



Society Strategies

Federation of Genealogical Societies

P.O. Box 200940 Austin TX 78720-0940

Series Set I Number 26

Rev. July 2007

Set I Strategies for Societies

Growing Your Society

An Outline of Ideas

by Jana Sloan Broglin, CG
and Roberta "Bobbi" King

Supplemental Page

This paper presents ideas for growing and retaining membership in your society.

The information on page 4 which directs the interested person on how to obtain copies of this paper is incorrect. The FGS office no longer reprints the SSS papers, and has phased out paper copies of the SSS papers altogether.

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Set I Strategies for Societies Growing Your Society : An Outline of Ideas by Jana Sloan Broglin, CG and Roberta "Bobbi" King

INTRODUCTION

During a time when many genealogy societies are facing loss of membership and declining attendance at conferences, there are societies whose memberships are increasing, and whose seminars are well attended. What do these societies know?

The following points outline several activities which societies should consider in cultivating an increase in membership and retention of members.

MEMBERSHIP SURVEYS

A society will gain valuable information by conducting surveys of the membership. Ask specific questions, offering answers in a multiple-choice format, but allow enough space for comments to be written by the respondents. When the survey is completed, it is important to implement as many of the suggested changes as possible, and in a timely manner.

Remember: Try to provide to the members what they really want, not what the board "thinks" they want.

EDUCATION PROGRAMS

As a genealogical or historical society, education plays a key role in the purpose of a society. What are some ideas for activities for fulfilling this purpose?

One society holds a "Summer Camp" for members and nonmembers. During this weeklong activity, attendees hear nationally known speakers on a wide range of topics including: the local and regional sources, methodology, Internet sources, and computer genealogy technology.

A separate one-day seminar with a nationally known lecturer may be held a few months later. By having an event at least three seasons (spring, summer, fall, or fall, winter, spring) a year that are most appropriate for the location of the society, the society name is out there letting members and nonmembers know that your society is very active in genealogical education.

LINEAGE MEMBERSHIP

Lineage membership within an organization can give an individual member an added sense of “belonging” to the group. The lineage categories offered could be: First Families of (the state); Society of Civil War Families of (the state); Settlers and Builders of (the state); Centennial Family of (the state); Pioneer Family of (the state); Territorial Family of (the state); each society has possibilities for early family statuses.

Each lineage category would have special requirements to establish membership, and each applicant would submit their genealogical connection from a qualifying individual for inclusion into the lineage society, along with acceptable proofs. A society standing committee would establish the standards to be met, review the applications, and issue the certificates. The society could decide if only direct lineages are eligible for membership, or if collateral family members may be included. All applications would become the property of the society, maintained in its archives, and could be published either in hardcopy form and/or on the society’s website.

PUBLICATIONS

Quarterly publications are an integral part of achieving a society’s goals and objectives. The society quarterly is an important publication which contains local research information; this periodical is a more scholarly journal than the “newsy” newsletter.

The quarterly may contain in-depth articles on research and case studies. Book reviews, especially submitted books on family histories or regional locality histories, should be included.

The newest forms of society publications are electronic: the e-zine (“electronic magazine,”) or blog (web log). The e-zine or blog may contain time-sensitive information regarding the society such as upcoming events. Some societies use it to announce special events to their volunteers, such as moving books in the library.

NEWSLETTER IDEAS

Articles of interest to researchers:

- Society news events, including local, regional, and national events;
- County histories, such as early pioneers, businesses, churches;
- Local repositories, with hours of operation and maps with driving directions;
- Local records such as tax lists and service organization membership lists;
- Bible records;
- Research repositories in surrounding counties;
- New members with surnames of research interest;
- Online research sites;
- Lookup volunteers, with their special areas of interest;
- Synopsis of speakers at meetings, and highlights of future programs;
- History and settlement of the area, including defunct townsites and discontinued post offices;
- Articles from old newspapers, containing names and events;
- War veterans, such as organization membership lists (VFW, Legion).

WEB SITE

The society’s website’s address should be easy to remember, a plus for any organization. Display contact persons’ information, show a list of officers and their email addresses, and display a map and driving directions to the meeting location. RootsWeb provides free web space for societies, and many groups have taken advantage of this complimentary space.

