

ROTARY CLUB of ADELAIDE

“How RCA has turned around its membership demographic”

Two years ago, the Board of the Rotary Club of Adelaide (RCA) recognized that our Club, like most other Rotary Clubs in the developed world, had a problem with its membership demographics. Our members were ageing (our average age had increased to 67), and our number of members was falling (we had dropped 35% in the previous 10 years). We had only 13% female members and very few different ethnic backgrounds amongst our members. We were predominately an ageing, anglo-saxon, male club and not a real reflection of our community. If we were to survive we had to do something dramatic about the situation, so the Board developed a three year strategic plan and made membership a major focus. The first of two objectives in the strategic plan was:

“to grow, renew and actively engage the membership by attracting and retaining new business, professional and community leaders and re-invigorating current membership through making meetings more enjoyable and by the better use of member’s vocational skills and abilities in the service of others.”

Then in order to achieve this objective, our Board and Membership Committee developed and implemented a range of strategies and activities which, after two years, has resulted in a 12% increase in membership, almost double the number of members aged under 50 and a 57% increase in the number of female members.

A quarter of our members are now aged under 50, and 19% of our members are female compared with only 13%, 22 months ago. Furthermore, we now have 9 members aged under 35 and our average age has dropped to 61.

The changing membership demographics since 1st July 2015 are:

	1-Jul-15	24-May-17	Change	% Increase
TOTAL no. of members (Hon, Active & FoR)	173	194	21	12.1
Members under 50	22	42	20	90.9
Female Members	23	36	13	56.6

During the July 2015 – May 2017 period the membership changes were:

	TOTAL	UNDER 50	FEMALE
GAINS: Total no. of new members	45	24	15
LOSSES:			
No. of members deceased	5		
No. transferred interstate for work	5	3	1
No. delisted (non-payment of subs)	4		
No. resigned (restricted by age)	6		
No. resigned (no longer interested)	4	1	1

While we have already seen substantial changes to our nature and culture, we still have another twelve months of this strategic planning period to go, so this is still a work in progress. We are learning as we go and modifying and adapting our strategies and approaches to maximize the outcomes. In June 2018, we will have a set of proven strategies and activities that we will know work for the Rotary Club of Adelaide context. Their suitability for other clubs will depend on the nature of those clubs but what will be relevant and valuable to all other clubs is the philosophy behind what we have done. If all the activities we have undertaken to achieve our objective were to be grouped into common focus areas we would have 5 groups or, if you like, 5 steps in our approach. Those steps would be:

1. **Awareness and Commitment** - getting all members in the club to accept that there is a problem with membership and to agree and commit to work together to resolve the problem.
2. **Getting the Club ready** - having a good look at how the club operates and making necessary changes to develop an attractive and welcoming environment for new members to enter when they come to the Club.
3. **Finding potential new members** - identifying and making contact with suitable people who have the potential to become new members.
4. **Getting them to join** - presenting Rotary to these potential new members in a manner that interests them, is seen as relevant to them with the potential to fill some of their needs.
5. **Welcoming and retaining them** - showing interest in the new members and making them feel involved and included from the first day they enter the club.

This is a holistic approach with each of these five steps needing to be carefully and thoroughly addressed if real, sustainable outcomes are to be obtained. This is not a quick fix and will take possibly 2-3 years to undertake. It is not about quickly picking up a few new members, it is about changing the nature and culture of the Club in a sustainable way so that the club environment continues to attract and retain members of all ages for many years to come.

In our case being a large club, **Step 1 (Awareness and Commitment)** took us about 6-8 months to implement, during which time we:

- Constantly spoke openly at meetings and fellowship gatherings about our future and the problems associated with our ageing and mono-cultural membership – we made them realise and accept we actually had a problem;
- Showed members videos on the issue of membership and the future of Rotary - the M. McQueen video from the District 9500 Conference and the M. Huddleston video from the District 9520 Conference – we reinforced that it was a common problem to all Rotary Clubs and got them to commit to work towards a solution;
- Openly discussed what other Clubs and Organisations (like the Yass and Sydney Rotary Clubs and the Port Adelaide Football Club) were doing to address their membership problems – we gave them options to consider in resolving the membership problem within our context.

If the total membership can't accept that membership is an issue that needs to be addressed and is not right behind the club doing something about it, then it is very hard to proceed. However, once the membership commits to addressing the membership problem and to attracting new and often younger people to the club, they are more likely to realistically assess how the Club operates and to make changes that will enhance the club's appeal to these potential new members. Making changes in any environment is never easy and in this case we are talking about possibly making substantial change to the culture of the club so it is essential that all members are given the opportunity to participate in this process and feel involved and consulted.

