

## Building Strong Clubs

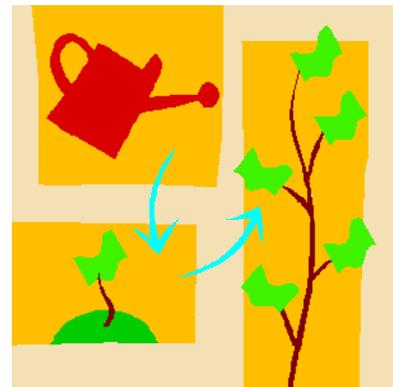
By Dan Ehrmann  
President, ClubExpress

### *Introduction*

---

At the typical club or association:

- 5% of members run the club and show up for almost every event;
- Another 15% of members regularly participate;
- Another 20% occasionally participate;
- The remaining 60% never show up for anything!



Many clubs have a turnover rate of 15-20% per year. People leave because they lose interest, they have health or financial problems, they move away or pass away, or because they are no longer being served by the club and the "product" it offers. Some clubs lose people because they cannot even get renewal notices sent out reliably, so members have no idea that it's time to renew.

Some clubs just don't market themselves very well, figuring that "passion" alone is enough to keep people interested and paying their dues. But most of the time it isn't!

With these statistics in mind, how do you build strong and vibrant clubs and associations that actually grow and survive more than a few years? People get disillusioned or tired out and others need to step in and take up the mantle of responsibility. Running a club can be a huge amount of work, with the only compensation being the complaints of other members.

And yet as we all know, being a member of club and participating in its activities has enormous rewards. We get to share our passion with others who have the same passion. We learn new things all the time and make new and lasting friendships. We get to do good deeds, strengthening our communities and the environment, and building bonds with other communities, sometimes across the country.

So the question that all boards of directors ask is: how do we create a strong club or association, one that members want to join and renew, one with a strong and growing core of active members, one with a "virtuous cycle" of people who get involved, which in turn generates more events and discussion and knowledge-exchange, which in turn gets more people to join and renew.

Building a strong club or association is like building a strong business. You need to focus on the fundamentals:

***An attractive product at a good price that people want to buy!***

Marketing professionals talk about the "P..."s of building successful brands and growing businesses, and we can adapt those to this discussion. Each of these topics is discussed in more detail on the following pages:

1. Product & Positioning
2. Promotion
3. Price
4. People
5. Process
6. Passion

## ***1. Product & Positioning***

---

### **How do you add value to people's lives?**

Some clubs and associations don't have a clear idea of who their market is and what their members are looking for. They may think they know, but it's easy for entrenched board members and activists to assume that everyone in the club thinks the same way they do and is looking for the same things. And it's easy for member needs to change without the Board quite realizing that this is happening.



It's a good idea to survey your members on a periodic basis to find out why they joined, how satisfied they are with the club and its activities, and what other activities and programs they would like to see.

It's especially important to conduct "exit interviews" of members who don't renew their memberships, to find out why they left. Sometimes it's because they're moving out of the area, or for health reasons. But sometimes it's because the association is no longer meeting their needs.

Try also talking to non-members who come to events but who have not joined to find out why not. These are your prospective members and they provide a window into how the association is perceived in the community.

Here are some questions to ask (some of these may not apply to all types of clubs):

- Age;
- Education level;
- Single, married, family;
- Social or business interest;

- How long have you been a member?
- Why did you join (or didn't join)?
- Is the club still meeting your needs; if not, why not?
- What are you (and your family) looking to get out of the club?
- What additional types of programs should we add?
- How do you communicate with other members?
- How could this communication be improved?
- How many events have you attended in the past 12 months?
- If the number is 0 or low, why?
- Does the newsletter meet your needs (frequency, content, etc.)?
- How could the newsletter be improved?
- Did you join another club in the area with a similar focus?
- If so, what did they offer that we didn't?
- This doesn't have to be a lengthy formal questionnaire whose questions are debated for months at board meetings. It can be something simple that the membership committee puts together and then uses in phone calls. (And if people suggest new programs or activities, don't immediately rope them in to be the coordinator; that's a huge turnoff. There are subtler ways of getting people involved, hooking them lightly at first and then reeling them in gradually.)

If you want to develop a more structured survey, ClubExpress provides a Surveys module which allows you to define a survey with multiple pages and multiple questions in different formats.

## Know Thyself

Successful clubs and associations have a clear mission statement. They know what they want to be "when they grow up..."! So ask the following questions within the Board and make sure you have clear and straightforward answers:



- How big can we become?
- How big do we want to be (a different question!)?
- Are we a generalist club?
- Do we have interest groups for specific sub-interests?
- Are we a smaller, more specialized club?
- Are we the "friendly social club" vs. the "passionate activist club" vs ???
- Are we involved in advocacy or representing member interests in defining policy?
- Are we involved in education activities (teaching members or the wider community)?
- Are we involved in community and charitable work?
- What geography do we serve?
- Are we looking to expand or contract this geography?

