garner that mixed groups generally dispel. Whatever the reason, male groups have been the most popular lineup among small a cappella groups.

Mixed groups have grown tremendously in popularity over the years. Just a few years ago it seemed the only professional mixed groups were choirs or jazz ensembles. This has been changing, as mixed groups have proven just as capable of pioneering any style of a cappella as their male counterparts. This trend continues into the collegiate world as well: 15 years ago, fewer than 15 percent of college a cappella groups were mixed - nowadays mixed groups are almost as numerous in the U.S. college scene as male groups, and their recordings and arrangements have proven to be the most trend-setting. Finally, if you're looking to stick to published and easy-to-get music, the number of SATB arrangements outnumbers all-male or all-female at around a 10-1 ratio (it's closer to 30-1 in the case of female arrangements). Quite a few professional quintets and sextets have started adding a female voice or two to stretch their sound.

Until recently, professional female groups were almost non-existent. Scholastic female groups carried a stigma of being pigeon-holed into cute or sexy, but lacking substance. In recent years, this image is rapidly changing. With the increase in female vocal percussionists and the advent of better technology, women are proving to be able to rock a rhythm section just as well as their male counterparts. Gone are the days when the only acceptable repertoire for women only included sappy girl ballads and perky-Andrews Sisters harmonies. Scholastic and professional women's ensembles are tackling hard-hitting rock, pop & R&B, while still holding the sensitive, beautiful and simple cards, ready to be pulled out of their deck at any given moment to will take an audience's breath away.

The challenges for women's groups still exist. Sexism? Possibly. Lack of full vocal range? Overcome with creativity. There are more and more role models prominently available for women in the community. The challenges may seem insurmountable at first, but if you get your group going, you'll be in demand at a cappella festivals around the world. Aside from starting an all girl band, we have yet to see a mostly-female group that only uses a male bass, but this is certainly a possibility, as is the possibility of an otherwise a cappella female group using some instrument (upright bass? synthesizer?) to fill out their bass range. Go ahead. Break the rules. We won't judge!

Style Of Music

A cappella groups are more stylistically versatile than most instrumental combos. Guitar bands and string quartets are limited in their sonic variety; an a cappella group can sing classical and pop songs back to back with equal prowess (based on the singer's talents, of course). In other words, your choices are limitless. Nonetheless, there are some general categories that have arisen over time:

- Madrigal group
- Barbershop or Sweet Adeline Quartet or Chorus
- Doo-wop quartet or quintet
- Close harmony/vocal jazz group
- Vocal band (including vocal percussion, etc.)

Many groups nowadays incorporate elements of at least one of these categories. What's even more exciting is that many groups blend a combination of styles and configurations to create their own unique sound (point of interest - all of the above styles were developed through stylistic and sonic pioneering - before 1990, there weren't any vocal bands).

Having an idea of what kind of music you want to sing will make group auditions and repertoire selection much easier. Don't think you need to know everything right away - if you're going to be carving out a new sound, it's difficult to have a complete idea until you have voices in place. Nonetheless, a general concept is very useful.

Announce Auditions

There's no better way to ensure you have the best possible singers in your group than to hold open auditions. You're going to want to attract as many people as possible, since without a reputation in your area you're going to have to do the weeding out yourself, as opposed to be able to assume that people know if they're right or not for your group. Also, you may be disappointed by the turnout - it is often difficult to find and attract potential

auditionees. For this reason, we highly recommend you do a full-on blitz for your first audition, otherwise you'll always wonder if there's someone better out there.

There are many places you should announce your auditions:

1) Social Media. At the very least, start a Facebook Page and a Twitter account. Share them with your friends, family, colleagues and neighbors. Post announcements on your pages, but also on known a cappella channels. Most metropolitan areas or states have at least 1 a cappella Facebook group, if not several. CASA sponsors several groups and pages that allow general posts. Remember that Social Media posts are time sensitive, so post your announcements at times when people tend to be online (mid morning, evenings), not just at 3 am. Don't forget to check out YouTube, Pinterest, Instagram and whatever other platforms the kids are using these days!

2) Local choruses: bring a flyer to a rehearsal and ask to make an announcement right before the break. Hopefully the director won't be too worried about potentially losing a member. Don't forget to check out local church choirs as well!

3) Newspapers: a classified ad will usually not cost more than \$20. If you have more than one paper in your area, advertise in them all - few people read the classifieds in more than one publication. Certainly in colleges, the campus newspaper is the place to advertise. Try both print and online ads.

4) Musician's publications: In many cities, the musicians in the local "scene" have a preferred publication, bulletin board, listserv or forum. For example, many musicians post classifieds in Washington D.C.'s City Paper. Find out where your local musicians hang out and post there. Often the best modern a cappella group members have come from vocal rock bands, where they've learned to sing well and blend with other singers, as well as have plenty of stage presence and style.

5) Online Ads: Search for local mailing lists and music friendly publications. Many successful groups have found their humble beginnings on Craig's List or other sites that allow free posts for musicians.

6) Local Ambassadors: CASA has a network of regional a cappella ambassadors that are in many cases the definitive source of a cappella information for their area. Let them know what you're up to, and ask if they have any suggestions or know of any potential members. They have direct access to many of their constituents through newsletters, mailing lists, websites and Facebook...basically, they've done your stalking of local talent for you, so take advantage!

