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(ESSENTIAL, EFFECTUAL, MANAGEABLE)

WAYS TO RECRUIT AND RETAIN MEMBERS FOR YOUR CHAPTER

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This article is the fifth in a series on helping chapters build their membership and become more active conservationists in their communities. The first four articles, which focused on conservation projects, marketing ideas, fundraising, and ways to attract youth to chapters, appeared in the Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall 2008 issues of Outdoor America. Electronic reprints are available on our Web site at <http://www.iwla.org/chapters>.

1. MAKE IT A TEAM EFFORT

Chapter membership officers go by different titles--membership secretary, vice president for membership, membership committee chair, or, most common, membership dues recipient (MDR). This is one of the most important volunteer leadership positions in any chapter. The MDR is responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operation of the chapter's membership program. This includes responsibility for maintaining accurate, up-to-date, and complete membership records for all new and renewing members. The MDR's role could include handling renewals, new member inquiries, and recruitment.

Although each chapter designates one person who is responsible for overseeing membership renewals and recruitment, this person needs support from other members. Membership should be a team effort.

Start by forming a membership committee. Volunteers can help by mailing renewals, fulfilling member cards, recruiting new members, distributing posters and brochures throughout the community, attending other civic groups' meetings to speak about League membership, and helping to orient new members.

Membership committees may consider designating another leader dedicated to marketing the chapter to potential new members. This position is often referred to as the chapter's membership marketing chair. Others on the committee could include those with promotional skills and responsibilities, which might include the chapter's newsletter editor and webmaster. The treasurer should be part of this group as he or she supports membership processing by depositing the checks and making payments for members' dues in a timely manner.

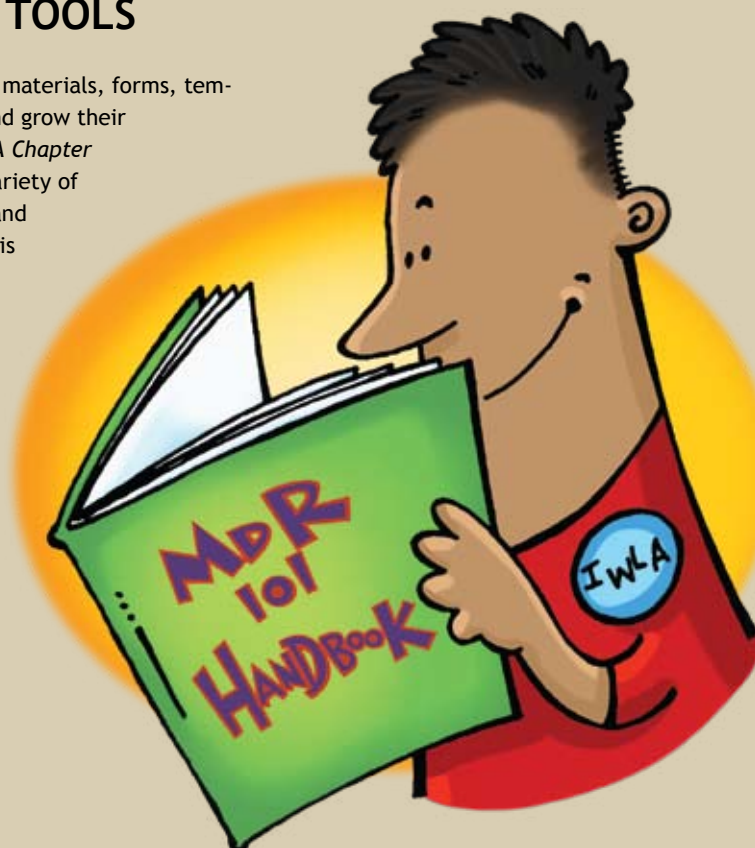


2. UTILIZE ALL AVAILABLE TOOLS

The League's national office provides marketing materials, forms, templates, and other tools to help chapters manage and grow their membership. Start with the recently released *IWLA Chapter Manual*, which includes a section dedicated to a variety of techniques for helping chapters recruit, upgrade, and retain members. Similarly, the *MDR 101 Handbook* is a must-read for chapter membership volunteers. It supplies the most current step-by-step directions for the billing system, including important deadlines and responsibilities.

The various supplied membership transmittal forms, in print and electronic versions, are designed for straightforward accounting and processing and will make the tasks much easier.

Along with member cards and decals, utilize the optional welcome letter available from the League's executive director, which outlines member benefits. Consider purchasing IWLA member lapel pins to present to your new members at their initiation.



3. MARKET YOUR CHAPTER

Develop a marketing plan and stick with it. Your plan should specify your chapter's resources, objectives, marketing strategies, and implementation. Similar plans could be developed to market and promote chapter-sponsored events and activities. The more you promote your chapter's name, programs, and membership opportunities in your community, the easier it will be to gain name recognition.

Utilize proven techniques, such as distributing chapter brochures and event posters and maintaining a Web site. The League's national office can provide assistance creating these tools. Printed news, event advertisements, or other media reports about your chapter will also help entice new members and encourage the belief your chapter is worth joining.

Finally, spend time making sure chapter events and activities are open to the public and well advertised. In addition to posting information on your Web site and placing signs in the community, ask your local newspapers, radio, or TV stations to announce and cover the events.

For more on ideas on marketing your chapter, refer to the Spring 2008 *Outdoor America* (online at http://www.iwla.org/oa/10_ways_to_market_your_chapter.pdf). This article includes quick tips and focused guidance on media outreach, image branding, and the benefits of community events, adopt-a-highway or -stream programs, and conservation projects.



4. MEMBERSHIP FOR ALL

League chapters offer four classifications of membership as provided for in Article 4 of the League's bylaws: Individual, Family, Student, and Youth. Chapters should offer all four classes of membership.

