



Volunteer Membership Committees

Using your loyal volunteers to help members come on board and stay put

At any size chamber, there is one universal truth: there is always more work to be done than can ever be accomplished. And that's especially true in the membership area. Membership is the lifeblood of any chamber, so membership recruitment and retention requires tremendous time, effort and resources. The average chamber will expend X amount of dollars, Y amount of staff time and Z percentage of its efforts on this critical activity. And yet, most chambers still find that "XYZ" still isn't enough.

Rather than come up short in this critical area, some chambers successfully tap their membership to help recruit and retain other members. Fortunately, every chamber can find those members who are a committed and dedicated group. These "golden geese" are often willing to get involved to help the chamber meet the needs of business and the community. When asked, they will give support where it is needed most. For most chambers, that's in membership.

It is there that volunteers can make a big difference.

Using a member-only club to attract new members

For the Virginia-based Roanoke Chamber, members have been helping the chamber recruit new members for over 41 years. They have provided so much support over the years that they have acquired a special designation, The Backbone Club.

"I don't have a sales team," comments **Casey Bolling, Vice President, Membership and Member Services, Roanoke (VA) Regional Chamber of Commerce.** "I have The Backbone Club and they are my sales team."

Participation in The Backbone Club can be likened to membership in a fraternity or sorority, of sorts. Volunteers develop their leadership and networking skills which, in turn, helps them in their careers. Simultaneously, their efforts help the Roanoke Chamber grow its membership.

Expanding upon the success of The Backbone Club, the chamber has added another group to help the chamber retain current members. This new committee, The Ambassadors, is made up of nine active volunteers with the primary responsibility of visiting current chamber members to encourage their participation.

According to Roanoke's Bolling, "The more involved our members are, the more value they see in their membership. And the more value they see, the more likely they are to renew when the time comes."

Linking current members with new ones pays off

With only six paid staff members, the Bethany-Fenwick Chamber relies heavily on the help of their volunteer membership committee—with good results. Located in a resort town, the Bethany-Fenwick Area Chamber has created a very effective Ambassador Committee. **Vickie Loria, Membership Director, Bethany-Fenwick (DE) Area Chamber of Commerce** describes it as "the communication link between the members and the Chamber."

The Ambassador Committee finds ways to increase participation among members, build relationships between members, and encourage networking among the membership. The ultimate goal of the Bethany-Fenwick Chamber's

Ambassador Committee is to show members what their chamber membership can do for them.

The Bethany-Fenwick Area Chamber also taps its Board of Directors to assist with membership recruitment and retention. The Board has a dedicated Membership Chairperson who keeps the effort going. All Board members are expected to participate in an outreach program to make contact with existing members.

"All of the volunteer action pays off," says Loria. "I cannot personally connect with all of our members, no matter how much I want to. By utilizing our volunteers, we can *personally* invite members to events, promote interaction among member businesses, keep members informed and, ultimately, increase member recruitment and retention."

The end result of all this effort is significant. The Bethany-Fenwick Area



Chamber's membership retention rate was 91% in 2002.

Taking a training course in membership

Volunteer membership committees aren't only important to smaller chambers. Even with a staff of twenty-one, the Springfield (MO) Area Chamber of Commerce recognizes the tremendous value of culling strong volunteers from their base of 2,000 members. These select individuals are then given the tools to effectively reach out to current and potential members.

"We have a 25-person membership committee," according to **Bonus Frost, Vice President of Membership, Springfield (MO) Area Chamber of Commerce.** "This committee has a goal to recruit 200 new members on an ongoing basis throughout the year."

To meet this seemingly lofty goal, the Springfield Chamber puts all of its volunteers through an extensive training process to give them in-depth knowledge of the chamber and its operations. This ensures that all volunteers are on the same page, providing members and nonmembers alike the same information about the chamber's role in the community. It also gives them the confidence they need to approach prospects and tell the chamber's message.

Making points where it counts the most

For over six years, a Texas chamber has reaped the benefits of having an Ambassador Group that focuses exclusively on retaining members. The group has thirty active members out of a total membership of 900. They are a very diverse group of very outgoing individuals who love to meet and greet members. "Our volunteers work hard to retain our members," states **Sharon Walker, Vice President of Membership Development, North Dallas (TX) Chamber of Commerce.** "Our philosophy is that it is better to keep our members than to have to go out and get them."

And much of that effort occurs during the new member's first year. Ambassadors make regular, personal contacts to ensure that the new member is informed and satisfied. In the first, sixth and tenth month, they survey their assigned new members in person, over the phone or via emails. The purpose is to keep the member informed, invite them to attend an event, or encourage them to actively participate. All ways chambers keep their members coming back.

Outside of the personal rewards, the Ambassadors earn prizes through a point system devised by the chamber. As they make their contacts, they amass points toward free airline tickets, special nametags or free gifts from area stores and restaurants. And, of course, everyone gets a special year-end gift.

Get on a roll with member retention

With strong volunteer committees in place, a Kansas chamber has always taken member retention and recruitment very seriously.



But then they decided to make it more fun. So, relying on the old adage, "You catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar," they came up with a unique program that has been a rousing success. "We call our new program, The Roll Patrol," crows **Dana Russell, Vice President, Membership Development, Olathe (KS) Chamber of Commerce.** "It makes our members feel very special and our volunteers more relaxed. It's just fun."

During a Roll Patrol (which occurs over 85 times a month), the volunteers bring famous cinnamon rolls from a local bakery to a member's office. Everyone happily indulges, while the volunteers ask the right questions to ensure that the member is satisfied with the chamber. "We focus on first and second year members plus those most at risk," states Dana Russell. "This really works well for the newer, uninvolved or difficult to approach member."

A special logo and the slogan, "We're on a roll because of members like you." reinforces the main point of all this effort. These visits are carefully designed to make sure that the member stays with the chamber. After all, their chamber has a lot to offer: great services, community support and sweet rewards.

When members speak, other members listen

Even if they had unlimited resources, most chambers would still tap their volunteer pool for membership enhancement. They realize that sometimes a chamber member can speak to another member (or prospect) more frankly and with even greater credibility than that of a staff person. In essence, they are putting their money where their mouths are. They can attest to, better than anyone, the intrinsic value of the chamber.

Ultimately, they are the ideal sales team. And they can, if put to good use, reap tremendous rewards for any chamber.

— **Linda Dickerhoof**

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