Once you have a clear idea of the mission, everything you do should position the club to achieve this mission, including:

- Marketing (brochures, ads, show tables, publicity, etc.)
- Web site
- Newsletter and other communications
- Programming and events
- Organization (board structure, committees, etc.)
- Membership plans
- Non-member mailing lists and communications

Marketing is a process of distinguishing yourself from the competition, making you more attractive than the available alternatives so that people decide to spend their time and money by joining your organization. And the competition is not just other local clubs and associations. It could be national organizations or online communities or even apathy (do nothing). So how do you stand out from all the alternatives?

Be willing to experiment and try different things. Many organizations get ossified over time, always doing the same things from year to year. Some of the new things you try won't succeed, but you'll never know unless you give them a chance, sometimes two or three chances.

## Events

Clubs and associations need a regular schedule of events of all kinds. The schedule should be determined as early as possible in the year (or even the year before) and widely publicized so that it can be added to calendars.

Some events are big projects, with their own organizing committees and months of planning. But every club also needs smaller, less formal events that give members a chance to meet each other, network, socialize, and share experiences, even if it's just a meal or a beer at a local restaurant or bar.



Do your events target the membership in general or specific constituencies within the membership? Some people are looking for educational and training meetings, while others are just looking to socialize with people who share their passion. In active sports clubs (running, cycling, etc.), people need active events (and at varying levels of difficulty) but they also want events that have an indoor, less-active focus, a chance to "talk" about doing rather than actually "doing".

Again, don't be afraid to experiment. And try to borrow shamelessly from other clubs and communities. For example, car club people aren't the only ones who enjoy car rallies; find a friend in a car club and "borrow" their rally route and clues, then use it for your completely different club.

Don't forget to invite members from neighboring clubs, and when you are invited in turn, reciprocate and make an effort to have a presence. This is a great way to strengthen ties and make the club experience richer for everyone.

Some clubs are very successful with joint events between different clubs. Community service clubs have great success with car shows organized in conjunction with local car clubs. Perhaps the canoeing and cycling clubs can organize a summer picnic where members get to the destination by land or water. The opportunities and ideas are endless.

## Communications

In many clubs, more than 1/2 of the members never attend an event!

Their primary means of staying in contact with other members is via the club newsletter, or through the web site (online discussion forums, listservers, email blasts from the president, etc.) If these members are going to renew year-after-year, the newsletter needs to be great and the other forms of communication need to strongly reinforce their connection to the club.



Even smaller clubs can publish a nice newsletter. Here are some of the things to consider for each issue:

- Event reports, with lots of photos
- Member profiles
- Technical articles
- Questions and answers from the club's discussion forums
- President's column
- "Mothership" news (regional or national parent organization)
- Industry news
- Upcoming events
- Book reviews

For clubs with fewer than 100 members, we recommend publishing at least quarterly. For clubs with 100-500 members, 6-8 times a year. And for clubs with more than 500 members, 10-12 times a year.

Advertising and sponsorships can be used to defray printing and mailing costs. Even smaller clubs can find local or industry merchants who are happy to support the club's efforts with advertising. You can create special packages for different sized ads, multiple issue insertions, color vs. black and white, and special positioning (e.g. the back cover.) You don't need a huge committee, just one person willing to make some phone calls.

If your club is local or regional, and there are other clubs around the country supporting the same community, consider setting up a newsletter exchange. You send them your newsletter and they send theirs in return. This is a great source of content for future issues, and it helps to foster connections between neighboring clubs.

Consider using color. With digital printing, it's possible to do small print runs at very reasonable prices. One of our customers (a 50 person car club) publishes a full-color, 24-page, quarterly newsletter for around \$4.00 per issue, including postage. It's full of photos, event reports and technical articles, and is a powerful asset for the club. (Contact us for information on printers who specialize in club and association newsletters.)

Many clubs are moving to all digital newsletters, which are written using a word processor or simple publishing program, then saved to a PDF file and uploaded to the club's web site. You can then send an email to all members letting them know that the current issue of the newsletter is ready to be downloaded by clicking on the embedded link in the email. (Some clubs have different membership rates for members who want a printed newsletter vs. those who are willing to download and read it online.)

### **Email Blasts to Members**

In addition to the newsletter, the club President should be sending an email blast to all members at least once a month and sometimes more often. It can list news, remind people about upcoming events, issue volunteer requests, and generally keep people informed and connected.