7) A Cappella events and concerts: Bring a stack of flyers, wear a nametag, and network. Word of mouth is often the best way to find singers, and a cappella concerts bring together singers and generate new interest like nothing else.

In addition, the best way for you to spread the word about your new group is to perform. Obviously you won't have all of your members, but if you can put together a quartet of committed and talented people before starting auditions, you'll have a tremendous advantage. It is particularly easy for collegiate groups, where you can sing in dining halls, before major functions, and during orientation week for the wide-eyed freshmen. Or, you could just do some general "dorm-storming," a term used to describe canvassing the dorms (often freshman dorms) and singing and announcing auditions wherever possible. For groups in the real world, it can be as simple as learning a few songs and singing at the local town center, shopping mall, open mic, or other gathering place. Better yet, do some good with your first few performances and volunteer visit a nursing home, community center, or church service. If people can actually experience what you're doing, instead of just reading about it, you'll much more easily generate interest. Even if your goal is to have a group of 10 and you only have 5 members, find something simple to learn and just get singing. When potential auditionees see (or get the impression) that your group is actively performing, they're more likely to take your group seriously. As you're going through this process, be sure to keep a list of all people and contacts you come across; whether or not they work out at present, you never know when you'll be looking for a new member, and this information may prove invaluable to you some day in the future.

Over time, new auditions will get easier to promote. The more well-known your group is, the easier it will be to attract more and better talent. Expect to host auditions frequently as a new group and don't forget your patience pills. It can take several months, even a few years, for a group to really gel and reach a point of stability in membership turnover. Capture even small opportunities of momentum; enjoy each stage of your group as it grows!

Attracting Good Members

Your existing personal reputation, as well as what you do throughout the audition process, will greatly influence your ability to attract really good singers. A potential group member will decide whether to audition based on all s/he knows about your group. This means several things:

- You should be careful in your recruiting about what image you portray. You should make the group look enticing to the type of people you wish to attract. This all boils down to basic marketing. Wording, images, tone and style are important.
- You should be careful in your dealings with people. Be friendly but professional. Be welcoming, follow up people's calls promptly, and run the auditions in a professional manner (you can still be friendly and fun while being professional).

Your reputation has a LOT to do with your ability to attract good singers. When first starting out, you don't have a reputation, so be extra careful not to take poor singers and to rehearse enough before performing. The reputation that you build in your performing will affect the level of singers that come out for subsequent auditions. This is particularly true for collegiate groups, where many of the auditionees tend to be people who have heard the group and liked it. The downside of this is that if you get a poor reputation, you'll have a hard time finding good singers. Unfortunately this often leads to imbalances in the college scene, in which a college has several groups, but one is the better group year after year, because their reputation attracts the good singers to their group over and over.

Your Perfect Member Profile

Before starting your audition process, you should decide what you're looking for in members. There are three major elements you're looking for in a potential member: talent, personality and commitment. Obviously, each person is different, and no one is perfect. However, with each person you see that shows promise, you should consider these three aspects.

Talent

Talent is a difficult quality to assess, so rather than raise many issues, we'll just list a number of questions you might ask yourself while auditioning a potential member:

- What kind of a singer is this person? As a soloist? As a background singer?
- What kind of performer do you think this person will make?
- Would you be interested and "drawn in" watching this person on stage?
- How experienced is the person, and how experienced does s/he seem?
- What kind of vocal range does this person have?
- How durable is his/her voice?
- How musical does this person seem?
- Do you think any deficiencies are permanent, or can problems be fixed over time?

Remember you're not only looking at the person's talent as presented in audition, you're also interested in how that will translate to a stage, and how it will fit in with your group.

Personality

A singer's personality isn't only important on stage - you also have to make sure an individual can get along with others, do business and other behind-the-scenes duties, and is generally responsible. Many groups have commented that they have had their success greatly enhanced by hanging out with each other and being social outside of rehearsals and performances. This may seem obvious, but during the audition process you'll be surprised how blinded people get by an individual's raw talent. Make sure you take a sober step back and look at the whole picture, just as if you're hiring a new employee for your business. You'll be glad you did.

Just how do you judge someone's personality in a short audition? Set up opportunities to get a peek at the real person behind the voice. Engage in conversation and ask questions. Observe how they interact with the group and other auditionees. Have your founding members relax and be themselves, so that you encourage that behavior in your auditionees.

Commitment

Having a common level of commitment is crucial to a new group - if half the members are looking for a Grammy and the other half are only looking for a casual pastime, you're bound to hit conflict with almost every decision you make.

During the audition process, clearly spell out what the commitment will be. Without an agreement up front, you may have a hard time getting new members to sign on for certain duties or responsibilities. If you clearly state from the beginning that you'll be rehearsing twice a week in the evenings for 2.5 hours, and get their OK before you take them, there's little they can say during the first rehearsal. Of course, you also have to be careful not to overstate the commitment, lest you scare away potential good singers. Be honest, and show that you expect the same from them.

In scholastic groups this should be spelled out up front. "We'll be rehearsing three times a week for a total of six hours, traveling an average of five weekends a semester, and spending spring break together touring" is an important thing for a prospective member to hear before signing on. If your group is new, you might want to discuss commitment lightly during auditions, to avoid scaring anyone away. When members are accepted into the group, you should then spell out the commitment in more serious detail, and ask that the new member agree to the commitment before accepting your offer to join.

