

MEMBERSHIP: Retaining Members

Congratulations to each of you who has extended the gift of Soroptimist membership to someone this year! Your recruiting success is evident by the more than 3,000 new members already recorded for this membership year. This is a testament to interest in the Soroptimist mission to make a difference for women and to the power of your efforts and the recruitment resources available from headquarters (see page 28 for order recruitment materials). Keep up the good work! More members means greater outreach and an expanded ability to improve the lives of women and girls around the world.

While the need to help women remains great, retaining today's busy working professional in the club can be more difficult than it was years ago. Once you have attracted new members to your club, how do you keep them beyond the initial year or two?

Most clubs serious about membership will do some homework. Take stock of your membership strengths and weaknesses using the membership rolls for the past two years. Make a list of all the new members that joined, and next to each name list how they initially learned about Soroptimist. Did they find out about the club from another member, and if so, from whom? It's important to recognize club members who take seriously their responsibility to invite others into the club. Perhaps the new member found out about the club from the SIA website or from one of your local projects. Find out what's working and capitalize on those successes.

Now, looking at the same list and taking into account how long each person has been a member, assess attendance and participation. If new members aren't involved or their interest retained in the first few months, they usually drift away and won't renew.

Go beyond extending a welcome. Involve new members in projects right away. Some clubs assign mentors or "big sisters" to new members for a year to help orient them to what the club is all about. Be careful not to overburden new members during this learning time. Remember that they probably didn't join to become an officer right away or to do what they do in their own jobs all day. Balance that with learning about and using each others' special talents, expertise and interests.

Do you track attendance? You should do so—not to admonish members (most clubs have dropped attendance requirements), but to show that club members care about each other. Follow-up if someone misses a meeting. Maybe something is wrong. Let her know that she was missed.

Now make a second list of all the members who terminated their membership in the past two years. If you have even one person whose name appears on both lists, you need to take a hard look at your prospective member

orientation. What expectations did this member have that the club wasn't able to meet? Did you realistically explain the club's expectations about project participation, support of fund-raising efforts and the financial obligations of membership? Did you expect the member to devote more of her time than she was willing or able to give? Talk honestly and sensitively with prospective members about the club's tolerance for work and family pressures that may pre-empt commitments made by members. Is it acceptable in your club for someone to call ahead of time and say, "I just can't do that this week" rather than to find out at the last minute that an important task remains undone? Guilt at not being able to meet a club's expectations often means that someone will quit the club rather than face disappointed new friends.

One club tries to make membership as guilt free as possible by issuing every member one card at the beginning of the year that says, "free pass." Free pass cards can be redeemed, no questions asked, once per year. When being asked to chair a project, work a shift at a club function or some other event, a member may use her free pass without having to make any excuses about being too busy and feeling guilty about letting her club members down. Knowing that they have

The key to retaining members is to involve them in meaningful projects. SI/Pasco-Kennewick, Washington, engaged club members with its "Breast Friends" breast cancer awareness event.



SIA Conducts Membership/Marketing Survey

Recently, SIA awarded a contract to Kerr & Downs Research of Tallahassee, Florida, to conduct a comprehensive membership/marketing research project to help shape the future of SIA. Thirty firms received requests for proposals; 13 submitted bids.

The project, which will be conducted in three phases, seeks to:

- Identify best target markets for recruiting members.
- Identify products and services that should be developed to enhance leadership development and the Soroptimist leadership experience.
- Recommend branding strategies.
- Recommend positioning strategies to enhance recruitment and retention.
- Identify SIA's competitive advantages.

This will be accomplished through the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data from surveys and interviews and focus groups of members, club presidents, prospective members, donors and sponsors. The project will gauge attitudes in a number of critical categories such as member satisfaction with products and services, member commitment to SIA's mission and internationalism, and perceptions of prospective members and younger women.

Kerr & Downs has been serving the association industry since 1981. The firm has conducted more than 600 custom designed market research studies for international, national, state and local associations. Their clients include the American Society of Association Executives and the Public Relations Society of America. Kerr & Downs was chosen because their proposal was judged superior based on price, their experience with other international associations, their sample reports, and their grasp of the project's objectives. Phillip Downs, who also teaches marketing at Florida State University, is overseeing the project for SIA.

this option, fewer than half the members use the cards each year but they have a fun time discussing the free pass option when assignments are being made.

Let's return to the list of members who resigned. Next to the name of each person, list the reason for leaving. Moving out of the community is one reason beyond club control. In this case, the club can facilitate the member's transfer into another Soroptimist club or notify headquarters that she may be interested in being a Soroptimist Associate member.

The most common reasons for resigning are a change in health status of the member or someone in her family, a job change or increased work responsibilities, the demands of motherhood, or change in marital status. All of these reasons may actually be a polite excuse for "I'm just not getting out of the club what I once did and it doesn't have the same priority in my life." Many members report that they couldn't have gotten through tough times without the support of their club friends. If the club is conducting worthwhile projects in a supportive and healthy environment that utilizes members' contributions of time, talent and treasure wisely, members will want to hang on to that network in times of stress.

One reason rarely given for resigning, except in confidence, is conflict within the club. Personality conflicts and cliques can utterly destroy the harmony in a club. And what busy working woman

wants to deal with politics, discord and petty disagreements in her service club?

The last membership/marketing survey that SIA conducted in 1995 revealed that while service was the main reason that women joined and stayed in Soroptimist, fellowship was the second motive and ranked almost as high. While the club can't be all things to all women, and circumstances do change, look honestly at the reasons given for termination and try to "read between the lines" to make sure members feel connected to the purpose and the larger network. Being a Soroptimist should be an enjoyable experience.

SIA is conducting a new membership/marketing survey to ensure that we provide clubs with the best program, marketing and membership tools possible (see sidebar). Please be sure to complete surveys or participate in focus groups related to this project. Your answers, in conjunction with the data from terminated members and prospective members, will help shape the future of our great organization. ☺

**By Leigh Wintz, CAE
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*During tough times,
members receive much-
needed support from
their club friends.*