

HOW TO Recruit Members

SUCCESSFUL MEMBERSHIP RECRUITMENT

Members of the Powder River Basin Resource Council in Wyoming, concerned about the effect of a cattle feedlot expansion on the water they drink, needed money to pay for legal assistance in their fight. On a map, they marked the homes of neighbors to visit who were affected by the feedlot. They recruited two dozen new members and raised \$1,000 towards their legal bills.

The Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council (YVCC) in Billings, Montana, invited 800 people, by mail, to come to a public forum on public health and air quality – and to join YVCC. One hundred fifty people came to the forum, and YVCC members recruited six new members by talking with them one-on-one at the forum, in followup phone calls and nine more joined through the mail.

The Western Colorado Congress signed up 100 new members by organizing the Ridgway-Ouray Community Council, a new chapter of local people concerned about plans for commercial development in their community of 2,500 people.

The three examples of successful membership recruitment featured in the sidebar have several things in common. All three groups are grassroots organizations; they need a growing membership to survive. They recruited new members by appealing to the self-interest of the people they were asking. They developed and followed a plan, which laid out how many members they wanted, who they were going to recruit, who was going to ask them to join, and when they were going to ask. And they asked people to join.

WHY HAVE MEMBERS?

Organizations that succeed at building their membership start with the basics. First, they ask themselves, “Why do we want members?” It’s important to answer this question, even if it’s obvious to you that your organization wants more members. If you know exactly *why* you want people to join, you know a lot about *how* to recruit them. It helps you decide *who* to ask and *how* to ask them.

Community organizations want people to join because they need **money, power, and leaders**. Memberships are the best and most basic source of funds for community organizations. Groups which want control of important decisions in their communities are always working towards signing up a working majority. The closer they get to signing up 51% of the people, the more power they have to win. Every group needs more workers, more good ideas, and more people with leadership skills.

Successful community organizations think about *why* people join their organization – and *why* people *don’t* join. Why did *you* join *your* organization?

Unless you think this through, you might be tempted to say that most people join public interest groups out of *altruism*, or that most people who don’t join are apathetic or lazy. But there are more important reasons why people do or don’t join your group.

Most people join groups because it is in their *self interest*. If the group wins on its issues, it will benefit them or their families. The group provides a place for them to socialize, to develop new skills, to do and learn new things.

This does not mean

that only “selfish” people join groups. *Self-interest* is not the same as *selfishness*. It simply means each of us joins because of what is important to us.

Most people who join a group were asked to join by someone who understood their self-interest.

People who don’t join groups are afraid of the repercussions of joining, or disagree with the position of our group, or don’t think joining will do any good. But the most common reason people don’t join groups is that *no one ever asked them*.



WHY HAVE MEMBERS *continued*

Many of us assume everyone has heard of our group, knows what our group does and how it operates, and either loves us or hates us. From there it's a short step to deciding we can't get any new members, because anyone who hasn't joined already must be against us.

In all but the smallest towns, most people probably know little or nothing about your group, even if you think your name is in the paper all the time. You can't expect someone to join your group if they don't know you exist.

Even people who have heard of your group and know what you stand for may not understand how membership works. Most people today are familiar with civic or fraternal organizations with elaborate screening procedures and initiation ceremonies. They believe that they can't join your group unless you invite them. If you don't ask them to join, they will think you don't want them to join.

If you don't ask someone to join, it's almost impossible for him or her to know how to join. "How much does it cost?" they'll wonder. "Where do I send the money? Do I have to fill out a form, take an oath, or go to a meeting?"

If you think about it, the idea that people would join our groups without being asked is a little silly. In fact, most people join after being asked in person, one-on-one. Yet we all secretly hope new members will fall in our laps: if we just get our message out in the media, we think, they'd come walking in the door by the dozens, checkbooks in hand. When they don't, we begin to draw strange conclusions, without any evidence at all: "No one likes us." "We're too controversial." "We need to educate the public."