A word of warning - just as a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, a group is only as effective as its least committed member. Of course, this also applies to weak singers or difficult personalities. One person showing up late for gigs and missing rehearsals will send chills of anger through the other members, and eventually will result in demoralization or even people leaving the group. Make sure you choose responsible, committed people, and that together, as a new group, you have a pact to make certain commitments (rehearsals, duties) to attain your goals. By having standards for this behavior set from the beginning, it also makes it easier for the director to ask members not meeting the standard to leave.

For scholastic groups, your group clearly has central, convenient meeting places. Post-collegiate and professional groups face an added challenge. Where is your home base? How far away should you recruit members? You may not want to set any restrictions on how far away members live, but rather make sure you are clear about regular rehearsal locations, dates, and times. Some groups thrive as a neighborhood endeavor, while others make it work by recruiting top-notch members in different cities. Each has its benefits and challenges, so you'll need to weigh your options carefully.

B. THE AUDITION

Intro

At this point, we'll note that some people are tempted to start a group from whomever is willing to show up, or with a bunch of friends. While this is certainly your own prerogative, you will almost certainly not end up with a high-quality group. If you intend to have a group you're really going to be proud of, auditions are imperative. There is little that is more difficult than having one or two poor singers in the group. This will hurt morale among the better singers, and present difficult dilemmas about how to deal with them both. Holding an audition is highly recommended.

If you're starting out a group alone, you may find it difficult to audition members alone. A good solution is to find musicians whom you trust to participate in the first few auditions. These musicians can help you choose the initial members, and then you can work with those new members to audition and choose the rest of the members.

Booking Auditions

Once interested persons have contacted you, give them an audition date and time, and tell them anything they may need to prepare for the audition. You'll probably want them to come prepared to perform a song for you, and you'll definitely want to ask them to warm up in advance of the audition. You may even go as far as sending them some music in advance. In any event, you'll want to let them know enough about what to expect so that they don't come in nervous and clueless.

What To Include In The Audition

The audition itself should reflect the nature of the group you want to form, and should include both elements of professionalism and enjoyable moments of camaraderie.

Before the audition itself, have the auditionee fill out a form for you, including current contact info, relevant experience, and anything else you want to know. It also may help if the person brings a picture and/or resume. This is more appropriate for pro groups; scholastic groups will probably be fine with just a form.

Technically, there are a few things you should make sure you cover during an audition:

1) Warm-ups. As stated above, auditionees should warm up in advance, but after a car ride or walk across campus, a quick warm-up will help the auditionee, and help you get a better idea of their voice. It's easy to use scales for the warm-up, which give you a chance to test their vocal range. Have them sing patterns or scales up and down to test their vocal extremes, and give you a sense of the quality of their voice in different registers. Generally if an auditionee is nervous, it'll be right at this beginning time. Take the time to have them take deep breaths, and to reassure them not to be nervous. Some light joking might help relieve the atmosphere - no one wants to audition for a bunch of stone faces. With or without nervousness, most singers who are relatively new to the a cappella world will not sing out enough, and should be (gently) encouraged to sing in a more full, supported voice.

2) Solo. Make sure they've prepared a solo in advance - something they know, and preferably something that fits the style and potential repertoire of your group (no emo songs for a doo-wop group audition). Have the person sing the song completely a cappella and alone, using no instrumental accompaniment, and no other singers. Make sure the singer knows this in advance, as this isn't easy for some. Hearing a person's naked voice is more telling than any other element of the audition. You'll hear vocal quality, interpretation, how well tuning and rhythm are held, and get a sense of the person's performing ability and dynamic. Make sure to encourage the auditionee to *perform* the song for you, or you may get all vocal precision and no spark. You'll be surprised how deeply the attitude and performance of their solo subconsciously affects your opinion of their voice and whether they'd fit into your group.

Occasionally you'll come across an excellent background singer who isn't a dynamic solo singer. This is OK, so long as you have other great soloists in your lineup.

If you're not at all interested in an individual at this stage, now is a good time to thank and dismiss the person. You'll probably all agree if someone isn't right at all - a simple glance or pre-established signal will take the place of a more obvious vote. There is no need to go through the following steps with someone you know isn't right.

3) Vocal Ability, Tuning, and Precision. A cappella is demanding, and you need to know your singers can sing somewhat complex passages in tune, and stand on their own without being thrown off by other singers. Some good tests are:

- Play complex patterns or intervals and have them sing them back to you
- Repeating difficult rhythms
- Matching vowel sounds and vocalism patterns
- Sing the same musical phrase starting on different pitches

4) How Good is their "Ear?" Some singers can sing patterns or intervals back to you well, but lack the ear to effectively listen to other singers or to blend their part in. This is very important in close-harmony singing, and should be tested. Some good tests are to play three notes on a keyboard (start with simple chords, and work your way to more complex combinations of notes), or hold the keys down indefinitely, and have them listen and sing the middle one to you. You'll also get an idea for their ear as they learn songs with you. Be wary of singers who drift from their part to similar parts a third or fourth away.

5) Sight reading. You'll probably want to know how quickly a person can learn music, and this is a valuable test. Start by having the individual do a little sight reading for you by simply looking at the music. If this is too hard, you can have them sight read a simple passage while you and a couple other members sing the other parts (if you don't have enough members, you can play the parts on a keyboard). If the right song is chosen, this type of group singing also satisfies the "blending" part of the audition, discussed below.

