

Eight strategic mistakes with memberships

• By Ellis Robinson • March 21, 2010 •

If you have members (whether those members fit the legal definition of member or not), chances are you're making at least one of these strategic mistakes identified by Ellis Robinson. With striking clarity she points the way not only to building your membership rolls, but to understanding your membership as your constituency.

There's always someone who says, "We need to increase our membership from 5,000 to 10,000 in the next three years." But too often nobody really knows what our target membership should be, and nobody really knows how to do "smart growth" in membership. Here are the eight strategic errors I see all the time in clients and the organizations to which I myself belong:

Strategic mistake No. 1: Encouraging people to become members. This is a mistake because it's based on the idea that people who are involved with your organization will join on their own, or in the week or so after they've left your fundraising event. Instead of encouraging people to join (presumably at some later time): **Ask people to join right now**, and *give them a reason to join right now*. For instance, if your regular membership rate is \$35, tell them they can join at a discount if they join *right now* at this event. (Even if your bylaws specify the membership amount you should be able to give "early bird" and other kinds of discounts.) You could offer them 5 percent off at the next event, or 16 months of membership for the usual annual amount. The size of their first donation is not as important as capturing them while they are right in front of you.

Mistake No. 2: Over-using membership numbers in public. Unless they're really big (like a million paid members), we tend to talk about membership numbers too much, usually to people who are unimpressed by them. Say you're an NAACP or an environmental organization in a metropolitan community. You may have 2,500 members and only you know how hard it was to get this many of your supporters to join. But the city council or a foundation is unlikely to be awed by the number 2,500, since they hear big numbers all the time. Instead: If you're the NAACP, talk about how you represent the 300,000 African Americans in the community; if you're an environmental organization talk about how you represent the 150,000 people who use the park each year. Remember, your work doesn't just benefit your members, it benefits your *community!*

Mistake No. 3: Thinking membership benefits are important. Except for a zoo or museum where people join to get discounted admission, most people don't join community-based membership organizations for discounts to Disneyland or a local boutique. Every organization is different, but most people join because:

- They appreciate what you do (a neighborhood center, a cause).
- Out of guilt (I know I should write a letter to my congressperson, but I'll send this group money instead). They're glad you're speaking out and they're willing to pay for you to do it. (They do want to know what their money has been doing.)
- Joining is a way for them to feel part of a specific community (like their neighborhood, their ethnic group, their fellow anti-toxics people, like-minded arts devotees).
- You give them a chance to dream. Most of the people who join adventure cycling groups never travel across country on a bike, but they all dream about it.

So when you ask people to join, focus on these reasons as benefits, not on key chains, magnets and other gewgaws.

Mistake No. 4: Not asking people to renew several times. The most common reason people don't renew is because they think they're still a member. You're still sending them the newsletter so they figure they're still a member, or they think maybe someone else in their household renewed. Instead of asking once, follow this schedule: First renewal: Two months ahead of expiration date. Second renewal: month when their membership expires. Third renewal: Remind them the next month with a phone call or a hand-addressed envelope. Keep asking until your renewal campaigns fail to break even. Then, include your lapsed members in your prospecting campaigns and consider mailing them your year-end appeal.

Mistake No. 5: Boring members by telling them what your organization does. Instead: Tell them how the value you provide makes a difference in their lives or in the lives of people they care about. And tell this through personal stories. Instead of a staff-written article about what happened at the city council meeting, have a short interview with a member who went to the same meeting and was inspired by what happened. Instead of telling them about your support programs, tell them about a young intern who signed up to work with you because of her experience with breast cancer.

Mistake No. 6: Relying too much on electronic communication. That says it all.

Mistake No. 7: Thinking that all members are equally valuable. All members are *important*, but some members are more important than others because they also bring you access, influence, special skills or other resources. First, it's crucial to have certain constituents among your members. For instance, an Alaska marine fisheries organization has to have Alaskan fishermen in its membership to be credible (and there's not a more independent, less-likely-to-join-anything group of people!). Second, your organization might need members from a certain small town or area, to serve as your "eyes and ears" near a project you are tackling. Program success may also require your membership to include constituents who are in the district of an influential state senator. Rather than just trying to "increase membership" be strategic about what kind of members you need for what, and develop focused campaigns for each.

Mistake No. 8: Announcing a membership drive. It's not necessarily interesting or beneficial to current members that you're out to get more members. It may be perceived that the current members aren't good enough – and will lose their "insider" status. *After* the fact you can (and should) say you've doubled (or increased) your membership – and thereby your influence, resources, and effectiveness.

Ellis Robinson authored *The Nonprofit Membership Toolkit* (available at josseybass.com or amazon.com). She lives and works on Sanibel Island, Fl., enjoying home-grown bananas and citrus, visits from red-bellied woodpeckers and ibis, errands by bicycle, and vacations with her four beautiful, charming and brilliant granddaughters.

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