Why do we do this? Well, it's scary to ask someone to join, face-to-face. We all fear rejection. We all like less personal, less frightening approaches, and the more anonymous the better. We'd rather call or write our next-door-neighbor than ask them face to face. We'd sooner ask a crowd of 100 people to join than ask one person, even if crowds usually make us nervous. That's why we like recruitment tactics that never work, such as running ads in the newspaper with a form people can clip out and send in.

The best way to get over the fear of asking people to join is to talk about it and practice. Think about how important membership is to winning on the issue you care about – you aren't afraid to talk to people about that. Take some time to sit down with the members of your group, think about *who* you want to join, and how you would ask them to join. What would the conversation – your membership rap – be like? Practice the *rap*. Ask another member of your group to play your neighbor Bill, and pretend you are asking Bill to join. What would Bill say? What questions will he ask? How will you answer them? Practicing how to deal with different things Bill might say and do will make it a lot more comfortable for you to ask him when it's "*crunch time*."

WHY PEOPLE JOIN

- Believe in the cause or issues of our group
- Want to win on an issue, improve their lives
- Want to be part of a group, like to be around people doing things together
- Dissatisfied with something, have a problem that needs attention
- Want to develop new skills
- Like and trust the people in the group
- For a sense of community; to have fun
- Somebody asked them to join

WHY PEOPLE DON'T JOIN

- Disagree with the group's position on issues
- Fear of repercussions (losing a job or business, being thought of as radical, controversial)
- Don't understand the group or its issues
- Logistical barriers (no money, no childcare, no transportation, no access for the handicapped)
- Never involved in a group before
- Apathetic
- Don't have enough time to get involved
- Think the group is too radical
- No one ever asked them to join

RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES OF MEMBERSHIP

When you're recruiting someone, you must be able to describe the value of membership in your group. What are the benefits of membership in your organization? Here's one list of the rights and privileges of membership.

- Receive the group's newsletter and information
- Attend meetings of the group
- Vote
- Set policy for the organization
- Elect its officers
- Have the chance to go to meetings of coalitions and other groups
- Work together to win on issues
- Special premiums (coffee mugs, t-shirts, books)
- Attend trainings sessions and other opportunities for personal development
- Participate in actions of the group

THE MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

Even a group that knows it needs members, knows why people join and don't join, and has practiced asking people to join, can still come up short recruiting members. We don't have enough time. We think we have to postpone membership recruitment until we have more time, because the issue we're working on is so urgent. It's easy to forget *why* we said we had to have more members in the first place – to win on that urgent issue – because “working on the issue” is more comfortable for most of us than asking people to join. And we make recruitment more intimidating than it needs to be by jumping in without specific goals and a clear plan.

Pretty soon, we've fallen back to the “snowflake method” of recruitment: since every member and potential member is unique, different from every other, planning and practicing won't work. Instead, we'll wait patiently for a storm to blow up and for new members to float down from the sky.

Two key concepts can help deal with these problems, so that you don't have to resort to the snowflake method.

- **Integrate membership recruitment into every aspect of your organizing work.**
- **Develop and follow a recruitment plan with realistic, achievable goals, specific tasks, and clear responsibilities and time-lines.**

The best way to develop an effective membership campaign is to involve all of your members in the recruitment of new members, to target specific individuals and kinds of people you want to recruit, use a variety of methods for recruitment, and integrate membership recruitment with every aspect of your organizing.

If membership recruitment is separate from your other work, you'll never get around to it. The burning issues will always have top priority. If you dump the job on a membership committee, you separate it from your other work. The members of the committee will be the only ones in the organization who understand why recruitment is important and believe it is their job to do. Since people are different, relying on only one recruitment strategy (“let's put an ad in the paper”) is bound to disappoint you.

MEMBERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

What happens to members after they join? We want more than their first membership checks. We want them to participate in our group, renew their memberships, and become leaders.

People don't join ready to chair a board meeting or lead a press conference. Citizens groups need to build members into leaders, who learn about our group and organizing for social change. We want to help people move up a series of steps, at a pace that is comfortable for them.

- Joining.
- Finding an initial role in the organization.
- Research, education and training experience
- Issue analysis, strategy, action, and evaluation experience.
- Governing, development, organizational planning, systems management experience.



