



Society Strategies

Federation of Genealogical Societies

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Set I Strategies for Societies

NOW THAT YOU'VE ATTRACTED THOSE MEMBERS,
KEEP THEM!

by Dawne Slater-Putt

Supplemental Page

This strategy paper, written some years ago, is an FGS *Classic* that contains ideas and strategies still relevant today in society management.

This paper discusses the involvement of society members as a key factor in keeping members in the society. This paper presents ideas on recruiting members, what makes them happy, what makes society membership valuable, how to instill ownership of the society for the members, how to tap into hidden members' talents; and how to tackle worthwhile projects.

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NOW THAT YOU'VE ATTRACTED THOSE MEMBERS, KEEP THEM!

by Dawne Slater-Putt

INTRODUCTION

Congratulations! Your society's membership has grown steadily over the past several years. The organization is now comprised of a large group of local people who regularly attend meetings, plus a number of members living in remote locations that count on the society for genealogical news from and about your area. How can your society effectively serve both types of members? Too many times those who perceive that a society is not meeting their research needs silently decline to rejoin. What can you offer that will encourage them to continue as members year after year? This paper will provide some ideas about how to best serve and interest members ... and keep them coming back for more!

MAKE MEMBERSHIP VALUABLE

An important way to keep members renewing is to give them the feeling that they are getting their money's worth when they make out that check for dues each year. The society's goal is to have members think that they really would be missing something valuable if they dropped their membership. The challenge to this plan is that members' needs and wants vary greatly. Following

are several ways to make a society valuable to its members:

- **Publish Useful Periodicals.** These are important for all members, but are one of the most valuable benefits offered to those living in remote areas. With this in mind, many societies produce two periodicals, a timely newsletter containing society news, announcements of upcoming meetings, queries, lists of acquisitions to the society's collection, and wish-lists of materials and equipment; and a journal that publishes records from the area and perhaps methodology articles. The newsletter is aimed primarily at local members, while the journal is significant to everyone, including remote members who do not attend meetings or regularly use the collection. An added bonus to printing previously unpublished records and methodology articles in the society's periodical is that this information is timeless; sales of back issues to both members and non-members can help pad the treasury.

- **Conduct Meaningful Meetings.** Social gatherings where members share their personal genealogical interests are fun and worthwhile occasionally. But think twice before holding this

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type of meeting every month! Members may not feel a loss at missing a few of these social events, while they would miss an educational program that may help them further their research. A mix that works well for many successful societies is to intersperse educational programs with work-meetings and social gatherings.

Members or other local individuals with a genealogy-related expertise are good candidates for presenting the educational lectures, but also consider hiring a state- or national-level expert on a topic of interest to your members. Survey members to determine their interests. The quality of program presented by a well-known speaker usually is well worth the expense.

Occasional work meetings might include shelf-reading to organize the society's collection, indexing, cemetery reading on fair days, or research on queries sent to the society. Besides breaking up the routine of lecture meetings, these sessions have productive organizational or project completion results.

Social meetings of the society need a structure or theme. Consider having a holiday party, dress as your favorite ancestor, tell about your black sheep, bring your favorite memento to show and tell, or have a lock-in at the society or public library.

• **Provide Workshops or Tutoring Programs.** A goal of many societies is genealogical education. Call on members to teach beginning, intermediate or advanced workshops, or hire an individual or firm to present one. Consider offering members a discount to attend the workshops.

Plan a tutoring program, matching members versed in specific areas of genealogy with those wanting to learn techniques in those areas, such as computers, military or land records, geographic specialties, and ethnic topics.

• **Produce a Locality Research Guide.** This can be an important benefit for remote members doing

"armchair research" or planning a trip to the area. It also can be cited as a perk in the society's promotional material to potential members. Include a description of the records that exist for the area covered by the society, as well as addresses, telephone numbers, and hours of record repositories. Other notes might mention ease of access to records, availability of parking, rates for copies, facility policies, etc. Addresses and telephone numbers of local hotels might be included, as well as a list of nearby restaurants. Include a map. If a booklet is beyond the capabilities of the society, consider producing a typewritten guide and combining it with materials from the local Visitor and Convention Bureau as a packet.

• **Provide Free "Advertising."** Allow members free queries in periodicals - a limited or unlimited number, depending on available space. Encourage member participation in a surname card file or pedigree chart book.

• **Help Members Make Priceless Connections.** Name a chairperson for the surname card file or members' pedigree chart book. This person should look for connections as he or she files the cards or forms. The same individual could monitor the sign-in book at the society or public library for matches between members and non-members. The goal is to make the member think, "Gee, I wouldn't have found Cousin Sally who has the family bible, if I hadn't joined the **** society!"