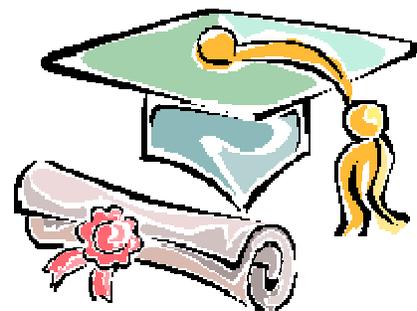
ClubExpress has a facility built-in to allow authorized users to email the whole membership or selected slices of members (by committee, interest group, member type, membership status, etc.)

What's important is to remind members on a regular basis of the value provided by the club. Give them reasons to be proud of their membership. You are psychologically reinforcing their decision to spend money and time being a member, and encouraging them to share this membership with others.

### **Education**

I am sometimes surprised that so few clubs and associations have Education as an official mandate and even a board position.

But this is a critical function for most organizations. People join to share their passion with others of like mind, but they are also looking to learn new and better ways of exercising this passion, or at least to share their knowledge and experience with others who may not be as far along.



Offering a regular program of classes or less formal workshops gives your organization legitimacy and provides another reason for people to join. It also gives you material for the newsletter and for a technical section of the web site. Classes and workshops can also improve your visibility in the local community and help to attract a wider audience as members.

It's easy to come up with topics and find experts to present. Start by tapping the membership. Some clubs offer members a rebate on their dues to run a class; others find willing volunteers

without this incentive. For some clubs and associations, there are experts all around the country who are interested in speaking and sharing their knowledge. In many instances, you can find people traveling to your area and coordinate a meeting around their schedule. Sometimes, it's enough to just pay expenses. This is especially true if your association is in an industry where consultants are looking to sell their services to your members.

## Competition

Strong clubs shine! They have regular events with lots of variety for different constituencies. They have a large and informative newsletter. They make it easy to join and to get involved. They are not necessarily the biggest club in their "industry", but they have all the pieces in place. People have fun, they learn something, they meet new friends, and word gets around.



The best way to compete is to be the best at what you do. Focus on the fundamentals, on the product and experience, and the members will follow.

It's important to work together with neighboring clubs, to share resources and ideas and to look for opportunities to organize joint events. Members and officers get to know each other and the opportunities for synergies increase. It's important to reduce ego and politics (or keep them well hidden) to allow you to cooperate more closely.

## 2. Promotion

---

Potential members have to know that you exist. There are dozens of ways to promote your club or association, many of them free or very low cost, especially if you are a not-for-profit. Consider some of the following:

- Local newspapers. Many have an Events section listing upcoming events for clubs and associations for free. Some radio stations and public interest local TV stations will also publicize these events.
- Local reporters. If you're having an interesting speaker or event with general interest in the community, try to get a local reporter and photographer to attend. A write-up in the local paper is huge.
- Local and specialty web sites. Many larger cities have city-based web sites that publicize local events and groups. On some of these sites, you can submit your event automatically, just by completing an online form. In some "industries" or "communities", there are also web sites run by third parties as clearing houses in that community, and they are often willing to promote your events in return for a reciprocal link.



- Local emailing lists/blogs. Depending on your "industry" or community, there may be local blogs or email distribution lists to which you can submit event announcements, and the list author will distribute it to the list members.
- Write articles about the club or association, or a recent event or speaker. Many online and print publications are keen for content, especially if it's well written.
- Consider creating an honors or awards program to promote the achievements of members, especially people who have provided years of service in the community. These announcements and events are an excellent source of material for the various media and channels described above.
- Local merchants will often post brochures on their countertops, or pin a flyer to the community announcement wall, especially in return for a mention. When you build relationships with local merchants, consider asking them to advertise in your newsletter and offer discounts to members. Where appropriate, a discount program is a big incentive for people to join.
- If there are local community exhibit shows, consider staffing a booth or table. Bring brochures and experts who can answer visitor questions and extol the benefits of joining the club or association. Print some extra issues of the newsletter so that you can hand out a back issue or two at these kinds of events.

Promotion should be handled by a Publicity Committee who can develop the materials, work the different avenues and channels, and share the load. If you generate materials and handouts, look for ways to use this creative material across multiple channels and media.

## The Club Web Site

It goes without saying that a dynamic and interesting web site is critical nowadays, perhaps the most important. Prospective members, event registrants and current members will usually go to the web site first to learn about the club and your upcoming events.

A web site must be part of an integrated marketing strategy, helping to promote the club and its programs and events; highlighting the strengths of the club and the benefits of joining; and showcasing the good times that people will have or the valuable information they will learn by joining.



