

Club innovation: Choose your membership level

The Rotary Club of Philadelphia offers different levels of membership, including full, a la carte with "pay as you go" lunches, and a Happy Hour Club

"When I joined there were around 120 members, but we bled members," says Matthew Tae, past president of the Rotary Club of Philadelphia.

For some time, the officers had been tracking the demographics of the club, and it was clear that it was not attracting enough new younger members.

"We meet at the Union League, which is expensive relative to other Rotary clubs," Tae explains. "These days, a person early in their career, in their 30s, can't get away for 90 minutes plus travel time at lunch on a workday. We needed a model where you could participate but not disrupt lunch hour."

One solution was a la carte memberships, in which the dues are lower and the members pay separately for lunches they attend.

There was some concern that full-time members might move to the less expensive a la carte membership, but Tae points out that this idea doesn't pass The Four-Way Test. For some time, the club had been sustained on about a third of the members not showing up and still paying dues, effectively subsidizing the club. The a la carte model offered a more equitable distribution of costs.

The club also started a Happy Hour Club, which was originally just a chance for fellowship outside the lunchtime meetings. When that became an official membership option, it focused on local service. The Happy Hour Club meets once a month for a happy hour meeting and once a month for a service project during the day.

The club redesigned its webpage and uses social media aggressively. "We've upgraded the Facebook page," says club membership chair Joan Batory. "We announce every meeting and have videos of the speakers when we can find them. So Facebook and the webpage have plenty of information."

The club leadership recognizes that all these innovations must be evaluated carefully to assess their impact. “We have six months to get to target membership,” stresses Tae. “When you go low on membership cost, you have to look at whether you are getting new members at the cost of not covering your expenses.” ‘

The early signs are good, with a number of new members in the pipeline and inquiries coming to Batory on a regular basis.

“I’m getting messages on Facebook, expressing interest in membership, in Rotaractors, in all the things we do.”