

## **How to Attract and Retain Members**

**by Carol Dunitz, Ph.D.**

Keeping your members involved and satisfied keeps them around. Waiting until a member's annual renewal date comes around to address membership retention flies in the face of sound policy. That's because retaining members is a function of loyalty. And the only way to have a loyal member who will renew his or her membership year after year is to ensure the member is satisfied on an ongoing basis with what the organization or association offers. The only way to make sure an organization is satisfying its members' needs is through communication. And while an organization can endlessly strive to enrich its members with a multitude of offerings delivered in response to questionnaires and surveys, there is nothing that serves to fortify the strength of an organization better than member participation.

Belonging is not a function of paying dues or receiving benefits. It is a function of member commitment. And the best way to get members committed is to get them to participate in activities that further their goals and those of the organization. Participation leads to increased emotional involvement. Increased emotional involvement leads to high membership satisfaction. Higher membership satisfaction results in greater commitment.

An organization's staff provides the veins and arteries -- the infrastructure -- for the organization. It is the volunteers, however, who are its lifeblood. Without members who volunteer to further the organization's cause, no organization or association can exist. An organization cannot sustain itself without members who see a reason for its existence and are willing to commit themselves to advancing the cause for which it works.

Member participation is paramount to ensure an organization remains healthy. And membership participation has a direct link to membership renewal. That is why it is critical that staff strives to involve members from the onset of their membership commitment. How can this be accomplished? By encouraging members who are already involved to actively bring others into the fold.

If you want to get a task done, ask a busy person to do it. High profile, active volunteers have already embraced organization causes. They are knowledgeable about the organization. They are involved in the organization. They are committed to the organization. These volunteers serve as role models for new members as well as those who have tended to sit on the sidelines. They carry their enthusiasm and commitment with them wherever they go. Their inspiration is contagious.

Committed volunteers have the ability to get others to participate. Participation does not require jumping into the pond with reckless abandon. Members should not be bullied into giving more of themselves than they believe they can handle. They should simply be encouraged to get their

feet wet. After completing a small task, a member discovers the joy of truly being a part of it all. But before new members can be expected to participate, they must be welcomed in a sincere and helpful way.

New member breakfasts provide a good way to get things off on the right foot. Such functions make new members feel important. They demonstrate the organization cares.

Posting new members' names on websites and in newsletters is another way to make them feel welcome.

A personal invitation to a new members over the phone can get them to come to a meeting. Approaching them when they arrive adds an additional personal touch and can be very effective. All of us know how awkward it can be to enter a room full of people we don't know. few people feel comfortable enough to approach individuals or groups of people who are unfamiliar to them. The task of making new or prospective members feel welcome should fall to those who already belong. Organizations may want to appoint established members to a welcoming committee. These and other members then meet, greet, and introduce new attendees to others. This helps them feel at home. There should also be a committee with volunteers who stay in touch with those who are not able to attend meetings. It is imperative to maintain contact with members who do not attend meetings. This can be accomplished through personal letters, and phone calls. E-mail is easily deleted and more difficult to use effectively for this purpose.

By putting mentoring programs and buddy systems in place, the organization take advantage of other techniques that make newcomers feel comfortable. Members who are established have the satisfaction of sharing and teaching when they take new members under their wing. New members benefit by learning and establishing relationships with others in the organization, which benefits them immediately and over time. Making new members feel important at the onset of their affiliation is critical.

New members become increasingly comfortable as their involvement grows. They have the opportunity to network and broaden their circle of influence. Their need to emulate those they admire comes into play. Participation should be encouraged for involvement at a grass roots level.

Working on events, involvement with committees and ultimately sitting on boards cements what can be a lifetime commitment to the organization. furthermore, it is important to remember that loyalty and enthusiasm are best secured when volunteers themselves help formulate the ideas that will be put into place. Volunteers should be encouraged to identify problem areas. They need to be given the task of pinpointing what hinders member attendance, what secures member retention, and what drives member expansion. Their 'discovery' empowers them. Their contributions and support solidify their loyalty. It ensures their enthusiasm and participation when the time comes to out solutions they helped formulate into place.

Members who participate and members who renew. They are also members who can be called upon to recruit and get others to renew. After all, loyal members are working for an organization they believe in. They can be an active, highly-charged source for new members. Smart organizations have a 'member get a member' campaign where they ask members to recruit new members. Truly astute organizations reward their members for their success with renewal and recruitment endeavors. A private 'thank you,' as well as public recognition and incentives or prizes for member recruitment go a long way in making a members feel good about the contribution they have been able to make.

Membership is not something that happens at annual review time. It is a strategic process, process that needs to be implemented daily. Implementation happens through participation.

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