

A Formula For Member Retention

By: Owen McDowell

Reprinted for District 5220, May, 1999

It's Crucial To Educate Both New & Veteran Club Members

Rotary International President Glen Kinross reminds us that “Rotary's greatest asset will always be the individual Rotarian. Each time we lose a member, for whatever reason, our assets are diminished.” Statistics indicate that more than 100,000 Rotarians leave their clubs every year. Research conducted by Rotarians suggests that at least 40,000 of these leave by their own choice, but another 50,000 provide no explanation.

In many ways, this is a sad indictment of our organization and raises some difficult questions. What's wrong with Rotary? Have we lost our prime purpose of service and fellowship? Are we giving the wrong impression to potential and new members? Do busy men and women think we're wasting their time?

It's true that in today's world, because of diverse pressures, young business and professional executives have a different approach to serving communities. They need a clear explanation of the challenge of service and how they can be effective Rotarians. In this context, maintaining membership is nothing more than marketing - and the first requirement of an effective marketing strategy is to understand your clients and their needs.

First of all, a club must have *strong leadership, meaningful projects, activities in all avenues of service, warm fellowship, and carefully planned meetings*. We can significantly improve our retention rates by thoroughly educating new members as well as ensuring that they're aware of the wide range of opportunities for service.

In 1996, Rotary International developed an ambitious blueprint to address the above concerns - a publication called, *Strategies for New Member Education (PD3-414)*. During the 1996-97 Rotary year, the New Member Education Task Force conducted a survey on the publication's usefulness. With input from the survey, R.I. reviewed, simplified, and renamed the publication. The new title - *Strategies for Member Education* - recognizes that education is imperative for both new and current Rotarians. The publication has three main parts.

1. Consideration and selection of prospective members.
2. Orientation of new members.
3. Continuing education for current members.

The concept of education advocated in the revised publication is neither “formal” nor “classroom style,” but simply part of the process of lifelong learning and development of the individual Rotary club membership has changed dramatically in recent years, and recruitment and orientation efforts must reflect the new demographics. In addition, the larger objective must be to develop Rotarians who understand and embrace the high standards for service and ethics that have characterized Rotary from the start.

The invitation to Join a Rotary club is perhaps the most important part of member education. The task force strongly encourages that at least two Rotarians should extend the invitation through a personal visit to a prospective members and his or her spouse. They should receive a clear message about what makes Rotary unique including a simple straight forward description of:

- Our international scope of service and fellowship
- Our emphasis on high standards of character and integrity
- Our broad-based community representation
- Our attendance requirements and dues structure
- Our commitment to the ideals of Rotary

There are many excellent examples of orientation programs for new members, and details of a “mentor system” have been included in the new publication as a suggestion. The continuing education section reinforces the need for basic rotary, information, training opportunities, and the improvement of our Rotary knowledge.

An educated, knowledgeable Rotarian. Communities are crying out for help, their needs are abundant...and they need Rotary. Our organization can respond to these urgent community service opportunities if we have a sufficient number of active and committed Rotarians.

A combination of fresh ideas and experience will strengthen clubs and enhance service at all levels.