Membership Recruitment Made Easy

By
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Are you a member of an organization that is made up predominantly of volunteers? If so, it’s probably safe to say that you didn’t join that organization because of some poster you walked past, letter you received, event you attended, or advertisement you saw. The truth is, though, that most organizations believe that these things are the best tools for recruiting new members or volunteers. Think back to why you were convinced to get active with some organization. Here’s the key question: Can you name the person who got you to join?

No matter the organization, 99% of members can point to the one or two people who were responsible for getting them to join. There is a simple reason for this: People don’t join organizations; people join people. Then they work towards a mutual purpose that bonds them with the organization.

Every organization or group has two core needs. It needs a clear purpose to rally around, and it needs people to perpetuate that purpose. The problem is that most members are only focused on their organization’s purpose. One of the biggest reasons most organizations struggle to find members, volunteers, or even employees is that while they are so incredibly passionate and informed about their purpose, they are not as passionate about their other core need: people.

One example of this is a group of community volunteers who help bring meals to homeless people every Thursday night. While they’re incredibly compassionate individuals – and they have an efficient, effective process for managing the resources it takes to help thousands of people in need – they can’t seem to get enough members to make the impact that they know is possible. Or consider another example, a college sorority. This leadership-oriented, values-centered group of collegiate women does thousands of hours of community service and fosters the deepest sense of sisterhood. But the sorority often has a hard time finding and convincing other women to join its efforts.

Why is this? What holds these groups back from being able to share the experiences they value so much with the number of people they deserve?
SPAM™

The answer, believe it or not, can be found in a tin can. Not just any can, though. Go to your local grocer and search the aisles for a distinct rectangular can with a blue background and bright yellow lettering. That’s right – SPAM™.

If we gathered 100 random people off the street and asked them their impression of a can of the meat product known as SPAM, what do you think their responses would be? Many people have a bad taste in their mouth when it comes to this pork product. When shown a can of SPAM, they may well respond with words like yuck, gross, slimy, fake, gooey, cheap, boring or blah. But here’s the funny part. Ask that same group of people how many have actually tried SPAM, and you’ll find out that only about 20% or so have ever cracked open a can.

There are two main lessons we can learn about recruitment just by thinking about this canned meat product. First, it’s important to know that many people are judging your organization before they ever try it. Second, there are four competencies of recruitment that you can learn, practice and master to help grow the quantity of quality members in your organization. These competencies form the acronym S.P.A.M.:

1. **Skill development**
2. **Product knowledge**
3. **Audience understanding**
4. **Motivation**

**Motivation**

While the S.P.A.M. acronym suggests that you first need to develop your recruitment skills (because the “S” comes first), the truth is that an organization looking to improve its recruitment results should start by motivating its members.

Most groups have a strong, dedicated core of leaders that do 80% of the work. Unfortunately, that core group of volunteers only makes up a small percentage of the organization, while the majority of members often remain unmotivated to do things like recruitment. Often, organization leaders will ask, “How do I motivate my members to recruit?” Unfortunately, this is the wrong question with which to start. For the most part, you can’t force people to do what they don’t want to do. However, if you re-frame the question, you’ll discover the answer for yourself. Try asking, “How do I recruit with my motivated members?” That question will get you somewhere.

There are two key aspects to motivating your members to do the hard work to significantly increase your organization’s recruitment results

**Motivation Key 1: Build a Dream**

Have you asked your members lately what their dreams are for the organization? Does your group have a big, wild, detailed dream that it is trying to achieve? Believe it or not, if the answer is “No” (and it usually is), this could dramatically impact your ability to recruit new members. Work with your group to develop a big dream to shoot for. Once you’ve identified your dream, ask yourselves what it will take to achieve that dream. More often than not, it will boil down to one need: a higher quantity of higher quality members. Once your members understand that successful recruitment can lead to achieving a great dream that matters to them, they’ll get motivated to involve others.
Motivation Key 2: Do It Yourself

While your group builds a dream and ties recruitment efforts to that dream, many of your members will be inspired to join in the recruitment fun. But there will still be a group of people who aren’t motivated to do any recruitment work. Here’s an important piece of advice: the more time you spend trying to motivate them, the less time you have to get out and recruit new people into your organization. Let the lazy members be. Your time is better invested if you go out and recruit people who will be as motivated as you are. Set a new example and expectation for recruitment with your newest members.

The greatest gift a member can give an organization is not a financial donation, special favor, or even hosting the annual banquet. The greatest gift is another member who will contribute at your level or above. Good members become great stewards when they consistently duplicate themselves with new motivated members.

Audience Understanding

Now that you’ve got a team of motivated members ready to get to work, take a moment to consider whom you are going to recruit. In order to do this, try to get answers to these three questions:

1. How big is your potential audience?
2. Are there ways to increase your potential audience?
3. What criteria will you use to select new members?

It is very important to understand the size of your potential audience. Most organizations think they understand their market potential, but often they just look at a sliver of their potential membership pool.

Begin this process by looking at the pool of people you usually recruit from. Do they have to find you? If the answer is “Yes” (for most of your members), then you’ve got a much larger audience than you’re currently tapping for membership.

Consider this example: An organization that provides support groups, advocacy opportunities, and educational programs for people living with mental illnesses recently wanted to expand its membership. The organization is open to anyone who has recently been diagnosed with a mental illness and so typically recruits members by putting fliers in doctors’ offices. When questioned about their audience potential, the group recognized that about one in five people in the United States has a diagnosable mental illness, and that all of those people have family and friends who would be interested in the organization’s good cause.