If this kind of "raw" sight singing doesn't work, you can move on to see how quickly the person can learn by ear. Play or sing the part once, and then have him or her sing it back. The amount of time it takes for the person to get the part right will give you a rough indication of what you'll be dealing with in rehearsal. Often a person will not be a good sight-reader, but will still learn parts quickly with minimal teaching. This type of person inevitably becomes a better sight-reader as time goes on.

If your group is not planning or expecting any members to sight read at all, but will be expecting people to learn music outside of rehearsal, you might give all auditionees music to learn on their own in advance of the audition (sheet music or a midi of individual parts) . Once again, the audition should be structured so that you look for the qualities in which you are most interested. Don't hesitate to come up with some unique tests (choreography, acting, etc.), if your group is going to demand certain skills.

6) Blending Test. Once the part is learned, take yourself and any other available singers (if it's just you, borrow some friends who are singers just for the audition) and sing the passage with the individual. You're listening for the singer's ability to blend in with your voices, compensating pitch, timbre, and volume to match what they hear. Also make sure this person can hold their part and won't drift onto one of your vocal lines. Make sure the person knows their part before you start this - even if it means taking a little while, and having the person hear your singers sing it a few times. The point of this exercise is to see how an individual will do once a song is learned.

One important caveat with the blending test, or any part of the audition when you'll sing with new members: make sure the existing group members know their parts very well, and that they're good at singing whatever the audition pieces are. You don't want to do an audition and sing poorly with a great potential group member, only to have him/her turn down your offer because s/he didn't think your group was good enough.

Depending on your group, the total depth and length of the audition may vary. For professional or semi-pro groups, long auditions or even multiple auditions are recommended, to get a really good idea of the talent/ability/personality of the singer. These pro auditions will usually be heavily weighted towards singing with the group and fitting into their lineup - filling the exact spot that is open in the group. In the collegiate or high school scene the opposite may be appropriate: often there are so many interested singers that auditions must be run quickly. A fairly complete audition, if you practice a couple of times, can be done in about 20 minutes. If your group is even more pressed for time, you could consider doing large group auditions in which the hoards of interested people show up at once and are pulled into a room for 3-minute-each screening auditions, and then called back for longer second round auditions at a later date.

If you're uncertain about singers, or having trouble choosing between singers for a specific part, don't hesitate to schedule a callback. The callback should be in format much like a full rehearsal, and make sure there's plenty of time to hang out with the singers as well as sing with them. Warm up together, learn music together, and sing together, but don't forget to leave extra time for small talk. Focus on anything you feel is necessary to differentiate between the singers or find out more about a certain part of their vocal ability or personality. Remember, you'll be singing with this person for quite some time so don't skimp during a callback - take an hour

or two to make sure all your questions are answered completely. (You can have more than one singer at a callback, but make sure the number isn't greater than four or five or you won't be able to pay attention to all of them - definitely don't call back more singers in one session than you have people to listen to them).

Remember the auditionee will probably be nervous, and make some allowances for that. Try to be reassuring right at the beginning of the audition, and keep cool and relaxed throughout. However, don't be too forgiving when you're finally deciding on who to take - if you need to call the person back or take extra time for relaxation then do so - but be wary of accepting a singer with a warbly voice that you attributed to nerves, as you may find the warble is a permanent quality. Likewise, many auditionees will claim to be "sick" at an audition, or otherwise excuse a voice which is weak or otherwise lacking... beware of assuming that they'll be better at a later time. If necessary, hold off on that one person and hear them again in a week or two.

A very important point: you should be taking notes on each auditionee during each step of the process; unless you only see a couple of people they will rapidly become blurred in your mind. A camera, or even video camera (just tape part of each person's solo) will be very useful when remembering people and making decisions. There is no worse feeling than finishing several hours of auditions, only to not remember who you heard or liked the most.

After the Audition

Meet as a group and consider all the auditionees, and be especially careful to consider your needs. If you take all the good singers without regard to voice part or solo ability, you may find yourself with seven great baritone background singers, and no soloists or tenors.

On the other hand, you may be in a position where you didn't find exactly what you need, maybe you're missing a certain voice part or not enough singers with sight-reading skills. Before you go back into the audition process, see if you can make a good group out of the best singers you have - maybe the format will be a little different than you expected, or someone will be singing a voice part they didn't expect, but having a group comprised of good singers and people you like is more important than holding out for that perfect countertenor. There is definitely a tradeoff between taking the singers you can find and holding off for another round of auditions. At some point you have to take the plunge and really get the group started.

Make sure you promptly contact each auditionee and let them know the outcome either way (via phone or email is most polite). There's nothing worse than appearing for an audition and then never hearing back.

Professionalism is paramount. The last thing you want is to have auditionees bad-mouthing you to your local music community before you even get off the ground. A good rule of thumb is to reach all the auditionees within two days of their audition. Try to talk to them personally, but leave a message after a few attempts have failed.

Another great rule is to tell them the news quickly, without excuses or reasons. If you apologize and then follow up with a lengthy description of why you did what you did, you're only diluting the apology by trying to excuse your behavior. Similarly, telling a person exactly why you didn't take them (or especially lying) is often worse than just saying "thanks, I hope we see you back again." If people ask why they weren't accepted, then happily provide what you can which is constructive (i.e. helpful for their next audition) but try to keep the calls short and polite.

