

Recruiting & Retaining New Club Members

by Tim Van Milligan of Apogee Components, Inc.

In this article, I'd like to talk about a problem that many rocketry clubs experience; namely attracting and retaining new club members. Without new members, the club goes through a stagnation period where it seems that only the "same-old" people show up at meetings and launches. To break out of this phase, it is important that new members become involved with the club and eventually take over important positions.

There are many good reasons why a club should continue to grow, but the most important is to develop new friendships and share the common passion of rocketry. Isn't that why we all joined a rocket club in the first place?

I guess the first place to start the process of getting new members is to stop; step back; and see where your club is at the moment. Is it the same people at every meeting assuming the responsibility of running the club? Is membership dwindling? Are people getting bored?

I would suggest that at a "membership meeting" all the current club members write down the benefits of having the club. What does being a member mean? Can you get those benefits on your own?

The second phase would be for the group to jot down their goals for the organization. Would these goals mean more benefits for the members? The more benefits you can offer new people, the more inclined they will be to join the organization and take part in it.

Finally, list all the reasons why getting more people involved in the organization would be a good idea.

The purpose of this club evaluation is to get everyone fired up about attracting new members. It also arms them with ammunition to use when approaching other people about becoming a member of the club. For example, when talking to someone about the club, they can tell them many more benefits about being in the club than they might have thought of before.

At this point, I think the club can start to think about new ways of attracting new members. You have to start with attracting a new person to the club before you can get them to join. I would be willing to bet that at a club meeting, at least 20 new ways to get people to come out to a launch or meeting could be put forward for more discussion.

But before your club goes out and implements these new ideas, I would suggest that you also talk about retaining the new members once they come out to a launch or meeting. What steps will be taken to make sure they stay excited about being a member of the club?

In my opinion, those are the basic steps involved in getting new members to join a rocketry club. From that basic discussion, I'm sure that any club could go out and double the size of the club in a matter of months. What I'd like to do now is to give a some specific examples and ideas that could be used in a "new member" program.

As listed before, the first step would be to list the benefits of being a member in a club. Here are some examples. I'm sure there are many more, so write them down as fast as you can think of them.

Benefits of Being A Member In a Rocket Club

- You can launch rockets with others and develop friendships with those people.
- Share the club resources so that the individual doesn't have to buy lots of specialized equipment. For example: launch pads, tower launchers, piston launchers, high current launch control systems.
- The club has established connections in the community, such as getting permission to use certain launch sites.
- The club may have established good relationships with local hobby stores, allowing discounts to club members for

their own rocketry purchases.

- Members may be covered under the club's insurance policy against accidents.

Setting Goals for the Club

The second part of the "new membership" program is to determine what new goals the club should try to consider undertaking. There are many types of goals a club can establish. For example, a club may set a goal of "education," where they try to get school kids interested in rocketry and space exploration. That is a very worthy goal, and I think these types of things should be written down when doing a self-examination. But from the perspective of attracting new members, you should try to think of as many goal for the club that will add to the number of benefits for being a member.

Remember, the more goals you write down that have a new benefit for the individual members, the easier it will be to attract and retain new people.

Why Recruit New Members?

The last step in the "self-evaluation process" was to list all the reasons why getting more people involved in the organization would be a good idea. Here are some that I came up with. You should add your own ideas to this list too.

- More people means more potential friends!
- It takes money to run the club, and if more people are involved, the financial burden for the individual members is decreased. So the individuals get "more bang for the buck" (pun intended).
- It takes people to accept the different leadership positions in the club, so if more people are available, the same people may not have to do all the work. This prevents burnout and keeps things exciting for the "old gang."

Ways of attracting new members.

Here are just a few ways of attracting potential club members.

- Put up posters in all the local hobby stores.
- Have a launch at a popular local park when other activities are going on. You always get people that come over to watch; and they all say they used to launch rockets at one point during their lives.
- Put on a demo at an airshow.

Attracting people interested in rocketry isn't too hard in my opinion. Let's face it; rocketry is very fun and addicting, so we've got a tremendous advantage over other hobbies. Whenever a launch occurs in a populated area, people always come out to watch. So do as many launches as you can in areas where a lot of people can see you. I'm also sure you can think of many more ways to advertise your launches, so I'll leave you to generate those ideas.

Retaining New Members

I believe that turning those new people that come out to one launch into long time club members is much more difficult than getting them to come to that launch to begin with.

The first step in this process is to make a good first impression. When a person comes out to a launch, you must make them feel welcome.

A big part of this is telling the new person the benefits of being part of the club. Your club might print up a simple little promotional flier to hand out to watchers at a launch.

And before they leave, by all means, get their name and address so you can send them a reminder note about the next launch or meeting.

Hopefully by this point you've convinced them to join the club. With all those great benefits, who wouldn't join?
Getting Long Term Commitment

Now, what do you do to make sure they come to the meetings, launches and sign up again when their membership expires?

First, I think some type of membership packet should be given to every newbie as soon as they fork over their dues. Most clubs fall down on this step. If you compare rocketry to other organizations, the good ones all give the new person something "tangible" to show that they are a member of the group. This would be the "membership packet."

Someone must take the time to put it together. So the first step would be to elect a "membership chairman" whose job it is to put together this packet.

A club could probably get a local hobby store to give a special deal for clubs, and I (at Apogee) would also give a special promo to a newbie joining up. It might be as simple as a free data sheet.

