

George Wittorff is a member of the Board of the NRAA, given the task of addressing membership issues facing the movement at a national level.

This is number 10 of a series of articles aimed at achieving that goal

*“The Club is the core element of our organization’s structure.
Members need to connect with the purpose of their club and become engaged.”
Zonta International.*

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? 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 club and association leaders need to 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?

Lets Look at Membership Fees:

Recently I conducted a survey of all State and Territory Associations, seeking a copy of their Membership Fees structure. I did so on the understanding that those results would not be published. However, what I did find that can be shared is that there is a huge variation across the Associations in the amount charged, and the variations in fee structure.

Based on those findings, the following is put forward for members, club and Association office bearers to consider:

Here are some common membership and fee mistakes that clubs and Associations 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 that 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?

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. Clubs will 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!

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 and Associations require members to sign up anew every year! Please don't do that.

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

Ideally, the #1 thing clubs/Associations 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.)

The above may seem like a pipe dream, but investigations by the NSWRA and NRAA into a National database may have this method of renewal within a few years.

And finally:

Charge Reasonable Dues

Does your club charge \$30 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 talk to people a lot of about strengthening and growing clubs, and I like to ask them if they spend more than \$5,000 a year on their sport of shooting. I usually get close to 100% "Yes".

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 signup and renew. It's a vicious cycle that never allows the club to thrive and grow.

While the above statement may be controversial to some, *remember that 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.

The sting in the tail is that the above strategy will ultimately lead to bigger club membership numbers, which in turn will facilitate the provision of better resources and lead to lower fee increases in the future.

If your club is 'undercharging', 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.

(Reference: Building Strong Clubs: Dan Ehrmann)

And finally, remember to **Always Promote Shooting As a Positive Sport.**

ASAPS