



MEMBERANDUM™

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Converting Your Members into Club Evangelists

Keeping hundreds of members happy can be challenging. Asking members to act on behalf of the club on a committee, to deliver membership referrals or to drum up support for a social gathering is something many managers and boards consider challenging, but it may be the single most effective way to grow your club.

Once you turn ordinary members into evangelists, you are on your way to creating a healthier bottom line for your club.

Foundation for the Ask

Boards and managers become frustrated when there is a lack of participation or ownership by members.

In most cases, the lack of member excitement is not a result of disinterested members. Unsuccessful engagement plans exhaust the normal communication vehicles in asking for - but not receiving - help.

It is not always clear to members that the call to arms they see in the newsletter is something they need to be concerned about. Members have been asked countless times indirectly, to "Bring Guests," "Register Early," "Bring Us Your Ideas," etc.

So how can you energize your membership to the point of evangelism on behalf of your club?

Clarity of Need and Ownership

First, be as specific as possible when asking for member participation. A general statement expressed in the monthly newsletter tells the member to stop listening since the message is not directly addressed to them. For example, in club announcements asking members to "support the club" will not be as effective as communications targeted to a specific group of members asking to make "Chop House Fridays" a success.

More importantly, it is essential for the member to understand why this appeal is more significant than others they might have received from the club. What is significant about success on this effort?

Many clubs report that their best-attended events run on auto-pilot - most commonly due to a committed group of volunteers who stay with it annually and recruit their own replacements when needed.

More challenging is to start or rejuvenate such an event. The key is to start with a core group of members who see the possibilities and understand the vision. Approach leaders individually and let them recruit their own team. Support them. When they stop feeling ownership, the entire event loses steam and responsibility falls back in the club's lap.

One of my favorite analogies in coaching clubs about soliciting membership referrals (or any kind of membership help) comes from a series of studies about Social Proof Theory. Dr. Robert B. Cialdini's book **Influence** examines the Social Proof Theory using an experiment on the lack of aid provided to emergency victims in busy settings. In the experiments actors are used to portray someone in distress on a busy street corner. Despite the crowd of people, no one comes to their aid. When the experiment is repeated with the victim pointing at passersby and singling them out with "you, in blue, call 911," the results are remarkably different. Most everyone singled out responds in this situation.

From this, researchers conclude the presence of many possible helpers leads each to conclude that someone else would help. Because no responsibility or ownership was specifically delegated, it was unclear who should take charge.

This theory has been borne out in hundreds of membership interviews where I've asked members if they knew the club needed new member referrals. They are aware of the club's need but they figure someone else is handling it.

A Personalized Ask

It is motivating for members to be approached by someone they respect in a well thought out, personalized manner. In this sense the member feels as if they are helping a person rather than an entity. Members have limited time and appreciate a club representative visiting them at work or home. Members like to feel special.

By offering to update a club member individually on recent and planned events and by genuinely seeking their input you establish a high degree of respect and engagement. Most members in this position feel accepted and are eager help. Commonly they'll offer to go beyond your request because they want to.

Deflect Defeat and Share Success

Everything you try to do with members will not always be successful. If all of your efforts are successful then you are not being brave enough in attempting new ideas.

When there is failure, point to the bright side for lessons. De-personalize blame. It serves no purpose to have members feeling negative about their efforts. Send a handwritten note of thanks and encouragement. Make a point of seeking them out and get them involved again as soon as possible.

When there is success, share it!

The Most Common Pitfall

One of the most common mistakes a manager can make is to pay members for their involvement in club activities. This can come in many dressed up forms including food and beverage or merchandise credits for membership referrals. Most members find these types of methods demoralizing and in the long run, this type of behavior only serves to de-motivate members.

These programs have limited success and often results are short-lived. If such a program works well, something else would have worked better and maintained the club's integrity. We've even spoken to members refusing \$1,500 cash rewards out of embarrassment. Members will see the value of their participation and will want to help once they understand the cause is just, their help is needed and it is their responsibility. A sense of belonging and ownership is crucial. If you want to thank a member with a bottle of wine, do it, but personalize the gifts for their specific tastes. DO NOT make such gifts conditional or quid pro quo.

A fully engaged membership is perhaps your most important marketing and business asset.

Damon DeVito is co-founder and Managing Director of Affinity Management. Affinity was founded in 1997 and provides advisory services and professional management to private clubs, golf courses, equestrian facilities and other member-based businesses. For more information on Affinity Management, visit www.affinitymanagement.com or call (434) 817-4570.

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