- Reflection on all activities and connection to values, self-interest of the members of the organization and of broader society.
- Ability to explain all of the functions of the organization, and carry out a variety of them.

THE “RAP”

What kind of things do you say when you ask someone to join, face-to-face? Here is one way you might have a conversation. It doesn't have to go exactly according to your plan, but it is important to have a plan.

Remember your purpose: to ask someone to join.

- Introduce yourself. Mention your connection with that person: “I'm a friend of your neighbor, Mr. Jones.”
- Tell the person you want to talk about your group.
- Make some small talk to make the person comfortable.
- Explain your organization and the issues it works on.
- Ask what his or her concerns are. Listen to the answer.
- Ask what he or she thinks should be done. Listen.
- Explain what your group is doing about those concerns.
- Explain why it's important that people like him or her join.
- Explain the benefits of membership, and how he or she can get involved.
- Ask him or her to join. Then wait and listen.
- Get a commitment (to join, come to a meeting, pay dues).
- Refer to your next contact (“I'll come by Tuesday to pick you up for the meeting.”)
- Thank him or her for talking to you, and say good-bye.

How you say something is as important as what you say. Be friendly, polite, and have a sense of humor. Listen as much as you can. When you talk, get to the point.

YOUR RECRUITMENT PLAN

GOALS

Your membership recruitment plan should have specific, realistic **goals**. You can start integrating recruitment into the rest of your work as you set these goals. *How many members do we need to win our fight against the dump? How many members will it take to impress Congressman Snort?* You also want to consider your fundraising needs when setting your goal. *What's our budget and how much of it do we plan to raise through memberships? What's our membership renewal rate? How many new members do we need just to stay even?*

TARGET

Target your efforts. You can't ask everyone at once, but you also can't let that keep you from asking anyone at all. Who, specifically, do you want to recruit? Who lives near that dump site? Who drinks the water downstream? Who signed our petition against the dump? If you have trouble being specific, try defining who you don't want to join your group.

TACTICS

Design membership recruitment **tactics** to help you reach the constituency you identified.

- Dakota Resource Council (DRC) members go out in teams with the staff to talk to lists of North Dakota neighbors and other recruitment prospects about DRC's issue campaigns— and about joining DRC.

- The Idaho Rural Council (IRC) collected the signatures of dairy farmers on a petition to “Dump the Dairy Board,” a great way to identify farmers who agree with IRC's position on factory farms.
- Like most groups, Dakota Rural Action (DRA) recruits South Dakotans who stand to benefit from the policies it works for. But in one case, DRA recruited several farmers **after** winning a campaign that benefited that specific group, by pointing out how much they'd already been helped.

TOOLS

Decide what recruitment **tools** you will need for the recruitment drive (pamphlets, brochures, fact sheets, membership envelopes, posters, petitions). Decide when the drive will begin and end. (You should be recruiting all the time, of course, but a membership drive with no deadline will never begin.) Then list all of the tasks and responsibilities on a chart that shows what will be done for each task, who will do it, and when they will do it. If it's true that 90% of organizing is follow-up, 99% of membership recruitment is follow-up. So follow-up: pull out that plan, find out who did what, evaluate how you're doing—and then go ask somebody to join.



WORC is a network of grassroots organizations from seven states that include 9,700 members and 44 local community groups. WORC helps its members succeed by providing training and by coordinating regional issue campaigns.

WORC Member Groups:

Dakota Resource Council
Dakota Rural Action
Idaho Rural Council
Northern Plains Resource Council
Oregon Rural Action
Powder River Basin Resource Council
Western Colorado Congress

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FOR MORE ON MEMBERSHIP RECRUITMENT:
Principles of Community Organizing training sessions are held twice a year by WORC.
Advanced Leadership and Staff Development training sessions are also held by WORC.

MORE HOW TO GUIDES:

WORC has produced a series of How To's, practical guides to assist members, staff, leaders and citizens to build strong organizations and effective issue campaigns.

Topics are listed on our website – www.worc.org. These publications can be downloaded from the website as PDFs or ordered for \$2 each. Contact WORC regarding bulk orders or about training sessions on topics in this series.

