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## REVITALIZING YOUR MEMBERSHIP PROGRAM:

# WHY DO *you need members...* AND WHY DO *they need you?*



BY ELLIS M.M. ROBINSON

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Organizations seek members for a variety of reasons. For the most part, organizations that choose to have members want them to feel some kind of ownership of the group. However, some organizations want a strong, committed group of people whose primary relationship to the organization is financial. These organizations often lose sight of the other roles members can play in programmatic or mission-fulfilling work. At the other end of the spectrum are organizations that want a strong, committed group of people whose primary relationship to the organization is their participation as activists and leaders, developing skills to make change in their communities. These organizations often miss opportunities to solicit members for financial support, or to involve them in fundraising activities. Over the years, the *Journal* has tried to help readers see that an organization that chooses to have members needs to involve them in a variety of ways — as donors, as activists, as leaders, as fundraisers, as volunteers and so on. In this article, veteran fundraiser Ellis Robinson reminds groups that there is much more to membership than money for your cause.

**M**embers are such an integral part of many grassroots groups that their role is rarely examined. How many times have you and your board or staff colleagues discussed why you have members?

If your answer is “never” or “I don’t remember” you are not alone. Yet, by clarifying the role of members within your organization, along with your expectations of them and your promises to them, you can build their loyalty and involvement and expect greater financial stability from their support. Here are some ideas how.

### MEMBERSHIP IS A PARTNERSHIP

There has been a lot of talk lately about building relationships with your donors or your customers. In fact, in the best membership programs the member and the organization share a clear, mutually beneficial view of what

the benefits of membership are to both parties.

Practically speaking, this means that everyone on your team — your board members, staff, and key volunteers — can explain why members are important to the success of your organization. Similarly, the member can identify how they fit and, just as important, how they benefit from supporting your organization.

First, from the organization’s standpoint, you need to answer the question, “Why do we need members?” Here are some possible responses:

- **Credibility:** The number of members, as well as who they are, can reinforce the validity of your group. For example, a group seeking to improve the quality of life for coastal fishing communities may count among its members people who work there, people who vacation there, and even people who have moved away but still have a

connection to the place. But the group's members must include a significant number of current residents if it is to be credible in its work.

- **Political Influence:** An advocacy group that is seeking to influence government decisions needs to include among its members individuals or sheer numbers (see below) who are considered important to the local, state, or national officials who must say “yes” if your work is to be successful.

- **Critical Mass:** How many members you need in order to be influential varies from place to place. For example, groups often complain, “We have all these members in the urban area; we really need folks in the rural part of our county.” Yet, given how many more people live in the city, you would expect to have more members there than in smaller communities. The key is to look at your members proportionally. For example, “critical mass” of representation in your state's largest city might be a thousand or more members. But achieving the same visibility, credibility, and influence in the outlying agricultural community might need only 20 to 40 members.

- **Expertise:** Members can provide important information that could cost thousands of dollars for your group to purchase. Examples include educators, scientists, lawyers, or accountants who may volunteer their expertise for the group. However, important expertise can also be place-based. For example, when the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy was founded, this nationwide organization depended on its members to be its “eyes and ears” to evaluate proposed railroad abandonments in their local communities and advise on a route's appropriateness as a future trail.

- **Outreach and Validation:** Despite the ability of communications technology to spread information wide and fast, word-of-mouth endorsements are still the most powerful. Having a friend, colleague, or relative tell a prospect, “I'm familiar with that group, I trust them, and I joined because they are working on issues that make a difference in my life” is perhaps the most powerful and effective membership recruitment tool available.

- **Volunteer Time:** Members are often an invaluable source of person-power to help you accomplish your work. Volunteers give you services you might otherwise need to purchase. At the same time, volunteering provides members with the chance to meet people who share their values, learn more about an issue they care about, give back to the community, and more.

- **Financial Stability:** Once convinced of the worthiness of your group, members can be counted on to give consistently, often increasing their gifts over time. Moreover, members are more likely to give than foundations or corporations. Individual giving is the largest source of

support of nonprofits. The sourcebook *Giving USA*, produced each year by the American Association of Fund Raising Counsel, reported that in 2000 individuals accounted for 74.6% of all funds donated to non-religious organizations. That means that only about a quarter of the monies that support charities come from foundations or corporations. In addition, unlike corporate or foundation grants, gifts from individuals can usually be given quickly and repeatedly. Furthermore, members are your most likely source of major donations and bequests.

## WHAT MOVES A PERSON TO JOIN?

There is a reason that I put “financial stability” last in the above list. Consider your personal checkbook for a moment. Are you at a loss for what to spend your hard-earned money on? Do you carry a large balance at the end of every month because you just don't have anything rewarding to buy?