Develop an easy-to-use, intuitive website. Entice individuals with the inclusion of a “members only” area, housing databases and other information, that will be alluring to potential members. Offer the index to the newsmagazines and quarterly publications, as well as the table of

contents on the public site, and perhaps place the actual articles in the “members only” area.

In the public place, publicize your society events, whether it is a monthly meeting, an annual seminar, or a special event conference.

Consider using sites such as PayPal (an online payment service) or a “shopping cart” to make purchases of books, memberships, or registration for society events easier for members and nonmembers alike.

Above all, keep the website current with no out-of-date information. An old web site, with months-old information, looks derelict and untended, and the same impression might be given about your society.

VOLUNTEERS

The volunteer is the backbone of any society. Without the willingness of volunteers, most societies would not have officers, conferences, publications, or a library.

The very important volunteer must be treated as such. Their jobs are vital for the success of a society. By holding recognition dinners and giving awards, the volunteer is made to feel as important as they truly are to a society.

SOCIETY LIBRARY

Your society library is a major source of research for members, and a good membership enticement. Out-of-town members will travel to your repository and nonmembers may see the value of your society after visiting your library. The library collections should be well advertised in the society newsletter, quarterly and on the website. Volunteers should be adding indexes regularly.

SERVING SOCIETIES

There are genealogical societies which are umbrella organizations, composed of member

genealogical, historical, and associate organizations. For these umbrella organizations, chapter management seminars would be an invaluable service provided to the members. Seminars could be held in different parts of the state, encouraging member societies or chapters to attend and host the guest members. A member directory should be published containing information regarding each chapter. Member organizations should submit a list of their publications, contact persons, local library hours, and meeting dates. The umbrella organization might offer services such as bylaws reviews to member societies, and offer to house a copy of a member society’s bylaws for safekeeping.

AWARDS

Societies can offer many types of awards for members or chapters. Awards may deal with records transcriptions; abstracts; finding or research aids; genealogical instruction books; state, county or local history books; family history books; biographical or collective biographies; military historical records.

Chapters within a larger society could be recognized for outstanding chapter; outstanding chapter officer; and outstanding chapter volunteer.

Individual members of an organization may be recognized by a service award for providing invaluable service to the society and to the field of genealogy.

ANNUAL SEMINAR

The society which can offer an annual seminar is doing a great service to the community, publicizing its own activities, and gaining members.

As much as possible, commit to high-caliber speakers of national reputation. For your annual event, local speakers are a valuable resource for local expertise and cost-saving expenses, but these tend to be the same speakers year after year.

It is the national speaker who often acts as the draw to such events.

A booklet-style seminar brochure is a professional introduction of individuals to your event. There are self-publishing computer programs which make this an easy task for the computer expert in your organization.

Attract topnotch speakers by committing to paying them the fees paid on the national level, including per diem, mileage, hotel, and free registration. One society reported an increase of registration by 35%!

One time slot could be set aside for special “pay” events. This might include a two-hour workshop, or a roundtable discussion. You might schedule a conference orientation, free, for attendees; they might appreciate tips on organizing their lecture attendance by having someone give them a rundown on the lecture schedule and talking about the speakers. Questions could be answered at this time.

The call for lectures deadline should be months ahead of the seminar; as early as one year ahead of time. Choose speakers as quickly as possible and send out the contracts, so that you can publish your seminar booklet and get the information into

the hands of your publicity outlets at least six months ahead of time.

For national advertising, the websites for the Federation of Genealogical Societies and the National Genealogical Society maintain a calendar of genealogical events.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jana Sloan Broglin, CG, is Vice-President of Membership for FGS, as well as being an active member of the Ohio Genealogical Society. She writes and lectures on society management topics.

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NOTES

The following Society Strategies Series papers expand on topics covered in this paper:

“Now That You’ve Attracted Those Members, Keep Them!” by Dawne Slater-Putt. (FGS: Austin, TX, 1997).

“Put Your Best Foot Forward: How Small Societies Get Noticed” by Jana Sloan Broglin. (FGS: Austin, TX, 2002).

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