In our club we went about this **2nd Step (Getting the Club Ready)** over a 4-5 month period by:

- Determining what an “attractive Rotary Club” might look like by asking members to survey their younger non-Rotarian relatives and friends to ascertain what would attract them to join Rotary. We collated the feedback, obtained similar feedback from other sources and presented all this information to our members;
- Identifying the changes we need to make in our meeting format and to our operation in order for us to become more attractive to potential new members and selling these changes to our members. It was amazing how accepting our members were to remove the invocation, the regular singing of the national anthem, the toasts and the traditional Sergeant’s session with its associated fines;
- Making sure that the image we portrayed on all communication and media sites was aligned with the RI brand so we were seen as being part of a global organisation;
- Making sure our own website and social media sites were completely up to date and inviting to visitors;
- Improving our welcoming systems at club meetings and our mentoring and support processes for new members as well as seeking to provide more opportunities for members to have hands on experience in the implementation of our community projects (an aspect seen as being a key draw card for potential new members).

In determining what changes needed to be made to make our meetings more welcoming and attractive to visitors and potential new members and in implementing these changes, an elaborate change management process was established incorporating an extensive consultative process with all club members. This process provided clear direction and a mandate to implement the changes needed and has resulted in the changes occurring with commitment and support.

So now about 8-12 months into the process we felt we were ready to find and start to engage with potential new members so we embarked on **Step 3 (Finding potential new members)**. Again, this was not a quick process because we wanted more than just names; from our research we knew we were looking for people who felt good about helping others and as we say have the “philanthropic” gene. We described the characteristics of the people we were targeting to our members and asked them to consider their relatives, friends (often sons and daughters of their friends) and their work and local business networks to provide us with names and contact details of suitable people. We also accessed Rotary alumni from RYLA, REYPEN, RYDA and Rotary Youth Exchange programs as well as current and ex Rotaractors and tapped into local business networks. We wanted as many names of as possible but only of the right type of people with appropriate backgrounds, interests and experiences, in order to improve our chances of ultimately getting them to join our club.

Armed with the names and contact details of a number of potential new members, we moved to **Step 4 (Getting them to join)** by interacting with them in a manner we hoped would stimulate their interest and encourage them to join. These interactions have been via:

- Carefully structured membership information evenings (similar to those conducted by the RC of Yass). We have conducted three such evenings to date; one on April 5th 2016 when we had 88 potential new members attend, the second on April 4th 2017 when we had 65 attend and another small function, for those who were unable to attend earlier evenings, on June 1st 2017 when 23 came along. At each evening we spoken briefly about Rotary International and our own club and had a couple of our younger members talk about their Rotary experiences and what they enjoyed about being a member of our Club. We provided drinks and nibbles, kept speeches to a minimum and allocated as much time as possible for informal discussions.
- Informative sections on our website and social media sites. These sections are very much a

work in progress and will ultimately contain selected videos, some taken from our membership information evening presentations.

Following the initial contact at the membership information evenings or via the website and social media platforms, we continue to interact with the potential new members by:

- Emailing them copies of our weekly bulletin for up to 8 weeks;
- Inviting them to be our guest at one of our regular weekly luncheon meetings;
- Asking them to join us on one of our community projects and or club events;
- Following them up on a one to one basis.

Then once a person has decided to join our club we move into **Step 5 (Welcoming and retaining them)** by showing interest in them and make them feel welcome and involved. Because we are such a large club, we tend to do this by:

- Acknowledging them at meetings and functions whenever we can;
- Asking them what they would like to do in the club and listening to their answers;
- Getting them involved on committees and fellowship groups as soon as possible;
- Using mentors to support them, help them assimilate and monitor their involvement;
- Linking them to other members with similar interests & backgrounds through the profiles;
- Inviting them to regular “new members’ fireside chat” sessions where they link with other new members and share their views and opinions;
- Inviting them to talk about themselves at one of our monthly social evenings.

These are the five steps which underpin our approach and put a structure to what we have and continue to do in addressing membership issues at RCA. While the membership information evenings (commonly referred to as the Yass model) are an important part of our process, holding these evenings in isolation is not necessarily going to attract and retain a significant number of new members. We believe it is the collective effect of all the activities we have conducted under each of these five steps that has provided us with our desired outcomes. The steps are not mutually exclusive, there is overlap and some of the activities under different steps can be conducted at the same time. In fact, as you can see by us already having conducted three membership information evenings, the activities under steps 3, 4 and 5 are regularly being repeated.

The specific activities implemented by the Rotary Club of Adelaide under each of these 5 Steps may or may not be relevant in other clubs but we believe the processes we have worked through, our five steps, are generic and should form the basis of the approach in any club wanting to turn around their declining membership and secure their future; but, it is not a quick and easy process. Don’t expect to do it in a few weeks, this approach could take 18 – 24 months because unless you get the acceptance and commitment of all your members, unless you ensure you have attractive and interesting meetings, projects and activities and unless you target the right people and then nurture, mentor, involve and support them when they decide to join, you will not get very far. It is the collective effect of working through all these five steps which will bring about the necessary cultural change within the club and lead to a positive impact on your membership demographics.

Ian D’Arcy Walsh

President 2016-17

Rotary Club of Adelaide

1st June 2017