C. FIRST MEETING

Once you've found who you're looking for, it's time to schedule a meeting with all group members and discuss your goals, expectations, procedures, etc. Make sure the new member(s) speak as well, as their perspective and goals will soon be as important to the group's direction as yours are. Answer any questions, and come to some agreements. You may even want to sign a brief contract/letter of agreement with the individual.

Depending on the kind of group you're looking to start, you may want to have a probation period (a couple of months) initially to make sure both parties are pleased with the experience of singing together. This can be

particularly important in professional groups. Audition processes can tell you a great deal about a person, but once you spend a little time together you may know things that didn't come out at first that would disrupt your group in the long run. Pay special attention to commitment - if the individual has a problem being on time or fulfilling responsibilities during the first couple of months you should be very wary of continuing to work together.

Initiation

Some college groups have somewhat elaborate initiation procedures. For example, once you've found the members you're looking for call them up late at night and tell them you've been struggling with a decision and you need to hear them one last time right away, or simply "I need to briefly talk with you, can I stop by?" When you meet them sleepy-eyed, awaken them by "singing them in" the group with the official group song. If you go to their dorm or home, you can make a big scene singing them in in front of all of their fellow residents. If you're starting a high-school or college group, give some thought to an initiation that will prove memorable for all and start cementing a strong bond between group members. Make them feel welcome, and make them feel like they're fully one of the members. Stay away from hazing or antagonistic welcomes - they will only divide up your group before it even starts. Even as an adult or professional group, it can be a fun, memorable welcome if you establish a tradition for welcoming and initiating new members.

In addition to the "fun" part of welcoming in a new member, don't forget to plan your group's on-boarding process and explain it clearly to all members. Things to think about include:

- information about rehearsal schedules and upcoming gigs
- arrangement files and learning parts
- expectations for learning music
- adding members to your communication systems (phone list, email group, Facebook page, or however else you communicate)

Name

Once you've chosen your members and decided what style of music you'll be performing, it's time to choose a name.

Your group name is the single most important marketing decision you'll make as it will conjure images in the head of everyone who's never heard you, and act as your trademark for those who have. Look at the following names and see how much you assume about a group simply by its name:

- Big Daddy and the Cool Cats
- The Revelations
- Jam 4 Reel
- Bushes and Briars
- The Swooners
- Golden Tradition

The above names are all fictitious, but give you an idea how immediate a picture your name can create. Before choosing a name, go to the [CASA Acapedia](#) scan through the college or professional group names (there's nothing worse than picking a name only to find out it's already being used by three other groups). If you're intending to gig widely in the a cappella community, you might want to check out [the names being used by barbershop groups](#), too.

If you're planning on full-time status one day, you probably want to file paperwork protecting you and your name from use by anyone else (trademark). The process varies from country to country, but you can register your name federally to own it for your own nation. If you live near a border with another nation (i.e., somewhere in the Northern U.S. States, or almost anywhere in Europe) and think you'll be touring into the other

country, you might want to investigate registering the name there, too. The British group Suede had to change their name to "The London Suede" for American albums and tours because the name was already registered in the United States to the singer Suede, formerly of the Flirtations. This is a time consuming and somewhat expensive process, but it's worth it if you're planning on heading for the big time (imagine if Pepsi built up its name brand only to be told several years later that it can't use their name).

Before you finalize your name, you'll also want to check to see if your desired website name is available. It is also useful to check popular social media sites as well, to make sure you can establish an appropriate ID name or handle.

Your name is your calling card. Make sure it's yours, and once it is, protect it.

Style

Much can be said about the various styles and types of a cappella. It's not necessary for you to decide immediately what your group is going to sound like, but it is important for you to have some kind of general idea. Hopefully you've given this thought before auditions, and had a discussion with various members about your individual desires. Now that you have a group, it's time to test the waters. Try different songs and arrangements. Switch parts. Experiment with vocal sounds. The process to solidifying a group "sound" will come with time, provided you're looking beyond covering other group's material.

Fun

Never forget to have fun. No matter how hard you work, how much you achieve, or how far you feel you have to go, you have to be having fun. In fact, some groups (high school, college, or "semi-professional") exist primarily just to have a good time and share their love of music with others. These groups, although often not as polished as their professional counterparts, often leave the audience with a comparably wonderful feeling, and equally large smile on their faces.

Celebrate your achievements and successes. Enjoy each other's company when together. Share your music with those less fortunate than you. A Cappella music has a strange, ineffable ability to strike a deep chord within people (those who sing as well as those who listen), and you should never forget how great this feels, and how wonderful it is to share with others.

D. ARRANGEMENTS

Unless you're planning on arranging and learning everything by ear, you'll want to use written arrangements. Eventually you should strive to get your own arrangements, but early on there's no harm in learning others' charts. In fact, it can save you countless hours arranging songs that have already been done before. Here are a few resources that can prove invaluable:

- 1) [The CASA arrangement library](#) - free arrangements are available to members based on membership level. There's a database of original and public domain songs in various styles that can help you get started.
- 2) On the a cappella related social media groups or lists serves, ask similar groups if you can use some of their charts. Network with other groups as much as possible, local or otherwise, and ask for arrangement copies, or offer to swap arrangements.
- 3) There are a number of publishing companies that put out a cappella sheet music. Contemporary A Cappella Publishing, UNC Jazz Press and Hal Leonard are a couple of the better ones.
- 4) There is an increasing number of talent arrangers and composers available for hire. Start at sites like [betteracappella.com](#) or search the liner notes of your favorite a cappella albums to identify your favorite arrangers.
- 5) Countless Internet sources exist for SATB choral music - a web search will find a source to fill your needs.