If you are like most of us, the answer is an emphatic “No!” Instead, like most of us, you are probably juggling too many required payments with too little income — and a long list of things you would like to spend money on when you end up with a little left over at the end of the paycheck.

So, as discouraging as it may sound, the reality is that few folks are contributing to your organization now (or might be inspired to contribute to you in the future) because they are looking for someplace to donate. Rather, your most loyal and generous supporters are investing in you because your organization offers them a way to fulfill a specific need or goal in their life.

Your goal is to figure out why they care about your work. What makes membership in your organization compelling and rewarding? First, let's look at how a prospect (someone who is not yet a member of your organization, but you think should be) makes the decision to become a member.

The decision ladder, “Moving from Prospect to Member” (see sidebar on page 6), illustrates the steps a prospect usually goes through before making the decision to join. Starting from the bottom, here's how it works:

1. **Your prospect must personally perceive a need that your group can fulfill.** This is pretty basic. The most likely people to support the local animal clinic, for example, are those who agree that having healthier cats, dogs, and other animals is important and will in some way benefit the potential member's life. It's also important that the prospect agree that meeting this need is probably not something the prospect can accomplish alone. Part of advancing from this first step to the action of joining a group is acknowledging that this life goal can best

## Moving from Prospect to Member: A Decision Ladder

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### OPPORTUNITY

I have a convenient way to join now.

6

### PERCEIVED URGENCY

I must take action now!

5

### BELIEVABILITY

I understand and share your organization's objectives and agree that they can be accomplished.

4

### CREDIBILITY

I perceive that your organization has the history, leadership, and other credentials needed to be accountable. I trust you to do good work.

3

### COMMON VALUES

Your organization is made up of or otherwise relates to "people like me." I feel we are on the same wavelength; we have enough common ground to consider a relationship.

2

### FAMILIARITY

I've heard of your organization before.

1

### PERCEIVED NEED

This issue affects my life.  
My world will be a better place if this issue is acted upon.

be achieved by a group. (This is one reason that the most likely future members of your group are folks who are already members of other groups. They already believe — and have seen it to be true — that more effective change can be made by working together than by operating alone.)

2. **Your prospect must know who you are.** This is another straightforward requirement: in order to join your group, the prospect has to be familiar with you. Though this sounds relatively simple, the competition is stiff for your prospect's attention. Estimates are that *the average American is subjected to more than 3,000 marketing messages a day!* So, if your organization has a name that is confusing, is known by several different names, or otherwise is not clear in its identification, now is the time to choose one strong way to refer to your group and use it consistently. Do not use initials! Only after decades of use and tens of millions of marketing dollars, did IBM and AT&T change

their names to initials. When you are that old and have spent that much money making sure your members and prospects know who you are, you can use abbreviations, too — but not before.

3. **Your prospect must feel like "one of the gang."** One of the strengths of membership is its offer of community. Before making the decision to join, your prospect must be convinced that she is among people who share her values; that she is going to fit in. You can accomplish this in many ways: if you embrace people of all ages, make sure your promotional materials include pictures of young, old, and in-between. If you are trying to appeal statewide, make sure you highlight activities in several communities. If you anticipate a barrier, address it right up front. For example, the Bicycle Alliance of Washington didn't want prospects to think that only experienced cyclist could be members. So they listed their board members down the left side of their new-member appeal letter and identified them by their biking habits: "daily commuter," "weekend rider," "lives and breathes cycling," and even "new parent, riding less." Just about anyone who enjoyed any kind of bicycling could find a compatriot in this group and see that the group had fun, too.

4. **You must be a credible organization.** You are asking your prospect to invest money, time, and trust in your organization. You owe it to him to demonstrate that you are accountable and reliable. Ways to do this include listing past accomplishments, documenting your history ("Founded in 1976"), using a street address instead of a post office box, referring folks to your Web site for more information (including financial data). Here is another place where listing your board or advisory committee can be helpful, especially if your list includes known and trusted leaders of your community.

5. **Your goals must be believable.** This is sometimes a tricky balance. The excitement and energy that is created around a BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal) can often be attractive but, frankly, not very believable if your prospect doesn't know much about your group. How to climb past this step in the ladder? Cite past similar successes. Or break your big goal down into understandable steps — show you have a strategy that will work. Also, be forthright about factors that might make a prospect nervous. For example, when Northwest Ecosystem Alliance pledged to raise \$14 million to protect lynx habitat in Washington's Loomis State Forest, they had never raised a budget of even \$500,000! So, they broke the goal into bite-sized pieces (\$50 protects one-tenth of an acre) and got a commitment from the landowner up front that they could protect as much land as they could raise money for, even if they didn't reach their entire goal. (They reached their goal and

more by attracting more than 5,000 new members to support the campaign.) You know what aspect of your work keeps you up nights. Your prospects are savvy, too. Let them know that you have thought about the potential stumbling blocks and have a way to address them.