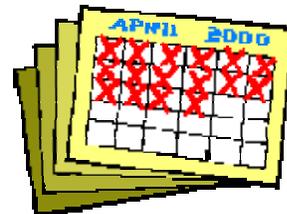
Web sites can be used for many things besides promoting the club. They can be repositories for documents and photos and event reports. They can explain club policies and allow members to vote on issues large or small. They can help with club management, including membership signups and renewals, member profiles and bios, credit card payments for memberships, events and merchandise, online discussions on subjects of interest to members, and committee business. (ClubExpress supports all of these features.)

But a club web site is useless unless you have the commitment to maintain it. Nothing will kill a member's or a prospect's interest faster than a web site which hasn't been updated in weeks or months. Too many clubs create a web site, manage it for a few weeks or months (usually with one person doing everything), then allow it to languish without clearly understanding why they set it up in the first place and what objectives it needs to serve. The actual cost of a web site is relatively small. But the resource commitments are much larger.

Web sites evolve over time. They never spring alive, fully-formed, from Day 1. So it's best to start simple and build the content over time, uploading documents and photos, and adding custom pages gradually. Within a few months, you will have a powerful repository and resource of club knowledge.

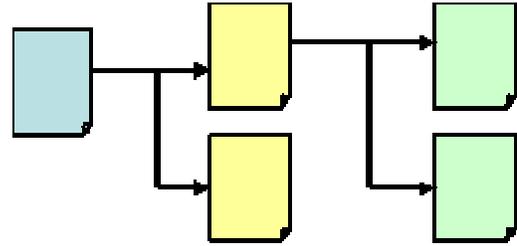
Here are some of the things that can go on the web site:

- Basic information about the club
- Benefits of joining
- Membership application (online or download)
- Board and clubs officers
- Contact information
- Committees, responsibilities and members
- Club policies, rules, etc.
- Member interests
- Member bios and photos
- Events calendar with details of each event
- Event registration (online or download)
- Back issues of the newsletter
- Other documents for download
- Event photos and reports (members having fun!)
- Other photos
- Technical and educational information
- Links to related web sites of interest
- Vendor discounts
- Sponsors
- Voting for officers
- Member surveys
- Discussion forums
- Buy/Sell/Trade lists
- Job postings



## Web Site Issues

Before you dive into the web site, spend some time planning the organization of the site, what's known as the information architecture.

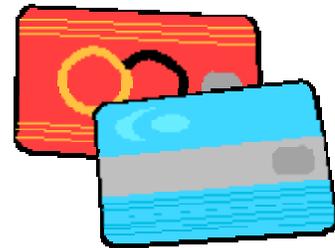


- What do you want on the public side of the web site?
- Do you need members-only content and if so, how will you implement a login/password mechanism to restrict access to this content? Also, what happens to these logins when a membership expires--do they stop working or do they allow expired members to still access the site?
- If you're going to use a number of custom web pages, how will they logically be arranged and linked

It's important to use software or a tool to manage your web site which allows for incremental changes and for the work to be spread around multiple users. Discussion forums can be managed separately from the event calendar and from the document and photo libraries. (ClubExpress includes multiple levels of security, allowing you to divide responsibilities among different members with a high degree of granularity.)

It's also important to define formal procedures for information flow and approvals (people planning). If one person or committee is scheduling an event, how will this information be communicated to the people managing events on the web site, including changes? How will information flow in the other direction as well, registrations and the answers to event-specific questions (for example, at the dinner, do you want the fish or the chicken?)

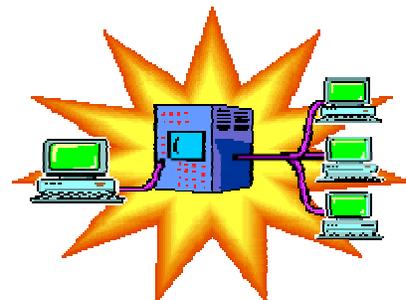
Do you want to handle online payments? If so, you may need to set up a merchant account or Google Checkout or PayPal. Considerable expertise is required to implement one of these solutions; there is also a setup fee and monthly costs to be paid. Reporting of transactions is relatively straightforward but understand how you will handle integration with the membership database (for example, when someone renews online, how is the database updated to reflect the new expiration date?) Note that all of these issues are handled automatically by ClubExpress.



