



# FRIENDS IN FOCUS

Creative & Successful Membership Outreach Efforts

## Introduction

Successful membership programs include a variety of efforts to engage constituents in the organization.

The secret to attracting members is getting people to interact with your group initially (personal invitation or interesting event, for example) and making sure that when they do they are valued and they find it rewarding. The following examples come from Friends groups in New York.

## Send a Zip Code Postcard Mailing

Using a \$2,600 grant from Parks & Trails New York, the Friends of Gantry Plaza State Park (now known as Hunter Point Parks Conservancy) printed and mailed postcards introducing the group and its new website to 12,500 households surrounding the Queens-based park. Postcards were also placed at businesses, apartment buildings, and events in and around the park. As a result, the number of email subscribers increased 105%, the group raised an additional \$1,000 in donations, and a new member helped with a strategic plan and marketing efforts. This type of saturation or postal code mailing is a way for groups to reach nearby residents and can be done using bulk mail through the US Postal Service or private companies.

Whether using the postcard to list upcoming events, invite residents to an open house, or provide a discounted membership or event offer, the Friends website and logo should be prominent on the mailing and there should be a call to

action (e.g., join, donate, volunteer, come to an event). If your budget allows, try a large color postcard (6" x 9" or larger); this will cost more in postage but will stand out in the mail.

## Implement a Business Membership Program

Many organizations have a special membership program for businesses. This is separate from and in addition to seeking sponsors for specific projects and events. The Friends of Knox Farm State Park near Buffalo, for example, allow businesses to become members at a specific monetary level and have set up a special section of their website just for these members. The page displays the logos of business members, which are linked to the businesses' websites.

## Establish a Presence in the Community

Tabling at community events is an easy way to enhance the Friends' visibility in the community and attract new people to the park or site—and new members to the organization. Be strategic about which events to participate in, focusing on those that are likely to give the Friends the most visibility and to attract people who would also be interested in what is happening at the park or site, such as green expos and farmers markets. While tabling takes volunteer time and commitment, it can be

satisfying and Board members or other volunteers can sign up for shifts so that no one needs to give up an entire day.

## Create Eye-Catching Materials

Display materials are especially useful when tabling at events—whether Friends or park/site events or events in the community. A banner in particular can help draw people to your table.

The Friends of Fahnestock and Hudson Highlands State Parks (FOFHH) developed a portable, double-sided retractable banner (see photo) as well as a table skirt after redesigning its logo. FOFHH also acquired a tri-fold exhibit board and developed informational material on the parks. As a result, membership increased, new board members were recruited, and interest in volunteering increased. The increased promotion and brand recognition also legitimized FOFHH as a strong partner with State Parks and enhanced the group's standing with other partners.



Once you've drawn someone to your table, have a takeaway and some way to capture his or her contact information (e.g., email list sign-up sheet). One way to incentivize signing up for an email list is to advertise that one of the names will be drawn at random to receive a prize (e.g., gift card to local shop, free admission to the park/site courtesy of the Friends, item donated by a local business).

Rack cards are another inexpensive yet effective option. The Friends of Schodack Island State Park created a rack card (see image) and are seeing one to two memberships coming in each month as a result. Rack cards can be displayed at the park/site along with other locations in the community, and can be included in an envelope to mail to potential members.

## Launch a Hand-to-Hand Campaign

Erie-Cattaraugus Rail Trail (ECRT) undertook a successful hand-to-hand campaign to personally recruit members. ECRT created and distributed 1,000 "Become A Supporter" business cards and 3,500 "Become A Supporter" postcards. The distribution was made through person-to-person contact and through display stands placed in local businesses and government buildings. Additionally, fact sheets were created to supplement the display.

These outreach materials had a significant and positive impact on the mission of ECRT to educate local communities about the benefits of trails; increase ECRT presence in the community; increase ECRT membership and participation; and to build local support for the conversion of the railroad into a recreational trail.

## Enhance Online Communications

In any conversation about membership outreach, online communications must be part of the discussion. Having a website is a critical part of any organization's outreach strategy. Nowadays, however, organizations need to use a variety of digital and online tools to reach a broader audience and drive traffic to the website. Make sure you are sending regular news via email and have a presence on social media sites.

## Develop Partnerships

Creative and unusual partnerships can yield surprising results. Fallsburg Rails



to Trails Committee in Sullivan County developed a partnership with the town. The town agreed to include the Committee's membership brochure in the water bills to reach full-time and seasonal residents.

Potential partners include local Audubon chapters, libraries, senior citizen centers, religious institutions, service organizations, municipal government departments, and applicable departments or clubs at high schools, colleges and universities. In each case, there may be opportunities to cosponsor programs or work on a project together.

## Take the Show on the Road

Giving presentations outside of the park/site is another way to take your message to new and different audiences. A template slideshow presentation can be created so that when opportunities arise, you don't have to create something from scratch. Each presentation can be slightly tailored to the audience and to add anything new that should be highlighted.

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



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