



FRIENDS IN FOCUS

Best Practices: Membership Development

Introduction

The following suggestions are based on widely accepted best practices for non-profits for membership communications and retention. While it may not be possible to implement all of these suggestions at once, gradually making changes with a goal of developing a more comprehensive and standardized process for regularly communicating with members and donors will help the organization retain members and provide a more consistent base of support.

Renewal Mailings

It is important that members receive more than one renewal communication as one letter is easy to set aside and forget about. Members/donors should receive the renewal piece before their membership has lapsed. The recommendation would be mid-spring. Summer is a difficult time to send mail due to vacations, travel and general summer relaxation. It is recommended that mailings be received before July 4th and after Labor Day in September, if possible.

As the responses begin to trickle in (a month after the renewal piece was received), send another renewal reminder to those who haven't replied. A second touch helps jog their memory if they intended on responding. Second mailings generally perform as well as the first (i.e., if you mail 300 letters the first time and get 30 responses that's a 10% response rate. If the second mailing only goes to the 180 who haven't replied yet, you can anticipate around 18 responses, in keeping with the first response rate).

The content of the communication should emphasize what member/donor support has allowed the organization to achieve in the last year (donor-centric, not organization-centric) and a positive vision for what their renewed support will help the organization achieve.

Personal stories are especially effective, such as how an event or program at the park or site had a positive impact on an individual or on the community.

The physical renewal mailing could be timed to coincide with an email membership drive. The board might also consider dividing up the list, making phone calls to all or part of the membership, and making a personal pitch to support the Friends.

Acquisition Mailings

Acquiring new donors is difficult, but necessary to grow an organization. An acquisition mailing should be sent to a list of individuals who are not currently donors just before the renewal mailing is sent in the spring. The best way for a small organization to grow their list of prospects is to reach out to friends, family, business partners, etc. of current stakeholders, in the Friends' case the board. If those closest to the organization all recommend 10 names that's a good place to start when generating a new prospect list for an acquisition mailing.

Other ways to grow the list of potential members is to look at the lists of board members and donors of other nearby and like-minded organizations. Board

members and donors are usually listed in newsletters or annual reports and on websites. Business leaders and prominent community figures are also good to engage through the acquisition mailing.

Collect names, addresses and emails from as many people as you can throughout the year. This includes at park/site events and programs and when tabling at community events. These people then become membership prospects.

Many nonprofit organizations trade contact lists with other nonprofit organizations to use in their acquisition mailings. Organizations with larger budgets may even buy lists from marketing firms. If you do trade your contact list, just make sure to be clear to your members that you do this.

Lapsed Donors

Organizations should communicate with lapsed members for about 5 years.

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After 5 years of no communication or engagement on their end, it is recommended to take them off the regular communications list and focus energies on individuals who have been more recently engaged.

If the list is being culled annually, you are only communicating to an ever-shrinking pool of donors/members. Sending only to those who have recently given may be a cost-savings measure but it is usually easier to inspire someone who has donated in the past to give again, rather than to cultivate and inspire a new donor.

Acknowledgements

Timely gift/membership acknowledgements provide the foundation for the next ask while providing a tax receipt for their membership/donation. Thank them for their support and be sure to detail how their gift is making an immediate impact on the work being done. The next time the organization reaches out, the individual will already be aware of the impact and will likely feel positive about receiving such a timely “thank you.”

Fall/Year-End Appeal

If the membership acquisition and renewal pieces are sent in the spring, it is helpful to provide another

communication about the impact of member gifts and the work being done by the organization 6 months later to all contacts you have, not just current members. It reminds individuals that they made a gift (if applicable) and shows the organization is accountable and properly using the gifts to create real impact.

It is also good to time this report/request letter for the end of the tax year as many individuals make contributions in December for tax purposes (though a tax-deduction is seldom the sole motivator for making a gift).

Other Communications

In addition to communicating with your members about their dues, it is important to have other, regular communications with your membership. Regular communications with members lets them know that you care about them and not just about getting their money. An example might be a letter or newsletter with some updates on the Friends and/or a calendar of events at the beginning of the year or in the fall.

Further Reading

- *Donor Centered Fundraising* by Penelope Burk
- *Fundraising for Social Change* by Kim Klein

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- www.donorrelationsguru.com
- Council of Nonprofits
- Eight Strategic Mistakes with Membership (Blue Avocado)
- Friends in Focus: Creative and Successful Membership Efforts

Making a difference for New York's state parks and historic sites from the ground up



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