## Web Site Hosting Options

There are lots of options for hosting a web site:

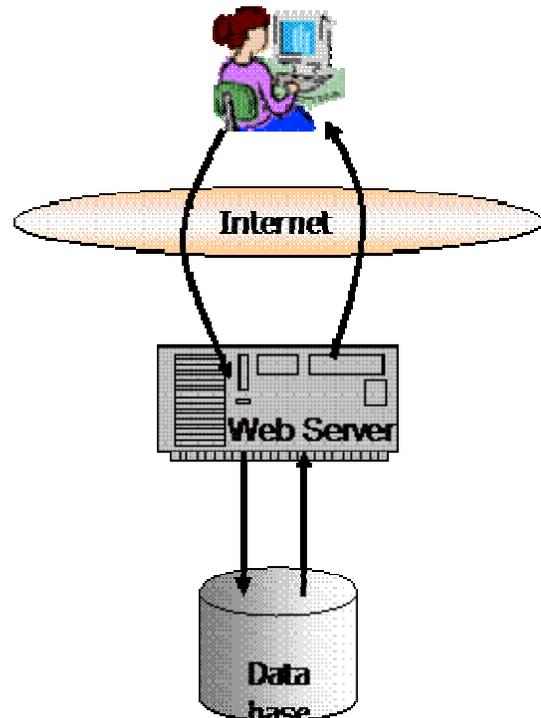
- Find a friendly club member with a web server. It's free but there are many disadvantages (no control over connectivity and backups; who handles troubleshooting if there's a problem; what happens if the member leaves the club; etc.)



- Low-end shared hosting from Yahoo, MSN and many others. This option is also free if you don't mind ads served by the web host. There are also very cheap (\$5-10/mo.) options. But there's no advanced functionality (calendars, forums, surveys, document storage, etc.) and certainly no integration with the database.
- Mid-range shared hosting from a hosting company (Hostway, Tucows, etc.) This option will cost \$100-250 per year and it includes Email accounts, programming tools, E-Commerce, statistics, perhaps even integration with a merchant account and a database back-end. They will provide basic content management. But you will need an experienced programmer to take advantage of the database and programming tools.
- Dedicated web hosting from a hosting company (same list of providers). This is your machine, your software and your programming. You have admin-level access to the box. All of the basic capabilities will be there at a cost of \$150-300 per month plus a significant setup fee. Again, you will need an experienced programmer to take advantage of the database and programming tools.
- With the two hosting company options, they handle backups, server health and updates, firewall and security, redundant power, Internet connections, and support, none of which you would get from a friend's web server!
- Finally, a custom platform designed specifically for clubs and associations (the ClubExpress option!) Like a hosting company, we handle backups, server health and updates, firewall and security, redundant power, Internet connections and support.

We also give you a web site designed specifically for membership-based organizations, with a membership database that's deeply integrated into the web site. All member information is in a single repository that can be updated by admins or members, so it's always current. Emailings, labels, forum memberships and every operation that interacts with members are always working off the most current data.

The web site includes areas for non-members, members and admins. There are special purpose modules for an event calendar with online registration, discussion forums and listserver, surveys, document and photo storage and display, committees and member interests, content management and editing tools, reports and data exports. The system supports online member signups, renewals and expirations, and members can update their own information in the database.



Admin tools allow club officers to access the data from anywhere via a secure login, to manage memberships or the web site itself. Financial tracking and reporting is built in, and the system also supports email blasts to members and the non-member mailing list.

A platform like ClubExpress is purpose designed for clubs and associations, with thousands of hours of development time that a lone programmer couldn't hope to replicate. This is much more than a simple web site. It can become the complete front office and back office of your club or association, freeing up time for board members and volunteers to focus on building a strong and vibrant club.

### 3. Price

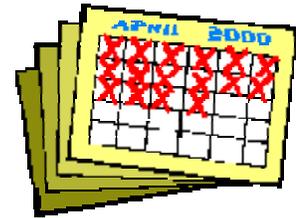
---

Here are some common membership and fee mistakes that clubs make:

- Inflexible membership plans
- Relying on manual processes
- Never sending renewal notices
- Making it harder to renew than it needs to be
- Not accepting credit cards
- Not charging enough!

#### Membership Plans

Clubs and associations should be flexible in the membership plans they offer. Too many clubs have a single option which is OK for the majority of members but which doesn't help grow membership or maximize revenue collected to support club activities.



For example, does your club have multi-year plans, offering a small discount for people to pay 2 or 3 years in advance? The discount doesn't have to be huge but the commitment from members is significant and getting the money upfront certainly helps. If you do this, watch the accounting/budgeting issues; you are incurring a liability for future services which needs to be paid off.

If your club is focused on people who join through their personal lives do you offer family plans to get both spouses and the kids involved in club activities? If your association is focused on members who join through their business or professional lives, do you offer small business plans for 3-5 people from the same company, or "sponsor" plans targeted towards larger corporations?