PART 2: GROUP ORGANIZATION

Leadership Roles

Every group is different, as the individuals in that group combine to make up a unique dynamic. However, all groups are common in that they need a division of responsibility and leadership. Who runs rehearsals? Who takes calls from interested gig opportunities? Who handles the finances? Whether your group will be run as a democracy with shared responsibility or a benevolent dictatorship with one or two people doing all the work behind the scenes, make sure the responsibilities are clearly spelled out and understood by all.

In choosing who should do what, avoid the common pitfall of assigning specific roles just because it sounds like you should. Many groups or clubs of all sorts make the mistake of having a President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer, even though those four particular offices don't necessarily meet the needs of the group. In a cappella groups, some typical roles are:

- Musical director (some call this "the pitch")
- Business manager
- Tour/performance manager
- Treasurer
- President (usually same as business manager)
- Show coordinator or album coordinator

Of course a typical group wouldn't have ALL these offices, just the ones that fit the particular group. Often times, roles will be combined. In some groups the musical director is also the business manager; they'd be better off with separate roles, as there's only so much one person can do - especially when a group is just starting out and there isn't sufficient income to make it possible for one person to be working a great deal on group duties. In any event, be sure to consider what roles your group NEEDS, and even who is appropriate for those roles, before creating and filling those positions. Allow the specific individuals in your group to dictate what roles should exist and who should fill them (unless you have a scholastic group that will have a complete personnel change every 4 or fewer years).

Also, take the opportunity to test out and train your next generation of leaders. Start by offering your newer or less experienced members simple tasks. As the successful complete each one, gradually offer them tasks with increasing levels of responsibility. This will leave you with better prepared replacements when leaders graduate or retire.

Group Contract

In a college group you probably need some kind of official charter or constitution. Talk to your student activities office or student government - they can give you examples of similar group's charters, so you don't have to start from scratch. Such a charter may be a requirement of the school, or a requirement in order for you to get money from your school.

Professional groups have a different need - they're bound not by the laws of their school, but rather by the laws of the local, state/province and federal governments. For this reason, it's a good idea to make some decisions now before conflict arises, and sign those decisions into a partnership agreement. The more professional the group, the more imperative it is to have this type of agreement.

Most groups don't deal with this step until it is too late, and group business and finances can be ground to a halt for a long time. Some issues to resolve include:

- Who owns the name? (The most valuable group asset).
- Who own arrangements or compositions created by or for the group?
- How do you pay out profits?

- Are leaving members responsible for gigs and commitments agreed to before their departure but after their leaving?
- Do you treat voluntarily leaving members differently from members who are asked to leave?
- Will everyone be paid equally, or do certain members get more money for certain duties?

Keeping Members

Sure, you can attract good voices - but can you hang on to them? Losing and replacing members is the biggest threat to a group's success. Unlike instrumental groups, voices are not usually easily interchangeable, and each person has a different range, vocal quality, musical prowess, personality, etc. whereas replacing a member is a chance to get a more talented vocalist, generally speaking you want to hang onto the members you have.

How do you do this? Have an agreement - make everyone commit to the group for a certain length of time (a year, or a school semester). This commitment will make all parties realize up front that they're signing on for a "run" (much like a musical theater production) and that they're going to have to tough it out. Most groups hit some rough spots - especially early on - and having an agreement to tough it out until April will help you navigate the straights. If you are wise you'll have enough payoff by the end of the commitment that people will be willing to stay on for another round.

PART 3: REHEARSALS

Scheduling Rehearsals

The number of rehearsals you have and their length will likely correlate strongly with the quality and success of your group. If you meet once a week for two hours you'll likely take a long time before you have an hour's worth of music and a smooth show. If you can afford the time, twice or three times a week is exponentially better than once a week - as the more often you rehearse, the less you forget between meetings. Also, a performance is often as efficient as a rehearsal in solidifying music and making your group a better performing unit, so as time progresses you may lose a rehearsal in lieu of a gig. Typical college groups rehearse 6-10 hours per week. Professional groups will require much more intense rehearsal as they're getting started, and perhaps less rehearsal time as they transition into a more performance-heavy schedule. Semi-pro groups (where the members still have day jobs) often rehearse just once a week, even though more frequent rehearsals would definitely benefit them - it's a matter of priorities at that point.

Besides maximizing the time you can spend together, make sure you prioritize music as your first goal when spending time together (there's always a tendency to socialize as well as sing) - by running well-structured rehearsals, the initial apparent rigidity will pay off in more efficient rehearsals and a better group. Save time by doing business via email, phone, and with reliable distribution of gig information (you'd be surprised how much time you can spend just dictating and clarifying gig information and directions).

It is highly recommend you save all business for the end of each rehearsal. There isn't a group in existence that won't begin to eat into their singing time if discussions are placed before singing. In fact, for many groups, this is a big problem. Save yourself the hassle and build a good pattern of music, then discussion from the outset, or even consider having separate music-only rehearsals and business-only meetings.