• **Provide Limited Free Research in Local Records.** Have volunteers provide a certain amount of research in local records for members. For example, the society might send a coupon each year to renewing members for one hour of research. A bonus might be to offer five hours of research to any member renewing for three years at once. This is a very valuable service for remote members unable to travel to do research in local records.

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- **Begin a First Families or Pioneer Program.**

Local and remote members can participate in this worthwhile type of project that brings together individuals working on the same lines as it preserves information about early settlers for future generations of researchers. Encourage the highest level of scholarship in order to collect the most accurate data and preserve the society's reputation. Consider giving society members a substantial discount on their application fee as a membership benefit. *[For more information, see the Society Strategies paper by Margery Graham on First Families Programs.]*

- **Be Professional in All Arenas.** Don't let members think that their dues are going to a "fly-by-night" organization.

CREATE OWNERSHIP IN THE SOCIETY

One way to retain members is to foster in them "ownership," the idea that it is "their" society. Make them CARE. Ways to do this include:

- **Give Members a Voice.** At meetings, encourage discussion and ensure the atmosphere is open and accepting. The responsibility of the president or chairperson is to maintain control and not let "nay-sayers" discourage others from volunteering ideas.

Give remote members a voice through the society's periodicals. Publish the topics of meetings ahead of time and publish excerpts from correspondence regarding the issues.

Queries give members a voice. If someone writes a lengthy query of local interest, he or she could be encouraged to write an article about the family for the society periodical. People often like to see their own names in print, as well as their family information.

- **Tap Hidden Talents.** A common complaint among society leaders is that a small number of busy individuals does all the work! To change this

and as a bonus to help others feel "ownership" in the society, be ever-vigilant about spotting people who are good writers, speakers, leaders, organizers, workers, etc. These people often hide their qualities well, so look closely! Ask questions.

Pay attention to what members do as an occupation or in other aspects of their lives. For example, a stay-at-home mom might be your 4-H project chairperson because she works well with children. An accountant might be your next treasurer. Someone who makes points eloquently at a meeting could be a speaker. Writers are harder to spot. Watch for those well-worded query-type letters coming in. A potential periodical editor might lurk among them as well. Remember that no written rule states that periodical editors have to be local members! If a remote member is willing to do the job, material can be sent to him or her. A computer enthusiast or someone who works in the field might be willing to set up a home page for the society, or to chair a computer interest group.

- **Tackle Worthwhile Projects.** Have a variety of ongoing projects to cater to a difference in interests. Some may like to read cemeteries, others answer queries, others index the census. People like to feel their work is important and has lasting value. Don't just ask for volunteers for these projects at society meetings. Ask people individually whom you think might be interested and do a good job.

- **Consider Term Limits for Officers and Encourage a Change in Committee Chairs Periodically.** This keeps the society fresh and allows new faces with new ideas to come forward. Change can breathe life and new excitement into long-term projects. Be on the lookout for people who might serve the society well but are too modest, too shy, or too busy to volunteer.

- **Experiment with Ephemera.** As a rule,

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genealogists like "stuff." They wish their ancestors had saved "stuff" from the organizations to which they belonged! Ephemera promotes ownership and allows people to show off their affiliations. The popularity of college and professional sports logo items is an excellent example of this phenomenon. Consider ordering a supply of lapel pins with the society's logo (very inexpensive) to be sold for \$5. Bookmarks, tote bags, pencils with a society logo are just a few items available. Many other attractive items can be ordered in every price range.

- **Sponsor Contests.** Encourage members to write essays on their family lineages, black sheep ancestors, most unusual heirloom, or most serendipitous find. These gather material for the society's periodicals while getting members involved.

- **Give Awards.** If people do a good job, let them know! Create standing awards and allow special awards. These might be given at the holiday party in December, or at a summer cook-out. Don't forget to consider your remote members for awards, too. They might receive a citation for the most interesting ancestor of the year or a well-written periodical article, for example.

- **Establish a Correspondence Committee.** This committee answers correspondence promptly, makes referrals and sends out literature. Consider sending sympathy cards when there has been a death in the immediate family of a member. **Q** **u** **i** **c** **k** , competent, and courteous attention to correspondence demonstrates to members and potential members that they are important to the society.

CONCLUSION

It costs very little money to establish traditions that will keep a society important in the eyes of its members. What it does cost is time and effort to reach out to those who might not volunteer on their own to help. As more individual members become involved in their society, not only are there more hands to help with projects, but more hearts to share in the organization's ownership and to have a stake in its success. Above all else, meet your deadlines, stay within your budget, take advantage of your volunteers, and meet your member's expectations of a professional organization.

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