Many clubs deal with the question of whether everyone should renew on the same date or whether to do rolling renewals. Here are some of the pros and cons:

Single Date Renewal	Rolling Renewals
When you were doing things manually, this was the best option, because all the effort was concentrated in a single window. With an automated system, this option takes no effort.	For clubs doing renewals manually, this was a harder option because the effort was repeated every month. But if you are using an automated system, this option also takes no effort.
Budgeting is a little easier. When everyone renews at the same time, you know exactly how much money you have to work with through the year.	Budgeting is a little harder because money is coming in steadily rather than all at once. On the other hand, you have more consistent cash flow through the year.
What happens if someone comes along a couple of months before the single renewal date? Many clubs will give that person an extended membership (14 months) to bring them inline with everyone else. What if someone comes along 6 months before the single renewal date. For these instances, clubs may have to define prorated memberships which are only visible at certain times of the year. (ClubExpress supports both options.)	There is no problem with people signing up at any time of the year; they automatically get a 12 month membership (or whatever duration is defined.) You don't need grace periods or prorated memberships.
Expirations are handled all at once. Everyone who hasn't renewed by the expiration date (or some defined number of days after the expiration date is marked as deleted.	Expirations are handled as they occur from month to month. Again, this option works better if your membership system is automated.

I'm a strong believer in automating the renewal and expiration tasks. (Not surprising of course, since this is a big part of what ClubExpress can do for you.) But this is among the most tedious of the paper-pushing tasks that volunteers have to do and it takes up a lot of the time available to a membership director or club secretary. When you automate it, a huge swath of time is freed up for more creative tasks.

Automation works whether everyone renews on the same date or whether you have rolling renewals. If you are currently renewing everyone on the same date but wanted to switch to rolling renewals, automation is almost essential.

## Renewal and Expiration Notices

Many clubs and associations don't send formal renewal notices! That's a guaranteed way to crimp your growth by up to 60% every year. A page in the newsletter is not enough to get people to renew, and collecting dues at the first event of the season also won't catch most people. You are setting yourselves up for hours of phone calls reminding people that it's time to renew.



Most members need continual reminders, including a first notice around 60 days before the expiration date, a second notice 30 days before, an expiration notice if they just didn't get around to it, periodic reminders in the President's regular emails, and yes, a full page "ad" in the newsletter. But if you send out these notices and then make it as easy as possible to renew, members will do it. Our experience with ClubExpress is that clubs get a much bigger percentage of their dues up front, making it easier to plan and budget for the year, and simplifying the follow-up phone calls.

If you have your membership in an Excel spreadsheet, it's not hard to learn how to do a Word mail merge and send everyone a renewal notice. That's the bare minimum!

Using an automated system like ClubExpress automates this process completely. You can configure ClubExpress to send out one or two renewal notices, with an embedded link to open the web site, allow members to log in, and take them the first page of the renewal wizard. Renewals take two minutes, including payment online by secure credit card. Expired members get a third notice with the same link, and the system allows them to renew online in order to reactivate their memberships. You can even configure an expiration "lag" period, so that members are given a few extra days after the actual expiration date before their membership status is actually changed to Expired.

But no matter how automated you make it, there will still be some laggards and you do need to call to give them a final nudge, or if they're not renewing, to understand why.

## Don't Make it Hard to Signup or Renew!

Some clubs we've met in our "travels" require members to sign up anew every year! Please don't do that.

Everyone accepts checks or cash at an event, but taking the time to print out a membership application or renewal form, fill it in, write a check, envelope it and stamp it is an artificial barrier that some people won't jump across.



The #1 thing you can do to simplify signups and renewals is to accept credit cards through your web site. New members can click a "Sign Me Up Now" button, enter some basic information, pay, and be an active member 4 minutes later. Renewing members can click a link in an email, login, click a "Renew" button, walk through a 2 page wizard, and they are done, paid and active

in less than 2 minutes. (If your credit card is already stored securely in the system, it takes less than 30 seconds.)

And on the way, they might sign up for a 2 or 3 year plan.

Or a family membership.

Or buy some merchandise.

And, I get frequent flyer miles or refund points!!!

It's worth paying 2.39% in credit card fees. On a \$35.00 membership, that's only 84¢. Heck, just raise your dues by \$1.00 and you're square.

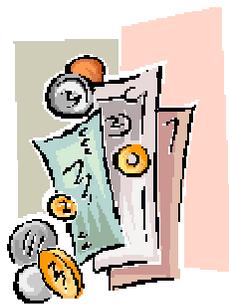
## Charge Reasonable Dues

Does your club charge \$20 a year in dues?

Have you raised the dues in the past five years?

What is the value to being a member compared to the price?

I speak at a lot of conferences on strengthening and growing clubs, and I like to ask the audience to raise their hands if they spend more than \$10,000 a year on their hobby or passion, the reason they are in the room. I usually get close to 100%.