Elements of the Rehearsal

Start with warm-ups; some people swear by them. Although some voices (baritones) are fairly warmed up just by speaking, others (high voices) often require good warm-up before being able to sing well. In addition, the support system (breathing) does not get warmed up effectively in daily speaking, and must be warmed up before rehearsal. At least as important as the vocal benefit is the mental benefit of warm-ups - they are a good way for people to mentally set aside other aspects of their life and focus on singing. In collegiate or non-professional groups, where singers still have a lot of learning and developing to do, warm-up exercises often are focused towards training specific traits - blending ability, vowel matching, rhythmic abilities, etc. Often these types of exercises do more to effectively teach good singing technique than the actual song rehearsal.

On the other hand, be careful not to use up too much of the rehearsal time on warm-ups. Some directors who enjoy leading the warm-up exercises so much that they overdo it at the expense of valuable song rehearsal time.

Next, to help solidify the mood and focus, it's often a good idea to sing through a tune or two you know without stopping. Once you get songs to a certain level of preparedness, it's best to get used to singing them all the way through, saving your comments for the end (otherwise you may find you continue to have problems with the same transitional passages where you find you always stop). In addition, it helps get the group in the mind set of "once you start a tune, you need to focus on it and finish it." Oddly enough this is difficult for some perfectionists, who crinkle their nose at every tuning issue or wrong note. Full "performance situation" run-throughs will help you break them of this habit (and they'll need to - so they don't "telegraph" errors to the audience through their facial expressions).

Each song that is done goes through two phases (with no clear line between the two) - the learning, and the polishing. Be sure some time in each rehearsal is spent on each. That is, spend some time learning new songs, but be sure to take some time to run songs that you already know, and make comments or work on difficult sections to improve them.

Learning music an important aspect of any rehearsal. Some groups can sight read well, others prefer to have the director play the parts on a keyboard one by one. Still others learn by ear, relying on having their parts sung to them or played on cassettes and memorized before rehearsal. Take the time initially to find out how each individual learns best, and come up with a system that will maximize your in-rehearsal productivity and minimize the amount of time your fastest learners have to wait for your slowest learners (thereby reducing potential tension down the road).

Some groups like to spend a portion of their singing time together improvising. Whether using a simple 12 bar blues form, or just letting a free-form exploration ensue, sometimes improv can be a freeing experience. Note: if you do improvise, and people are comfortable, you might consider taping each session - sometimes some great song ideas and/or arrangement textures arise, and it's great to be able to go back and listen to them later.

Polishing music is important, and there are a number of performance issues that can't be addressed around a piano. Once you get your music to an acceptable level of preparedness, you should consider audio taping your performance. You can all listen back to the group as a whole more easily than you can while singing, and may realize some issues that weren't clear when everyone was focusing on their own part.

In addition, videotaping your group is an excellent way to see how you look when you sing. Disregard the tape quality, and look instead at facial expression, movement, and how the physicality of your group adheres to the music. Finally, you may want to consider bringing in an experienced coach or musical friend to critique and work with the group. An outside opinion is always a good way to gain perspective, and sometimes a detached individual can address issues clearly without the distraction of interpersonal or ego issues getting in the way of the message.

As you spend more time together, you'll fall into a comfortable rehearsal pattern that will best suit your group's talent, comfort, and needs.

PART 4: BUSINESS

Basic Business

Once your group is off and running, it's time to let the world know you're ready for business. The following are a couple of things you should make sure you do to "hang up your shingle" and establish a permanent business entity.

First, get a permanent address and phone number. A post office box and voice mail box are the easiest ways to do this. You need an address and phone number that doesn't change every time you change apartments or

disconnect every year when your officers graduate (for scholastic groups). These things are not very expensive, and it's imperative you be able to keep regular customers and contacts you've established. If you're on a campus and pressed for funds, you can often get a consistent address and phone number by using the student activities office (high school groups can usually use their music department as the contact).

Second, establish a presence on the Internet. While a presence on social media is important, establishing an actual website increases the professional appearance and legitimacy of your group. If you aren't skilled in web design, there are many programs on the web that can help you get started, or may offer consultant services. Keep your site easy to navigate and make sure you update it frequently. If someone checks out your page to book you and your upcoming gig list includes shows from 6 months prior, they may assume you've gone on hiatus.

Getting Gigs

The best way to get gigs is to gig. That doesn't make sense, you say? Well, there's no better way, and nothing's keeping you from taking the first step: perform for free - as often as possible - in public locations. Even if you only know a handful of songs you should agree to meet on weekends and spontaneously jam on the street corner. Nothing hones performance instincts more than performing, and it's the best way to get lots of people really excited about your group.

Initially, this means performing at friends' parties, street-singing in tourist areas, volunteering at charity events, entertaining at office parties, etc. There are many people and organizations interested in free entertainment - ask friends, fellow students, co-workers, for ideas of where you can sing. People who hear your group in person, and enjoy your show, are now all doing word-of-mouth advertising for your group (make sure they all get business cards, which all group members should carry, and get their names on your mailing list!). That will pay dividends for a long time. After a while, the quantity and quality of show offers will improve, and you'll go from making no money to \$50 a show to \$500 and even to \$5,000.

Just because a show is free doesn't mean you shouldn't give it your all - performing excellently and professionally for every show will build a reputation of quality. Even if it is only for 10 people at a faculty luncheon, a good show can turn into the best contact of your career, and a bad show will result in lost opportunities you'll never know about.

To accomplish this well, you need to network. Just like a good job hunt, talk to as many people as possible about good places to sing. Ask your Uncle Bob if you can sing on his radio show, have your mom's friend hire you to sing at the mall, send your recording of the National Anthem to every sports franchise within driving distance. The more contacts you make, and the more people you impress with your musicality and professionalism, the more fun the whole experience will become.

