

Board Development

Where, Oh Where, Did Our Membership Go?

During these times of rapid change and uncertainty, many not-for-profit organizations are re-examining their memberships. These organizations are taking a closer look at the number of members in their organizations and/or the roles that members play in their organizations. There are a variety of reasons for this renewed interest in membership. In some cases, organizations are increasing their memberships as one way of replacing disappearing sources of income. Other organizations are looking to their members as a source of active workers. Still others are building strong memberships to help with advocacy efforts in their communities.

If you are considering bringing more members into your organization, remember that recruiting and retaining new members takes both time and energy. In fact, recruiting members to your organization is very similar to recruiting board members and service volunteers to your organization. Therefore, if you have recruited board members and service volunteers successfully, consider using that process as a starting point for your membership campaign.

As with other types of volunteer recruitment, effective membership campaigns contain seven key steps:

1. Decide what membership means in your organization
2. Assess the current situation of your organization's membership
3. Establish your membership goals
4. Develop a membership prospect list
5. Select techniques and tools to recruit members
6. Do the recruitment
7. Orient your new members

The following pages cover the seven steps in more detail.

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To Join or Not to Join

Beware of memberships articles in your bylaws that are too broadly-based. For example, some bylaws state that everyone living in a certain community automatically becomes a member of that organization. Experience has shown that this approach does not increase participation. In fact, many people do not appreciate being included in an organization to which they have not applied. If your organization has this type of membership requirement, consider using a membership card system. With this system, people annually apply for a card that shows their willingness to be part of your organization. Depending on your circumstances, you may or may not want to attach a fee to the membership.

STEP 1: Decide what membership means in your organization.

The first step in deciding the meaning of membership in your organization is to review your bylaws. Check the membership article that describes:

- Who the members are
- How people become members
- What rights and duties members have

Recruiting and retaining members means that you have to answer clearly these questions:

- What does your organization *require* from its members?
- What does your organization *offer* to its members?

In order for your organization and your members to have a worthwhile relationship, both must believe that a *fair exchange* is occurring. In other words, there must be a balance between what is needed, and what is given, by both parties. To assess the fairness of the exchange in your organization, answer the following questions:

- Why does your organization exist?
- What benefits do you offer to your members?
- What are the responsibilities of members?
- What do you expect your members to do?
- What are the qualifications for becoming a member?
- What are the costs of membership, both in money and in time?
- Why would someone want to join your organization?
- Do you need to have different categories of membership to meet different needs?
- What can a member expect from your organization? (e.g., meetings, types of communication, opportunities to meet others, discounts)
- How long do you expect people to remain as members?

Be clear about what you expect from your members. Many people join organizations with no intention of becoming active participants. For example, some people think of their dues as a form of contribution to your organization. Others want to support your cause by affiliating with you. Some people simply want to receive your newsletter. Tangible benefits, such as discounts, also motivate people to join organizations. Therefore, you must decide if you want members in name only, or members who help to do the work of your organization.

If your organization wants its members to be active participants, consider having different classifications of members, with different benefits and different requirements. In fact, some organizations have built active memberships by reducing the number of external benefits. This approach usually eliminates most of the non-active members.

STEP 2: Assess the current situation of your organization's membership.

Assessing your current membership gives you a picture of who your current members are. By assessing what your membership looks like now, you can develop insights into what you want your membership to look like at the end of your membership campaign. Here are some questions to help you assess your current situation:

- Has your organization's reason for existence changed since it began? If so, does your membership reflect these changes?
- Why did the current members join?
- How could you improve your services to members?
- Do your current members genuinely want to bring in new members?
- Is your membership diverse? Is diversity important to your organization?
- Are there similarities among your members? Use relevant demographic information to make your comparisons, (e.g. gender, age, geographic location, occupation).
- Who is in charge of recruiting new members?
- What membership recruiting activities did you do in the past few years? What were the results? Which activities worked and which did not?

Short surveys, phone calls, and focus groups are quick ways to gather some of this information. Experience has shown that the personal touch is more effective in getting people to respond. Small prizes or incentives can dramatically increase a willingness to respond to questionnaires.

Before setting your membership goals, take the time to discuss why your membership looks the way it does. Have you planned your membership profile or has it happened by accident? Who was previously in charge of membership recruitment? What strategies were used? What were the results of each strategy? Do you want your membership to look different from the way it is now?

In many organizations, there is not an organized membership campaign in which people are asked to join the organization. As a result, the membership grows haphazardly, and usually reflects the types of people who are already members.

STEP 3: Establish your membership goals.

Based on the meaning of membership in your organization, and on the current situation of your organization's membership, decide what you want to accomplish with your membership campaign. Set measurable goals, so that you can:

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“...develop a constituency of people whose personal involvement in the organization's goals assures their heartfelt commitment.”

*Andrew Slaby in an interview
with Nonprofit World,
March/April 1991*

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- Evaluate the results of your campaign
- Celebrate your successes
- Make adjustments to your next campaign

Here are some questions to think about as you set your goals:

- How large is your *potential* membership? Based on your history, and comparing yourselves to similar organizations, how large can you *realistically* expect your membership to be?
- Which is more important: the size of your membership, or the number of people who actively participate in your organization, (e.g., coming to meetings, helping at events)?