My argument is that most clubs don't charge enough for membership, considering the benefits that members get. Clubs are perpetually poor and this stops them from adding programs, beefing up their newsletter, offering more services and value to members, creating a richer experience that encourages more members to sign up and renew. It's a vicious cycle that never allows the club to thrive and grow.

Perception is critical. Members are attracted to a club that takes their passion seriously. This can best be done if the club has the resources it needs. This means charging reasonable dues.

But remember that member expectations are higher; they want to see some real benefits from the higher dues, including more events, a bigger and better newsletter, a web site with lots more content, discount programs. Funds can be used for marketing programs to spread the word, letting more people know that the club exists and how it can help members.

Yes, a small number of members will complain and a smaller number will leave in a huff. Every organization has complainers who don't want anything to change. But if they see the club thriving, most of these will quietly come back.

My recommendation is to start with a bigger jump (say \$10) and plan to add \$5 every 3-5 years. Explain why you're doing this and stand firm. Be resolute and united as a board. Remember that the naysayers are always more vocal than the silent majority.

## 4. People

---

Continuity and growth is a primary board responsibility.

When you volunteer to serve on the board of directors of your club, you are accepting the responsibility for helping to ensure the long-term survival, health and growth of the organization. You are also accepting responsibility for ensuring that the articles of organization, mission statement and bylaws are followed. (If they don't reflect the current organization, then they need to be changed.)



The board is responsible for managing every aspect of the club's operations and for asking the tough questions:

- Is the organization financially solvent?
- Are we running things as efficiently as we could?
- Are we using our limited resources to best effect?
- Are we doing everything we can reasonably do with the available resources?
- Are we meeting the needs of our members?
- Are we using technology effectively?

Sometimes, the answer to one or more of these questions is "No". In some cases, the board has been elected specifically to implement change, perhaps to revive the organization or to upgrade its technology.

Change is a two-edged sword. Do it too quickly and the club is no longer the club that most people originally joined, and you might end up with more defections than you were expecting. But if there are structural problems and you don't address them quickly enough, you risk the club closing because it cannot fund its operations or because members see no point in renewing their memberships.

Change needs to be measured and be accompanied by careful thought and discussion among board members and other interested parties. The board needs to welcome new blood who will bring in new ideas and skills. This is an especially good way to encourage younger people to get involved, preparing them to be the next group of club leaders.

If you've ever served as a club President, you know that begging for volunteers in some general way almost never works. People don't step forward without having a specific task that needs to be done and that interests them. So the best way to get more people involved is to start by building a database of skills. Then, when you need something done, find people in the database and ask them to help with that specific task.

Hook them with a small task, then reel them in by building a web of contacts and friendships which make people more willing to participate.

Successful organizations have active programs to bring in new people. They have committees to share the workload, led by a board member with a formal charge to share the workload and get input from multiple people. Committees also get more people familiar with the organization and how it works; they move people around to different portfolios and move them up the hierarchy.

But committees need to be focused on doing rather than on talking. Spend too much time debating and people will quickly get bored and leave.

## Board of Directors

Clubs and associations should periodically examine the structure and organization of their board of directors, to confirm that it still reflects the group's needs.



- Has the board becomes large and unwieldy?
- Are responsibilities properly spread around?
- Are there parts of the club's operations which are not specifically assigned to a board position? (For example, many clubs don't have someone specifically assigned to manage the web site and email communications.)
- Are some positions no longer needed?
- How does information flow around the club (For example, when a new membership arrives in the P.O.Box with a check, who collects the mail, who enters the details into the database, where does the check go, and who contacts the member to welcome him or her to the club. In some clubs, this is four separate people!)

I don't believe in "at-large" positions. People should be on a board of directors for a reason, with specific, defined responsibilities. Besides the President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer, other members should have specific portfolios related to the operations of the club, including membership, programs and communications.

Boards should be small and focused. If the structure of your organization requires a larger board (for example, if every district in a larger club has a board position) then define an executive committee that is authorized to make certain types of decisions, and commit the club up to a defined spending limit. As noted above, use committees in general to get the work done.

For some clubs, it makes sense to have separate board positions for newsletter, publicity and web site. For other clubs, it may make more sense to have a Director of Communications board position, with a communications committee that handles the newsletter, publicity and the website.

Remember that the board of directors is elected by the members to run the club. Boards have a lot of power and autonomy to make decisions and execute them, without having to come back to

the members for permission for every little thing. If the members don't like what you're doing, they will vote you out of office.

And most importantly, let automation handle the menial tasks (there he goes with ClubExpress again!) People will be more willing to volunteer if they can do creative and challenging tasks instead of sitting in a room stuffing envelopes. Allow directors to focus on creating a richer experience for members and on growing the club with the limited time they have available.