Family membership allows chapters to not only count both adult members of a household as members, but to utilize the volunteer time and talents of the entire family. Family membership also tends to be less expensive than if the two adults joined as individuals.

Student and Youth memberships are also generally discounted. Student members are those between the ages of 18 and 21; Youth members are under 18. These young conservationists are truly outdoor America's future, so don't exclude them from your chapter.

Imagine how much more quickly your membership will grow when all of these potential members are included. The best part is that your members will be more likely to volunteer for projects when the entire family is involved.



5. CLEAR THE HURDLES

Some chapters are often asked by prospective members, “Why is it so difficult to join your organization?” Local requirements—including specific residency stipulations, the need for multiple sponsors, or required participation at chapter functions—are often deemed as unnecessary hurdles to join the League. Membership caps (limits to the number of members who can join annually or a total member count) also turn away potential members.

Another hurdle is created by the fact that all chapter dues are based on the calendar year and expire on December 31st. Some chapters require anyone who joins—regardless of the time of the year—to buy a full-year membership. When you have a potential member sitting on the fence about joining, perhaps a half-year membership (50 percent of total dues) is a good incentive. Beginning July 1st of each year, this discounted rate would be available to new members through the end of the year.

Remember, the League today operates in a much faster-paced world than that of the days when many of our chapters were chartered. To stay competitive with other groups clamoring for the attention of potential League members, your chapter should make it as easy to join as possible.



6. LAUNCH A MEMBERSHIP CAMPAIGN

Although every chapter event, project, or activity offers an opportunity to build membership, a targeted membership campaign waged periodically really puts the focus on your chapter’s goal of attracting new members.

In launching a membership campaign, include both short- and long-term goals, such as increasing membership by 10 percent per year for the next five years. The plan should also address specifically how the goals will be achieved. Be sure to address expected responsibilities and required qualifications of recruitment officers as well as costs.

There are several ways to recruit new members: person-to-person, direct mail, special events, and promotions. Asking a friend to join is the cheapest method. If each member could recruit a friend or family member, the League would double its size.

Mailing recruitment letters to potential members works if you have good mailing lists. Use former members, local IWLA at-large (non-chapter) members, and recommendations from existing members.

Special events, such as a chapter open house or a youth fishing derby, are also great opportunities to recruit from a captive audience. Recruitment promotions such as contests or challenges with prizes or other incentives are also popular and often successful.



7. RECRUIT AT ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS

Promote, offer, and sell memberships at all chapter functions. For example, if your chapter is hosting an Earth Day event or fishing clinic, make sure that it includes a short talk on the League and opportunities to join. Or if your education committee is organizing a speakers' bureau for local civic groups, be sure they take membership materials to their speaking engagements.

In addition, open some of your regular business meetings to the public. To make it interesting, invite a speaker whom people in your community would like to hear—a local naturalist, noted sportsman, or a representative from a state fish and wildlife or conservation agency. Organize an outdoor recreation activity or show a video related to the speaker's area of expertise to help draw more people. Remember to always sell your League chapter's member benefits to help close the deal.



8. ORGANIZE A WELCOME WAGON

Member orientation sessions can be a good way to familiarize new members with a chapter's activities as well as the League's history and conservation mission. Use them as an opportunity to talk about chapter bylaws, operational issues, and safety rules and regulations. Also use them as an opportunity to learn more about the new members' interests, to offer volunteer opportunities, and to solicit ideas for new projects. If applicable, it's also an opportunity to familiarize them with chapter grounds and facilities. Remember to keep the sessions informative and entertaining.

Also be sure to recognize your regular membership recruiters and other active volunteers. Consider highlighting their efforts during chapter meetings, through your Web site, or in your newsletter. In addition, consider creating a chapter-level membership recruitment award. Nominate your contributor of time and talent for the League's Judge John W. Tobin Award, which recognizes each chapter's top volunteer annually.



9. DEVELOP STRONG COMMUNICATIONS

Communicate regularly with your members. Internal communications such as newsletters, event posters, e-mails, and Web sites are some of the tools that can be used. External communications such as printed news, event advertisements, and other media reports about your chapter reassure members that your chapter is contributing to conservation and the community and is worthy of their continued support.

Ensure that your members have opportunities to hear about conservation-related topics throughout your state and on a national level—these are the engaged members who will become your next state and national leaders. Likewise, having involved and knowledgeable members almost guarantees total membership retention. Keeping your current members involved is just as important as signing up new ones. In general, members don't voluntarily drop out of an organization that is working hard and constructively, has strong leadership, and gives its members ample opportunities to participate in meaningful and challenging ways in fun and rewarding activities.

When members don't renew or stop participating, consider calling or visiting them in person to find out why. This information will help you diagnose the problem and make changes so that your chapter continues to grow.



10. OFFER CONSISTENT BILLING

Billing notices are generated and shipped to each chapter in early September—several months before chapter membership expire on December 31st. Don't wait to get started on renewals. Mail the first round of notices when you receive them. Place reminders of upcoming renewal deadlines in your chapter newsletter or on your Web site to help alert members. The sooner you collect and submit renewal payments, the faster you can get an updated membership card into your members' hands before their current ones expire. Also, collecting renewals early eliminates the need for large second billings, which are issued to all chapters in early December.

The question is often asked, "Why the multiple notices?" The answer is simple—it is far easier and more inexpensive to renew a current member than to seek out a new one. Chapters that do not mail more than one renewal are missing out. Other chapters who send out a second notice, or even a third (available in March to chapters upon request) have proven success in higher retention rates.

Nothing's more frustrating than recruiting a bunch of new members only to watch their memberships lapse, sending the chapter back to square one. Do everything you can to retain existing members. It may mean a little more work now, but it will save you a lot more work down the road.