When the organization saw the possibilities of being open to anyone who wanted to help with its good cause, the members suddenly realized that the organization could very quickly triple in size. This new perspective was simply due to an expansion of their “Audience Understanding.” They saw that their potential audience was much bigger than the one from which they normally recruited. And if they re-imagined what kind of member might benefit from the organization and be a benefit to the organization, their potential for growth expanded quickly.

They also realized that if they had more conversations with more people about their organization, their results would be dramatically impacted. The additional benefit of their recruitment efforts would be to educate a wider population about mental illness.
While it is very important to understand your organization’s growth potential, it is just as important to maintain quality standards for your group. Does your group have specific, measurable, observable criteria as the basis for membership selection? If not, is there a specific commitment that each potential member must make before joining? Having some form of measurable selection criteria can make all the difference when it comes to your organization’s quality. After all, the quality of the organization depends on the quality of its members.

**Product Knowledge**

Before you and your motivated recruitment team go out into that newly expanded potential member marketplace, it’s important that you know your product. After all, if you don’t know your product, how are you going to sell it to others? Make sure you’ve prepared the following three things:

1. **Elevator Pitch:** In 30 seconds, can you answer this question with confidence and authority: “So, what’s your organization all about?” It is a simple question, but people often stumble trying to find an answer or drone on about it for hours on end. Have a succinct, accurate, passionate explanation of the organization you’re so proud of.

2. **Benefits, Not Features:** When people talk about their organization, they typically talk about the big events, meeting spot, cool Web site, special awards, history or mission statement. But these are all *features* of the organization. Prospective members care about how the organization will *benefit* them, not what features it has. Be prepared to share how the organization will benefit a potential member or volunteer, to explain how it will make their lives better. Some examples? “Our organization will help you reach your goal of meeting 100 business leaders in the community;” or “Our group provides that family-like connection you’ve been looking for.”

3. **Quality Responses:** Inevitably, potential members for your organization are going to have some concerns about joining. Maybe they’re worried about the cost of membership, the time commitment, or their families’ reaction. You’ve probably already heard any number of reasonable (and sometimes unreasonable) excuses for not becoming a new member or volunteer. Fortunately, however, you have prepared quality responses based on your positive experiences with the organization. One suggestion is to make a list of the “Top 10 Reasons People DON’T Join My Organization.” Then arm your members with the sales technique of Feel*Felt*Found. For each reason on the list, be prepared to say “I know how you feel, I felt the same way, but here’s what I found…” and then provide a quality response.

**Skills**

This is where the rubber meets the road. You are now motivated, you understand your audience, and you know how to talk about your product. Now all you have to do is go meet people and talk with them. Easier said than done?

The truth is that many people lack the basic interpersonal skills it takes to be a great recruiter. Another truth, however, is that these skills are easily learned and aren’t really all that difficult. An article like this is probably the least effective way to actually teach interpersonal recruitment skills, but there are a few tips this article can provide.

First, it’s important to understand that you can’t recruit anyone you haven’t yet met. This simple fact reminds us that the skills discussed here aren’t hard sales tactics. The skills we want to build are those that simply help us turn strangers into people we know. Meeting people, knowing their names and
contact information, and having a friendly discussion with them is 90% of recruiting. The more you do those simple things the more your organization will grow.

“You can’t recruit who you don’t know.”

The goal of developing recruitment skills should be to establish initial contact and collect as many names of potential members as possible. Once you’ve accomplished this, the key is to get to know each other through normal, friendly activities (these activities are not necessarily related to your organization; remember, people join people, not organizations). One idea is to ask prospective members to volunteer with your organization to make a project or event successful. Through this participation, people can learn whether or not they want to join as a full member.

There’s no doubt that getting names is the hardest part of the recruitment process. If you meet a prospective member of your organization for the first time face-to-face, make physical contact (shake hands) and get the most important word in the person’s vocabulary: his or her name. The conversation could go anywhere from there, but here are a few suggestions.

- Ask about them, don’t tell about you. People are interested first and foremost in themselves. If you let them talk about their favorite topic, they’ll like you and you don’t even have to say much (except maybe ask a few good questions).

- Use their name occasionally. Remember this is the most important word in their vocabulary. Plus, using their name gives you a better chance of actually remembering their name.

- If you get to the point in the conversation where an awkward silence takes hold, try talking about these F-words: Family, Friends, From (where are they from?), Future (what do they have planned for this weekend, next week, next year?), Firsts (is this their first time here?), Favorites and Fun.

- If the conversation does drift to your organization as the topic, be prepared with the elevator pitch that you have memorized and practiced.

- Find out about their needs – what do they wish for? Use that information to pair the value and benefits of membership in your organization with their wants and needs.

- Don’t be afraid to ask them to join. Do you know how many people have never joined your organization because you didn’t ask them? A lot.

- If you’d like to make sure they will say yes before you ask them to join, try this question, “If I asked you to join our organization right now, what would you say?”

- If they have concerns about joining, use the quality responses you’ve prepared to acknowledge their concerns but address them effectively.

These are just a few helpful tips, but if you just do these things you will see real results. By having good conversations with more people, the quality and quantity of members in your organization can dramatically increase.
Remember: Remain focused on the basic needs of the organization – People and Purpose. Stop feeding your potential members SPAM and try a more meaty recruitment process. Start taking an active approach to recruitment, and master the Four Competencies. Your organization is worth it.

Phired Up Productions is an education firm providing recruitment services to membership organizations. Our message is for customers that desire a higher quantity of higher quality individuals involved in their organization(s) – and who are interested in long-term, limitless success.

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