## 5. Process

---

Being the volunteer who does all the scut work is a thankless task.

We've all been in that position, the one who has to wrestle with the printer and mailing labels, get everything printed and folded, collating in front of the TV with the kids bribed to help, stuffing envelopes, missing a couple of sheets at the end and wondering which envelope has extras (or is missing a sheet.) affixing the labels and stamps and running everything down to the post office.

When your club has jobs like this that need to be done, people volunteer less often and stay with their "portfolio" for less time. Tasks like this make it harder to attract volunteers, especially young people who are comfortable with automation.



But most importantly, these jobs reduce the time available for constructive tasks, like providing services to members and growing the club.

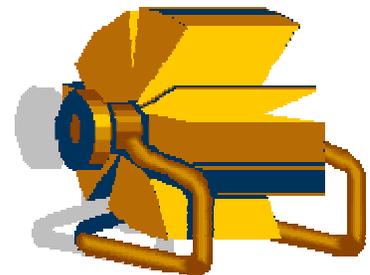
Here I go again with the self-serving lecture, but I think everyone will agree: automation and outsourcing, used wisely, will significantly reduce the number of these types of tasks that club volunteers need to do. Less time on tactical tasks means more time for strategic tasks.

Technology can make things simpler, as long as it's straightforward, reliable and reasonably priced. You don't want to replace paper wrangling with computer wrangling if the software is just as hard to use. Where's the benefit in that?

### Other Ways to Simplify the Process

Here are a few other ideas to consider:

- **Committees benefit clubs and associations in so many ways.** They share the load among multiple people, help board members train their successors and spread knowledge around the organization, and allow each portfolio to accomplish more. Yes, things are a little slower when a committee gets involved, but sometimes that's not a bad thing; a little deliberation often fixes problems and avoids a hasty decision.



- **Centralize the data.** When the member list is on the Membership VP's computer, and the accounting system is on the Treasurer's computer and the emailing list is on the President's computer and this list, and that list, and you get the picture. What if someone's on vacation? What if someone's computer crashes and they weren't as diligent about backups as you are (I hope you are diligent about backups....)?

Even worse, what if a computer is stolen? The law in many states and foreign countries requires that if there is even the possibility that membership data has been compromised, letters need to be sent to everyone in the database informed them of the possibility, however remote, of identity theft.

One of the primary benefits of a web-based system for club management is that the data is centralized in one location, accessible to everyone based on their need or authority, and someone else is responsible for security and backups.

- **Push maintenance down to the members themselves.** With an Internet-based system, members are responsible for their own updates to phone numbers, addresses, etc. Every time members update their own contact information is one time that you don't have to do it for them (in how many places?)
- **Support credit cards and other automated payment mechanisms.** Yes, there's a fee associated with accepting credit cards, but it's a small price to pay for not having to do it manually. This is just another aspect of pushing work down to the members themselves. Let them pay for memberships and events online and the transaction is Done! No need to follow-up. You also get the money sooner. Recent surveys show that a huge majority of Internet users are very comfortable paying online, as long as they are confident that the web site is secure and that their data will be protected.
- **Do everything you can to avoid paperwork being passed among Board members.** We've met clubs where the club secretary picks up the P.O.Box and forwards the memberships to the membership director to update the database. This person in turn forwards the checks to the Treasurer for deposit, and can you guess how many errors occur at one step of the process or another. With an online system and most payments being handled by credit card, most of this paper shuffling goes away.
- **Minimize duplicate entry.** In the example immediately above, everyone had their own database and they were never in sync. There should be one master database that everything keys from, and using an online solution makes this easy.

## 6. Passion

---

Successful clubs are led by people who are passionate about the club's mission; who want to share it with others; who want to help them expand their knowledge and enjoyment.

This passion shows through in everything the club does, from events to the newsletter, from the web site to education, from membership programs through attracting sponsors and advertisers, and in every interaction with members and the community.



Never forget to keep it fun. People join a club or association because they think it can add value to their lives, either their personal pursuits or their careers. They will continue to be members as long as the perceived value is there, and as long as the people running the club are positive and uplifting, willing to share their knowledge and answer questions, willing to listen to ideas and open to others getting involved.

Clubs should always be trying to innovate, never sitting still. What worked ten years ago, even what worked three years ago won't necessarily work now, or perhaps there are better ways to attract and keep members. Don't be afraid to try new things; you will learn as much from what doesn't work as from what works. Be flexible and be welcoming towards new ideas, especially from younger members.

Clubs and board officers shouldn't focus on the "doom and gloom". Nothing turns members off faster than reports of dissension among board members, politics, infighting, paralysis, a sense that the club is not being "led". Members don't want that in their lives and it will push them away from the club, and especially from ever getting involved.

-- End --