Use Club Meetings as a Tool to Retain Members

The final part in retaining members (old and new) is by keeping them interested in rocketry. This is where the club meetings and launches come in. They need to be kept interesting and fun where a new person could gain new friends and have a good time. The meeting is particularly important in northern climates where long winters and cold weather can prohibit launches, making it easier for members to forget about rocketry.

The way to keep the general membership excited about the meetings is to take all the boring "business stuff" out of them. You might consider having two separate meetings, one where only business stuff is discussed, and the "general" meeting where only fun stuff takes place. If it is too much of a problem to have the meetings on separate days, then maybe consider having the business meeting just prior to or just after the general membership meeting, where new people don't feel obligated to attend.

The general membership meetings should have only one purpose: to be fun. Start them by welcoming new members and visitors. Then give them a very brief and quick synopsis of what will be discussed in that particular meeting. You want to get to the fun stuff as quickly as possible. You must remember that you are competing for their spare time, and they could easily stay home and watch TV.

After welcoming newbies and doing the emergency business stuff, it is time to start making the people that came glad to be there. One good way to do this is to hand out as many rewards and recognition as possible. The more people you can recognize, the better. Every individual on the planet likes attention, and if your club can satisfy their ego; odds are that they will enjoy the meeting and continue to support the club with their membership.

But the general club meeting should be more than just handing out recognition. It also needs to be entertaining.

The first way to make them more entertaining that comes to mind is to have a rocket building session. It isn't always necessary to build an entire kit in a session; maybe just demonstrate a single technique that modelers haven't grasped yet.

Something similar to a building session is a competition strategy session. In this meeting, you can review the rules of a competition event (how not to be disqualified) and some hints and tips of how to win. Those clubs that have tried this type of meeting have found that participation in contests increases dramatically.

The Club Newsletter

The newsletter is an important tool to use to maintain excitement about being a member of the club. I don't think that any club should be without one. Besides passing on important club business information like meeting dates, launch schedules, treasury and committee reports, the other stuff you can put into the newsletter is what the members joined the club to get. Modelers want plans, kit reviews and scale data! So give it to them, and they'll stick around a long time.

And by putting out a newsletter, you are sending out a message to the members that your club cares about them enough to invest a lot of time and resources to produce one on a regular schedule. It is also a tangible item that they can put their hands on to show that they belong to the group.

The content of the newsletter should also reflect your club's commitment to keeping members interested in renewing their membership again next year. Put in stuff that they want, and they'll stay involved in the club for a long time.

A note about rocketry competitions

One of the unique features about being a member of a club is that you can test your skills against others in friendly rocketry competitions. For a certain type of individual, this is very appealing. And if you look at clubs that have been around long periods of time, they have been active in holding competitions, and those individuals holding the leadership positions have been active in past competitions. Therefore, holding competition events may give a long range stability to the club that other types of activities don't.

If your club decides to hold competitions, you should do it in a way to stress the positive benefits and minimize those things that turn people off. You should also try to hold competition seminars to try to refute the negative stereotypes that people may have about contests.

Here are some other suggestions:

- Select a large portion of the events so that they can be flown by newer modelers using readily available kits. Established competitors won't be turned off, as this means they don't have to build a new set of models.
- You are under no pressure to hold only NAR recognized events; so for variety, make up your own simple events. How about things like upright lander-spot landing, or ping pong ball duration?

Conclusion

In this article, I've tried to show you the procedures that your club can use to attract new members and retain those that you already have. If you remember, the steps were: perform a self examination of the club - the members should get together and write down on paper the benefits of belonging to the group, and what the goals are for the club. Finally, your club should really decide whether or not they want new members, and why - so again, write down on paper the reasons that having new members of the club would be a good thing.

But the one key item of attracting and maintaining members is to show them the great benefits that are possible by belonging to a club. In this publication I've listed many possible benefits. You may not have available all of them from my list, but you can probably think of many more. But make that list known to your club's members, and do this as often as possible. They need to be reminded that they can't access those benefits if they aren't a member of your group.

We as rocketeers are always envious of the AMA and their 100,000 plus membership. They grew that large because they built strong local clubs first. As rocketeers, we have a much greater advantage to get new members; rocketry is challenging and very exciting. Every year, over a million people try rocketry; which is much greater than those who fly RC airplanes. But we should follow their lead, and build strong local clubs first. Then we'll have them envious of us. Good luck, and keep in touch.

Author's Note: This article is an abbreviated version of a much larger publication. If you are interested in the long version, please contact the author at the address listed at the end of this article.

The longer version has these features:

- 21 different benefits of being in a club.
- Five goals for a club with direct member benefit.
- Nine reasons to recruit new members.
- 22 ways to advertise your club.
- How to make a good first impression in the eyes of a potentially new member.
- 14 items to put in your membership packet.
- 29 different awards and special recognition certificates you can give to your club members to make them feel important.
- Eight topics for general meetings that make them fun for new members.
- Nine types of special meetings to break up the routine of general meetings.

- 30 types of articles you can put in your newsletter to make them exciting.
- The specific duties of the membership committee.
- 15 sample questions you can put into a new member questionnaire.
- 12 ways to raise money for the club besides the regular "dues."
- 12 reasons why competition attracts new members.
- Eight excuses people give for avoiding competitions.

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