

## **MEMBERSHIP DEVELOPMENT – The First Steps**

### **By Rich Barbuto, District Membership Chair**

Okay, so you want to increase membership through recruiting and retention. My strong advice: Do not launch a membership drive until you have accomplished both steps discussed below!

These related steps are taken simultaneously. The first is to see where your club is today as far as membership development is concerned. The second is to improve aspects of your club that will serve to improve membership development. Now, let's examine both.

Where does your club stand on membership? Gather data over the last five years. (Contact me if you don't have the numbers – [barbuto@kc.rr.com](mailto:barbuto@kc.rr.com).) Go over the list of folks who have terminated membership name by name. Clearly, the club has no influence over some departures, such as job changes. These are normal. Compile a list of folks who have voted with their feet. As best you can, ascribe a reason for departure for every former member. How long were they members when they stopped attending? It is typical (although unfortunate) that one out of two new members will depart before their third year. Are there any trends? Are younger members leaving more frequently than older members? Can you see a trend in the average age of your members? If the average age is 55 or older, your club is dying.

If two out of three new members are leaving by their third year, then something is drastically wrong and needs immediate attention. Remember, folks join organizations because the organization meets their needs. Needs include a desire to help the local community, fellowship, opportunities to use their talents, recognition, opportunity to contribute to a specific service project, networking, desire to be a part of something larger than themselves, being a member of the "gold standard" of service clubs etc.) While your membership development team is sorting out this data and finding trends, the rest of the club leadership is working on step two.

Step two is improving your club (appearance, operations, production, fellowship) so that a business or professional person will want to join immediately.

What to fix, you ask? Glad you asked. Have your club leadership do two exercises: "Healthy Club Checklist" and "Look in the Mirror." These are found on the District website ([www.rotary5710.org](http://www.rotary5710.org)) under Committees/Membership/ Membership Development Resources. After the club leaders have examined the two exercises, sit down and discuss the answers one by one. The things to fix will become clearer to you. However, a word of caution: club leaders tend to be optimists, giving higher grades to the club than the rank and file member might give. After you have derived a tentative list of things to improve, come up with an action plan to fix each issue over time. Assign responsibility for each action. Remember to involve your committees and your veteran members! Resource each task with people and funds as appropriate. Your goal is to make your club an organization that a prospective member will want to join. When you give your club a "makeover," there will be some discomfort among some members so treat this enterprise gingerly and with respect for the current membership. However, do not forget that you are influencing the relevance of your club in the community for years to come! Now, for some pointers.

Public Relations is Critical!!!!!! Put people and resources against this enterprise. Your club website is your window to the world. Your website isn't just to pass information to the current membership; more importantly it is to showcase your club to all prospective members! Examine every aspect of the website. Does it portray people having fun and

providing service? A lot of both! Update frequently! Would a prospective member view the website and say: "This is a professional and fun group I want to be involved with." If not, get cracking.

[If you don't have a website, get one if at all practicable. Your website is your window to the world. Will prospective members take you seriously if they can't find anything about you on the internet?]

Club venue, meals, and program are perhaps the most memorable part of a guest's first visit. Who wants to join an organization that meets in a dingy back room, eats mediocre food, spends an inordinate amount of time on business, and invites boring speakers? You may say, "Well, a good Rotarian looks past these things because the club does great service." Of course! But your guests are not yet "Good Rotarians." And they never will be if you do not make the obvious fixes.

Conduct your meetings professionally! Start on time even if only half of the members are there. When you always start ten minutes late, you are training your members to be late. Worse, you are wasting their time. Follow the same sequence of events each meeting. Professional does not mean humorless. The sergeant at arms is key to making things fun. Do fun things, but remember to never embarrass anyone! Take time to recognize accomplishment inside and outside of Rotary. Conduct announcements and business briskly. Leave enough time for the program and stop on time! Members should be smiling when they depart. Let me repeat the big three: have fun, recognize accomplishment, and embarrass no one.

Do things with the District. It is widely held that participation in District events has a very positive influence over commitment to Rotary. Make sure your club is represented at every District event – and not just the club president because he or she "has to." The whole board as well as new members should carpool to District events. Bring a large contingent to the District Assembly and Conference in April, the Foundation/Membership Seminar in August, and Foundation Banquet in November. Better yet, designate these activities as the weekly meeting.

Involve as many as possible in all these actions to improve the club. Get the veteran members on board with formulating the plans as well as executing them. Each club has only so much energy so you may want to cancel or defer some 'routine' activities while you make your club more attractive to prospective members.

Next month we'll discuss the next steps in making your club increasingly strong and relevant in your community.