**6. Tell the prospect why action is needed now!** With those 3000+ marketing messages spinning past your prospect everyday, you want to make sure that, when you get his attention, he is compelled to act now and not put your request in the pile of things to do later. Make sure your prospect knows why his joining now will make a difference. Perhaps the state legislature is going to be considering a key bill soon and his voice will count. A food bank or homeless shelter might be stocking up for the winter season. The PTA or Friends of the Library is preparing for the new school year. Tell the prospect why his membership now will make a difference — and invite him to take an action (sign a petition, volunteer as a mentor, come for a hike along a threatened river) as well as sending a gift.

**7. Make it easy for the prospect to respond.** The more ways you can make it possible for that prospect to join, the more likely it is to happen. Provide a return envelope in your mailing. List your Web site and e-mail address. Use a toll-free phone number (and make sure there is a way for folks to leave messages ... and that someone in-house picks them up every day!). Take credit cards and invite faxed-back responses. Include a remit envelope in your own newsletters so that when the word-of-mouth “advertisement” happens — when a friend stops by a member’s house to pick up the kids for soccer and leafs through your newsletter — the prospect can respond easily.

## WIIFM: WHAT’S IN IT FOR THE MEMBER?

Now you know why your organization wants members and what steps a prospect must go through to make the decision to join your group. How do you figure out what those magic words are that will motivate your prospects to join?

Here comes the great news: All you have to do is ask the folks who have already made that decision to tell you what motivated them.

If you have not already conducted a membership survey, put one in your work plan now. This can be as complicated as mailing a questionnaire to each of your existing and past members, or as simple as calling twenty-five of your members and asking them three or four questions. The primary purpose of this questionnaire is to understand the “whys,” which means you will collect qualitative information, not quantitative information. At a minimum consider asking the following:

- Why did you join our group?

- Which of our programs are most important to you and why?
- Would you recommend membership in our organization to a friend or colleague — and why?

Depending on your abilities to tabulate and analyze your returns, you might like to ask additional questions about lifestyle and demographics. Keep the number of questions relatively small; test the survey yourself and let people know how long it will take to fill out. Also, tell your members how their participation will help. For example, “Please take ten minutes now to complete and return this member survey. Your responses will help us better understand your priorities and concerns, as well as assist our outreach to the greater community. Please mail, fax, or e-mail your completed survey by [date]. Thank you.”

The responses you receive to your survey will help you understand, in your members’ own words, why the work you do makes a difference in their lives. In addition to being a great morale booster to you and your colleagues (after all, your members love your work so much that they send you money to do it!), the answers you get will provide a treasure-trove of quotes and phrases that explain how your members talk about your work.

By adopting those same words and priorities in your communications, you reinforce the values and culture that your organization has already established (thereby keeping the members you have today) and make your group more credible and compelling to new prospects, helping them climb that ladder to joining.

## NEXT STEPS:

If you are interested in revitalizing your existing membership program or creating a new one, take the following key steps to establish a membership strategy that will assure success:

**1. Define why your organization needs members.** Consider your program goals and objectives, as well as timing. Who do you need to help you achieve success, and when do you need them? Begin this discussion within your staff. Then bring your recommendations to your board for reflection and consensus.

**2. Conduct a membership survey.** Now that you have your organizational perspective on membership, find out from your existing members why you make a difference in their lives. (If you are just starting up and don’t already have members, ask your founding supporters and donors.) Give each of your staff members (and/or board members) a short stack of completed surveys to review before your discussion to give them a personal overview of members’ opinions.

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**3. Agree on the key reasons people join your group and list members' perceived benefits.** Focus on the words your members use to talk about your goals and accomplishments. For example, "providing clean, affordable housing" and "making sure all citizens have a safe place to live and raise a family" are both ways of describing the goals of a transitional housing organization, but the emotions and values that these phrases communicate are very different.

**4. Identify your key prospects and what makes "critical mass."** Who do you need as members to make your goals possible? Where do they live? What do you want them to do? Whom do they influence? When do you need them?

**5. Create your "elevator statement."** Imagine you enter an elevator at the first floor, heading to the tenth floor. At floor two, one of your key prospects steps into the elevator with you. You have eight floors — about 45 seconds

— to move him from prospect to member. Your elevator statement is an encapsulation of all the above discussions that can be used by everyone involved with your organization to send that compelling, credible, effective message that will inspire your prospect to do the right thing and join your organization. Sell that BHAG of yours with the prospect's interest in mind and you will start that prospect on the ladder to becoming your next member.

You now have in hand the basic research and strategic priorities needed to develop a successful membership plan and program. Look for more membership tips in a future issue of the *Journal*. **GFJ**

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