



Who Needs More Members?

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Recruitment, Obligations, Types of Membership

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"Where can we find more chairs?"
"Is there a bigger room where we can meet?"
I've run out of membership cards."
"We are going to have to limit membership."

Wouldn't it be nice to be plagued by such problems? The membership picture for most organizations is not that rosy. Many groups are experiencing drops in membership or are being confronted with long lists of "inactives." Attracting "new blood" isn't easy.

Changing life styles account for some of the drops in organizational participation, but the failure of organizations to develop up-to-date, dynamic procedures for recruitment, new-member orientation and involvement must also be blamed for unsatisfactory membership management. Realistic membership strategies and options can help you turn around your membership slide. You can recruit members and keep them.

Bylaw Bottle Neck

The bylaws of most organizations spell out procedures for admitting members, but say little or nothing about recruitment, member obligations and dismissal of members. Some bylaws provide for different types of membership. Few organizations review their membership policies on any regular basis or modify the membership bylaws.

Membership bylaws often need modification to describe actual practice and reflect future possibilities.

Groups need to know their membership needs in terms of numbers and what is wanted/expected from them. Questions groups need to ask are:

1. Is there an ideal number of members for this group or organization? Where do we stand in relation to ideal size?
2. What do we want/need members to do?
3. Do we need a particular type of member? Age? Background, skills, etc.?
4. To what extent do we fully "use" the members we now have?
5. What are our strengths and difficulties in attracting and holding members?

Use Member "Smarts"

Members who have worked on recruitment or membership drives can be of tremendous help to leaders who want to review and modify the bylaws. Don't overlook their expertise. Ask them: "To what extent have membership procedures been modified in recent years? How do you feel about existing procedures? How can we improve the system?"

Recruitment Options

A group can: advertise, nominate, seek to attract newcomers to the community via tie-in with newcomer groups, involve prospective members in projects and activities and work toward membership as a spin-off, make use of a "bring a friend" program, canvass via telephone, claim all who belong to a parent organization.

There is no one right way to recruit, but once your group knows what its membership needs are and why, you can

develop plans for getting the job done. Some groups like to recruit only once a year; others prefer sign-up throughout the year. Either can be effective.

Attracting members requires salesmanship. Why should anyone **want** to join? Why join at this particular time? What's in it for me? These are vital questions that groups must face if they are to do an effective selling job to prospective members. While being identified as a League of Women Voter member, member of the Junior League, Rotarian, Jaycee, Study Club member is valued by some persons, membership identification no longer carries the social impact it once did.

With time a prime resource for most people, the worth of an organization or the calibre of its program are far more powerful membership inducers than guilt or praise by association. Organizations that enjoy high credibility rarely have recruitment problems. Those with visible, viable programs need few campaigns to attract members—or keep them active.

Recruit the Right People

At times, groups are unrealistic in their membership expectations and put too much emphasis on trying to attract persons who are out of reach. Groups wishing to upgrade their membership rosters might do well to consider training programs or leadership development opportunities in their programs. Young people and old who are looking for self-improvement options gravitate to groups that satisfy this need; such persons are often excellent members in spite of their inexperience.

Drive Guidelines

If a membership drive is selected as the best way to gain new members, following these guidelines can be helpful:

1. Limit the drive to no more than three weeks.
2. Stage the drive at the most appropriate time of year—when potential joiners are “most free;” when most newcomers in the community will have arrived; in time for the year’s activities.
3. Plan adequately to carry out the drive and provide adequate publicity—before, after, and during.
4. Prepare accurate information for potential joiners—what the group is, does, when it meets, what is expected/required of members, etc.
5. Provide appropriate activities or special events so that prospective members can get to know the active members; **BE YOURSELF**—avoid activities that suggest the group is something that it is not.
6. Arrange for transportation and/or babysitting if needed.
7. Escort prospective members or at least meet them upon arrival—at special recruitment programs.
8. Provide for immediate follow-up to the recruitment program—a phone call may be most appropriate.
9. Provide a reasonable “escape hatch” for those who may wish to exercise the “right of refusal.”
10. Develop a record-keeping system so that the same persons are not bothered repeatedly and that “likelies” are kept on tap for the next time around; keep track of why people say “no.”
11. Evaluate the process and pass along **in writing** the success/failure report so that next year’s committee may profit from this year’s experience.

Nurture New Members

Once new members have joined, involve them immediately. Interest and skill inventories are a useful tool for all organizations to assign meaningful “work” to all members.

Try to provide escort service to meetings for new members, and have

new members wear special name tags. Meeting reminder phone calls can be used with positive results.

Some groups give special recognition to new members at the annual meeting or other important occasion. A number of healthy groups try to nominate one or two members to leadership positions during the members’ second year in the organization.

Don’t allow new members to become disillusioned. Groups cannot afford misrepresenting themselves. Don’t deceive prospective members about what you are, what you expect from members, or what you will do for new members.

Evaluate your actual membership needs. Don’t think of “good” as “big” when “smaller” might result in “better.” What was the ideal size for a group some years ago may not be ideal today. Equating the “health” of an organization by the length of the membership roster is foolhardy. It encourages groups to “pad” their lists, allows “deadwood” to remain on the lists, and results in higher assessments to parent or affiliate organizations.

Update Membership

Groups, like farmers, need to “cull” their “herds.” If the bylaws do not state ways for removing members, the officers should set down reasonable procedures for removal and proceed accordingly. Another option is to establish several categories of membership. The latter procedure usually requires bylaws change.

Many people find it difficult to leave the membership of an organization. They are less hesitant, however, to become inactive or uninvolved. Membership need not be continuing and automatic after the initial commitment. Obligations and responsibilities should be set forth for those who call themselves “members.”

Giving members a renewal option every year or two can provide an acceptable “out” for those who are not happy members or who feel the group has outlived its usefulness. It takes real “guts” to say, “I don’t want to be a member any longer.” If renewal is an accepted practice, making that choice will be easier. After all, no group really **needs** or **wants** members who do not want it.

Spelling out membership obligations

should not be difficult. They should be simply stated and well publicized. They should cover such areas as: attendance requirements, dues, service, or participation. More and more groups are finding that members pay their dues but are lax about attending meetings and/or participating on committees. Many groups have difficulty attracting enough members at meetings to do business legally; possibly quorum requirements need revision. Some churches ask for time and talent pledges as well as dollar commitments; other organizations might consider this also.

Establishing associate or inactive membership categories depends upon the group and its member situation. An “inactive” category may be in order if the roster contains a great many senior citizens who cannot afford regular dues and/or are unable to be active. And people who are supportive of the organization but who are not active may welcome an “associate” category of membership. Such affiliations could provide additional revenue and supply “name members” whose contribution might be in different directions than usually expected—contacts for fund raising, sources of free services, supplies, etc.

If you establish different membership classes, be sure to set down all “rights and privileges” in writing and make them available to all members of all categories. Failure to do this can lead to misunderstanding and embarrassment. Also, spell out how members may transfer from one category to the other and how they may be dropped and reinstated.

It is hard to persuade persons to retain membership in an organization once they have decided to leave. It rarely pays off.

Use Your Head

Knowing your membership and their interests and motivations can be most helpful. A member hinting at leaving may only be asking to be recognized, appreciated, needed, used. The wise leader is perceptive and makes the right assessment: “Please reconsider; we need you,” or “Many thanks for your fine participation; I know some other group will benefit from your enthusiasm and expertise.”

Let’s face it, a bit of common sense helps.

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