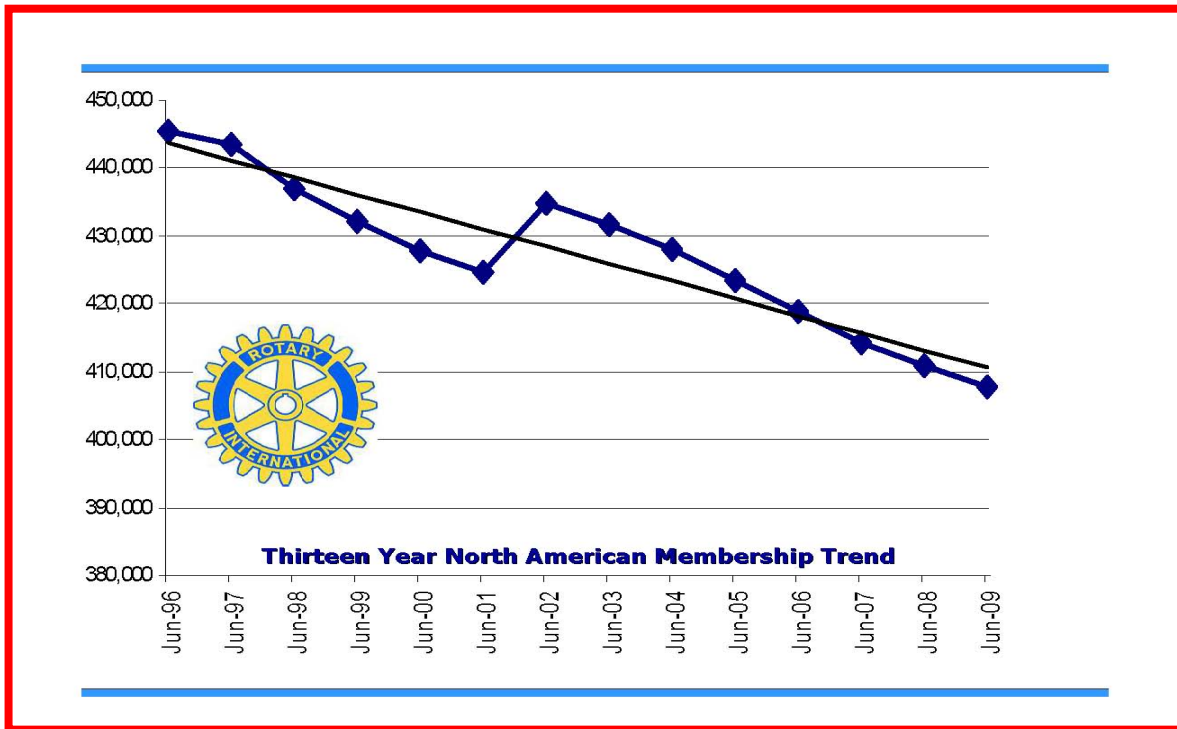


# Reversing a Membership Freefall

## ESTABLISH PRIORITIES

by  
Jim Henry, RRIMC Zone 34

*The simple reality that must be addressed is that if Rotary clubs do not become more effective at satisfying their member's needs, many will go the way of companies that do not adapt to changing times.<sup>1</sup>*



**Rotary International is a world-renowned association of individual, autonomous Rotary clubs. Each club is a local network of business, professional, and community leaders, active or retired, who have discretionary use of their time and who joined to advance the Object of Rotary. When discussing membership, some say, “Is there really a North American membership development problem? Rotary blossomed through WWI, the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, WWII, the Korean and Vietnam wars, and through several recessions. This is probably just an economy-related membership blip.”**

Look at the Thirteen Year North American Membership Trend. That’s not a blip. It is a trend that if not corrected will lead to the point of no return. As you examine the trend, remember that 1996 to 2005 were economic boom years and North American membership still declined. Note also that it took less than three years to offset the 2001-02 membership rise, which was a blip. The chart exposes a couple of important items: North American Rotary clubs do not have recruitment problems. The problem is that they cannot keep members. It is also obvious, when one takes off their Rotary-colored glasses, that the reasons are mostly internal – problems leaders can solve if they make it a priority to do so.

If businesses are not keeping customers, the leaders generally make it top priority to find out why and correct the reasons or they most likely will not be leaders for very long. Common sense says the same principle should apply to Rotary. Clubs’ customers are its members. Districts’ customers are its clubs. Effective leaders know that retaining customers has to be top priority. Effective leaders are also keenly aware that others will know their priorities by observing where they spend their time, talent, and treasure. As the motivational maxim implies (*and the IRS knows,*) checking accounts and calendars are priority logs.

<sup>1</sup> Membership – A Chilling Analogy, February 2009 <http://membership33-34.blogspot.com/>

# Reversing a Membership Freefall

Clubs and districts with chronic membership loss know that they must make reversing their membership freefall top priority. So why don't they? Most probably do not because they have PFS (*Parent Fear Syndrome*.) This syndrome manifests itself when parents fear quizzing their teenagers about what they have been up to because the offspring may actually tell the truth forcing parental reaction and action. Maybe leaders fear pursuing membership related issues because they may have to evaluate sacred cows and put some out to pasture.

Leading clubs to become more effective requires a multi-year effort, not a hit-and-miss one-month-a-year stab. It takes focus, which is often lost in time and the jumble of other activities. However, it is vital that the leaders keep membership satisfaction in sharp focus because often it will be necessary to change past customs and practices, which will be easier if everyone has the endpoint in view.

When we analyze the operations of effective clubs, we find that they are clear about whom they want as members and what it takes to satisfy their members' needs. As mentioned earlier, a Rotary club is a local network of business, professional, and community leaders, active or retired, who have discretionary use of their time. This definition focuses on a limited number of people (*BFLOB<sup>2</sup> - Not everyone is a leader.*) Effective clubs generally set and enforce membership standards because, if they do not, the very people they would like to attract to the club may not be attracted to the club. Again, to simplify a complex problem, effective clubs advance the Object of Rotary, which satisfies their members' networking, friendship, and achievement needs.<sup>3</sup> Focusing on the needs of individuals with leadership characteristics may mean that clubs and districts will have to strive for excellence rather than settling for mediocrity.

After establishing as top priority making clubs more effective at satisfying their members' needs, it is the leaders' job to keep the endpoint in focus while delegating responsibilities. Then they must see that the designees have the freedom and resources to do their job, and continue to follow up, offering guidance when necessary and giving recognition when due. Leaders also must remember that *most communication is non-verbal*. Leader's actions – *where they spend energy, time, and budget* – continually publicizes their priorities. Reversing the membership freefall must receive top billing in letters, newsletters, training sessions, web pages, club bulletins, speeches, awards, projects, conferences, and assemblies; otherwise, it will not happen and the inspiration and enthusiasm of those charged with responsibilities will cease.

To reverse a membership freefall, clubs must focus on becoming more effective in satisfying their members' needs. It will not happen until leaders at all levels establish doing so as their number one priority. Otherwise, clubs and districts will continue doing what they have always done, and, as the thirteen-year trend indicates; many clubs and some districts will reach their point of no return – their tipping point – and will cease to exist.



**Reversing our  
Membership Freefall  
must be the number  
one priority of all  
clubs and districts.**



<sup>2</sup> BFLOB – Blinding FLash of the OBvious

<sup>3</sup> Why are Effective Clubs Effective? or What Motivates Rotarians, April 2009