Remember that recruiting new and diverse members is a difficult task, especially if you are doing recruitment in an attempt to save your organization. Many people do not want to join a struggling organization. As well, bringing new and diverse members into an organization can be difficult for both the new members and the current membership. For example, if you are trying to rebuild your membership by recruiting younger members to an organization whose members are from another generation, the new members may not feel comfortable or welcome. Therefore, be sure to develop a plan to help these new members to feel that they are a welcome part of your organization. A *buddy system* is one way to facilitate this important transition.

If increased diversity is your membership goal, be realistic about the immediate results. Consider introducing potential members to your organization in a positive manner, by involving them in a special project or event. After the event, share your long-term membership goals with them, and show them how they can be an essential part of your organization.

STEP 4: Develop a membership prospect list.

Before launching a major campaign for new members, check to see which current members have not renewed their memberships. Send them a reminder. If they do not reply, call them to see why they have not renewed their memberships. With this approach, you may either regain a member, or obtain valuable information about how you can improve your organization's services to members. Building on your membership analysis, decide who meets your organizational needs and goals, and who is also most likely to join your organization. Brainstorm a list of who these people are in your community, and decide who would be the best person from your organization to recruit them.

Life Memberships

Life memberships are generally given to honour people who have made significant contributions to an organization. If your organization has this membership category, do not forget to communicate with these people, and to ask them for ideas for potential members.

Sometimes current members can suggest friends or colleagues who might be interested in joining your organization. However, they might not want to approach them because they feel it may impose on their relationship. Consider having someone else do the recruitment appeal, explaining who suggested the individual's name. This way, the person can turn the organization down, without feeling that they may be jeopardizing a friendship.

STEP 5: Select techniques and tools to recruit members.

The most effective way to recruit people is to ask them, in person, to join your organization. The most effective recruiter is a satisfied member of your organization. To help your recruiters to be more effective, provide them with training and effective recruitment tools.

Training sessions need to be enjoyable, in order to build a team that can support its members during the membership campaign. By the end of the training session, recruiters need to be able to:

- Approach people that they may not know
- Explain important facts about your organization
- Describe the benefits of membership
- Spell out your organization's expectations of its members
- Invite people to join
- Leave people with a positive impression of your organization

Two recruitment tools that are essential for recruiting new members are a brochure and an application form. Your brochure needs to be attractive and easy to read. The brochure describes:

- Factual information about your organization
- The advantages of becoming a member
- The expectations of members

In addition to your brochure, you need an application form that is easy to complete, thus making it easy to join your organization. Ask a minimum of questions on the application form. Ask only for data that you will use. Make sure that the questions are ones to which people can give an informed answer. For example, do not ask people to select committees or activities in which they want to participate, since they may not know all of the options.

STEP 6: Do the recruitment.

Do not assume that people know about your organization or that you are looking for new members. Use your newsletter and/or other publications to

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Who Does What?

Who is responsible for recruiting members in your organization? Are there specific goals for membership? To whom does the individual or membership committee report? How often are the reports made? Is recruiting members a year-round effort, or a one-time campaign?

Do you comply with current provincial and federal privacy legislation?

Who is maintaining your membership list? Who makes sure that the membership list is kept up-to-date? Who contacts those members who have not renewed their memberships? Who monitors the membership to make sure that members' needs are being met? Remember that it is easier to keep a current member than to find a new member.

Keep in mind that if you cannot identify who is doing something, it is probably not getting done.

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Tuning Up Your Membership Committee

Stop-Start-Continue

questions are a quick and easy way to evaluate your membership committee. To conduct this evaluation, give each committee member a sheet of paper with these questions:

- *What things should the membership committee start **doing**?*
- *What things should the committee **stop doing**?*
- *What things should the committee **continue doing**?*

First, have each person individually answer the questions. After everyone has completed the questions, list each individual's responses on a flip chart. Come to a consensus about what needs to happen to improve the effectiveness of the membership committee. This process may take a couple of meetings to complete. If done carefully, the results will justify both the time and the effort.

promote your membership campaign. Look for opportunities for in-person presentations to individuals and groups. If you are recruiting in a group setting, consider using a display, video, and/or slide/tape presentation. Be sure to define what you expect from a member in return for the benefits received.

At the end of your membership campaign, evaluate your results. Be sure to write down this information. Many good ideas are lost because no one took the time to record and file them. Here are some questions to help you evaluate your campaign.

- Did you meet your goals?
- What will you do again next year?
- What will you change?
- If you did not meet your goals, why not?
- Were there misconceptions in the community about your organization?
- What can you do to change these impressions?
- Were people reluctant to join?
- If so, did you ask them why?

Do not be discouraged if you did not meet your goals the first time.

Advertisers recognize that people need to see a message at least three times before they even recognize a product. This is no different for an organization. Make an effort to let people know what your organization is doing throughout the year. People may be willing and able to join when you approach them the next time.

Step 7: Orient your new members.

Now that you have new members, you need to concentrate on keeping them. During the first few months, make sure that your new members gain a sense of belonging, and realize that they are valued in your organization. Make an effort to show them that they are an important part of your organization. Remember: not only are these people members of your organization; they are the foundation for your future recruiters.

Something to Think About...

Finders, Keepers?

To keep members, make them a priority:

1. Inform members about what is happening in your organization.
2. Address member inquiries and concerns immediately.
3. Respond to requests from members.
4. Promptly answer members' phone calls and letters.
5. Listen to members' suggestions, and follow them whenever possible.
6. Address the needs of different members.
7. Keep your membership list current.
8. Invite members to volunteer, or to make a donation.
9. Communicate!