

“They are all a bunch of D***heads”

and other membership success strategies

A friend of mine recently joined a local history group. I was a bit surprised. Not about her volunteering - she's a bit compulsive like that - but about the group.

Finally, I had to ask, “Penny, I know that group. Their president has a vice-like grip on the association. She's a control freak who has managed to alienate just about everyone who's ever tried to get involved. She's been running the group for over 40 years. You are young, enthusiastic, and full of ideas I can't ever see her endorsing. How does that work?”

Penny's answer really didn't help.

“I know. She's awful. She's so bad that I almost walked out of the first meeting. And it's not just her. Half the committee are just the same. They've all been there since the 80s and are determined to keep the group as it is,” she said.

Now I truly was perplexed. I had to know. Why on earth did she continue to engage?

“Well, that's a bit of a funny story,” Penny explained. “Just as I was about to leave, one of the committee members, an old bloke called Keith, leaned across to me and said ‘Don't worry about them. They are all a bunch of d***heads and the rest of us hate them too. Stick around and I'll introduce you to some really great people.’ And he did. Plus he got me signed up to volunteer at an event which was awesome.”

Turns out that the rest of the group were truly lovely and very embracing of a new member who was less than half their average age. Through leveraging Penny's passion, the group not only generated a highly engaged new volunteer but also, thanks to her input and ideas, held their most successful annual open day ever.

This story perfectly illustrates some of the fundamental principles that underpin successful membership programs.

It's about connecting emotionally

Emotion drives passion and commitment. It doesn't matter whether you are connecting with people online or offline, you need to engage them emotionally. In this case it was a cause Penny loved and she made some great friends.

Your brand has its own personality, for better or worse

Every time someone interacts with your organisation, they are forming an opinion about it. You can't stop this process, but you can influence what that opinion is. Your brand is how you do this.

You need to make sure that EVERY element of your organisation reflects your chosen branding. If you want to be regarded as approachable, you need to ditch the messy automated phone answering service that makes it difficult for a member to speak to a real person.

First impressions are critical

How you appear to prospective and new members will dictate their future with your organisation. Whether meeting people in person, talking over the phone, sending an email, or engaging through your website ... being welcoming and relatable is fundamental. The process and tone you use when engaging prospective and new members should be carefully considered with impeccable attention to detail. For example every event needs at least one person responsible for ensuring that prospective and new members have such a great time they want to return.

People Need Clear Pathways

Most people join associations on a “suck it and see” basis. A great first impression is a good start but to keep them involved, you need to provide clear pathways to move forward. This includes providing clear instructions on how to take up member offers, providing lots of ad-hoc volunteering opportunities to enable new members to engage without a long-term commitment, and giving them reasons to engage quickly (such as a new member voucher for an event with a time limit). Very much like a gym membership, people can have great intentions when joining but life can get in the way. Provide compelling reasons for people to continue to engage.

No situation is beyond repair

If a small, volunteer run, local history association with a membership made up entirely of retirees and pensioners can generate new, young members ...so can you! You just need to figure out how.

Learn more

Belinda Moore, SMS* is author of *The Membership Machine* and *The Membership Managers Handbook*. For a free pdf copy of *The Membership Managers Handbook* or to learn how she can assist you to set up and run a successful membership program email belinda@smsonline.net.au.

Belinda will be presenting workshops on membership in April and September. Book now at www.answers.net.au/events/