This kind of thing requires dedication from the entire group, not just one obsessive person. Make sure everyone is looking out for and generating opportunities. The initial hard work will pay endless dividends down the road.

You'll find that as you get more and more gigs, they will start to fall into two categories: (1) gigs for money, (2) gigs for fun. This is not to say that gigs for money are not fun, or vice-versa, but it is to say this: You'll have a limited amount of fun (do your best) performing for corporate gigs, like the Illinois Rural Electrification Council annual banquet, but you'll love those on-campus shows to students as a college group, or those big hometown music-hall shows as a non-collegiate group. Be sure to chase after the gigs you really want, and even charge in inverse proportion to how much you really want the gig - this will insure you continue to do what you started out wanting to do - have FUN!

As your group establishes itself, and you're intent on professional success, you'll want to focus on finding an agent and manager. These are excellent topics, but beyond the scope of this booklet.

What to Charge

It's difficult to know how much money your group is worth if you've never performed before. However, you'll be called upon to quote a price at times, so it's good to gather the following information:

- How much money are similar groups in your area receiving? If there aren't any, ask a group who used to be at your level, (who is now defunct or commanding higher fees) or a group in another similar region (cities will offer higher paying gigs than rural areas, for example).
- What is their budget? Corporations will have more money than non-profit organizations (usually). Individual budgets (weddings, parties) vary.

Your best bet, until you get the hang of it, is to ask them to make an offer - if it's too low, you can easily tell them that you will need more, but if it's higher than your unspoken asking price, you've just saved yourself a bunch of negotiation, and you're getting a better fee than you intended.

More information about this topic can be found in sales manuals. Remember that although you feel like a bunch of singers, you're also a commodity and a service. To think in these terms in our capitalistic world is to be realistic about the nature of singing for money.

Press Kit

Eventually, you'll need more than a business card and word-of-mouth to get you gigs. Whatever your aspirations, CASA's "Ultimate A Cappella Press Kit" booklet is a great resource. It will tell you in-depth how to put together a good press kit, demos, and materials that will help you get your group more gigs than you can shake a stick at. It's available wherever you obtained this booklet. This way, whenever you find a potential gig, your professional-looking kit will (1) get you the gig more often, and (2) get you more money for the gig.

Most groups offer an Electronic Press Kit, or EPK, directly on their website(s), but some still offer a physical press kit upon request.

PART 5: THE A CAPPELLA COMMUNITY

Becoming A Part Of The A Cappella Community

There is a great deal of competition in most industries, but a cappella is a unique halcyon in the middle of the stormy music industry. The more you connect with other groups and singers, the more opportunities, resources and support you'll have, and the more likely you'll be able to quickly address any problem or setback.

The first place to start is www.casa.org. The Contemporary A Cappella Society of America exists to help you, and its network of regional ambassadors, festivals, contacts, awards, blogs and programs are an invaluable resource. Yes, many of these are free, but no, you should not hesitate in paying the extremely reasonable \$35 annual membership fee.

Your second stop should be social media sites. Facebook has a particularly busy and interactive a cappella scene, where a cappella singers half way across the globe become friends, share arrangements and perhaps even record together before they ever meet in person. You can start in the CASA group, announce yourself, and ask any questions you might have. You'll find the community to be responsive and supportive.

Something to consider: the more you interact with others, the more they'll help you. If you post only when you need something or want to promote yourself, you'll find fewer responses than if you dive in and fully become a member of the online a cappella family.

In addition to Facebook, there's Twitter (an important tool for announcing upcoming concerts and the like), photo posting sites such as Instagram, Pinterest, Google+, and so on. It is better to be active on a few than inactive on many, especially early on when you're looking to build your group's name, reputation and fan base, so choose your outlets carefully, then proceed to post at least once or twice a week.

As much as online interaction can be fun and effective, there's absolutely nothing to compare with an a cappella festival: Fantastic live performances, casual singing opportunities, great educational seminars, lots of personal interaction. CASA sponsors several across the US ([SoJam](#), [LAAF](#), [BOSS](#), [VoCAL Nation](#), [AcappellaFest](#),

[Texas A Cappella Celebration](#)), and there are many others spread around the world, [as documented by acatriber & vocal blog](#). You'll make great friends and great professional contacts, as well as leave the weekend with lots of new ideas and energy.

Meeting people on a national and even international level is always thrilling, but sometimes your greatest connections will happen in your local area. Check the [CASA Acapedia](#) for groups in your area, and don't only look for groups exactly like yours. High school and collegiate groups, professional groups, barbershop choruses, gospel choirs, you name it. Go to a performance, invite them to a rehearsal. The better you know your local community, the more you'll perform, the more easily you'll find more members, the more successful you'll be in local outreach.

Networking is an important part of any business, and in the case of a cappella, is extremely fun as well. A cappella group members are among the most humble and approachable members of the music community, and a cappella fans are among the most generous. You'll doubtless meet and make many new friends at shows, conferences, and online.

If you've followed all of the suggestions in this book, you'll have a group that knows at least a few songs and you'll be singing with some regularity. The next step is up to you - do you want to tour full-time? Land a record contract? Become well known in your local community? Make jingles and commercials?

Whatever it is you want to do, you should congratulate yourself for already having taken the hardest and most important step - you've created a singing group from scratch!

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