

Creating a More Welcoming League

Leagues should examine how they welcome potential members and new members. This sounds very simple, but it is a critical piece to recruitment and retention. Think back to when you first joined the League – Were you familiar with League lingo? Did you know everyone at the meeting? We all know that first impressions mean a lot, so make the initial experiences of new and potential members great ones. Make individuals feel welcome and eager to join.

Recruitment and Retention

Many League members think of membership recruitment and retention as two separate practices. However,

Good retention practices begin as soon as a new member is recruited and never stop.

Retention Best Practices

Retention is a continuous activity to which League time and resources should be devoted - just like membership recruitment! Below is a list of suggested best practices that Leagues can use to welcome new members, keep members engaged, and reach out to members considering leaving LWV.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Welcome Packet

Every new member of your League should receive a Welcome Packet. Ideally, this would be a kit that is full of information about your League, including a welcome letter from the president, a calendar of activities planned, a member contact list, and a small League item (such as a pin, lanyard, button, or bumper sticker). Some Leagues' resources might not permit creating something as elaborate as this, but new members need to know the basics of how the League works and how they can get involved. This is the first official communication from the League so make a good impression and think about what goes into the packet. Include the most critical pieces of information that they will need to get started, not everything. Overwhelming a new member is not a good strategy.

Be sure to send a Welcome Packet as soon as possible once a member's form and check have arrived. Your League will not make a good first impression if a new member's check isn't cashed for weeks or if they don't hear from you soon after deciding to join.

Survey Interests

You can check with new members about topics or issues that interest them as well as how busy or engaged they hope to be – ongoing, one-time task, one task/month, etc. Also, ask some courtesy questions: What's the best way to contact you? When are you available for meetings?

Ask some questions that might help League: What other groups are you active in? What are your skills – or what skills might you be interested in developing? How did you learn about the League?

Surveys can take different forms: an actual form sent via email or created using a survey tool, a hard copy survey, or a quick phone call. Sample survey forms are available on the CD.

Orientation

Many Leagues have had success hosting new member orientations at the beginning of a new League year or twice a year (in the fall and spring). These orientations should be a fun way to familiarize new members with League process, programs, lingo, and activities. Make it a casual experience by having a lunch or reception orientation. Don't be afraid to try new things and make sure there is time for them to ask their questions about the League. Provide concrete examples of the League's work/successes, and share individual, personal stories about the League.

Mentoring Program

Start a mentoring program by pairing new members with seasoned members of the League. Mentors can give new members first-hand insight and advice about League practices and actions and provide them with valuable history. Consider pairing people together based on similar backgrounds or interests. The bond between new members and their mentors is irreplaceable, and many stay close throughout their years in League together.

Introduction

It is always intimidating to be the new person in the group. New members should be introduced at their first meetings to the whole membership and recognized at annual meetings. Having the League president say, "Please welcome, our new members Jane Smith and John Doe," is simple and an easy way to open the door for other members to welcome them to the League and makes the new members feel welcomed. Leagues might also consider asking those gathered at an event to wear nametags. This will help the new member get to know the names of League members, too.

President Outreach

The local League president (or his/her designee) should make a point to reach out to new members by calling them when they join and thanking them for becoming a member. This is a good time to ask new members what their interests are and to inform them about upcoming events. The personal welcome, interest, and invitation will mean a lot.

New Member Ambassador/Committee

Leagues are encouraged to have a specially trained group to effectively and consistently communicate the value of membership. They can serve as “membership ambassadors” in communicating the value of League membership to non-members. The ambassadors can be trained to use the membership messages and to share the stories of specific League members (such as the reasons they’ve joined, the value of membership and the personal and League successes that they have enjoyed). The main job of the ambassador is to communicate these messages clearly and consistently, and most importantly, to ASK others to join the League!

Designate one member as the new member ambassador or create an entire committee of new member ambassadors. The ambassador(s) should be responsible for welcoming new members, sending them their packet of information, setting them up with their mentor, answering any questions they have, and keeping track of their interests.

KEEP MEMBERS ENGAGED

The best way to retain members is to never have them consider leaving the League in the first place.

League members who are engaged, having fun, and feel fulfilled will stick with the League for the long haul.

Have an Agenda

Nothing frustrates people more than not knowing what is going on. People don't want to waste their time. Try to have an agenda for every League meeting. It doesn't have to be fancy. Simply list the items of business and an estimated timeframe in which things will be addressed. Members, new and old, will appreciate the organization and consideration for their time. Less time will be wasted, leaving more to connect with fellow League members.

Create a Calendar

Just like an agenda, people want to know what is going on in the upcoming year. At the beginning of the year send all members a tentative calendar. Nothing is set in stone, but giving members an idea of what will be happening in the coming year will allow them to plan accordingly and set aside dates when appropriate. It will also help your Board and committees organizing your League events maximize the media, community visibility, and recruitment opportunities in advance. LWVUS/EF has a national calendar that lists many important dates that your League may want to consider placing on its calendar. The LWVUS/EF calendar is located in the “For Members” area of www.lwv.org.

Continuously Promote Member Benefits

Why are you a member of the League? Mentioning the benefits of membership, both tangible and intangible, in member communications like your League’s monthly newsletter will remind people what they are getting out of all the hands-on work they do. Members join for a variety of reasons - from shaping the important issues in their community to getting the online communications from LWVUS. Remind people of the benefits of being a League member wherever possible.

Remind Members

Send out e-mail reminders the week of an event (in addition to listing events in your newsletter). Very simply, people are busy and may forget about events that were announced weeks or months before. Reminders can be quick and easy. Assign a person working on the event to e-mail the entire membership when the event approaches. A quick reminder will get more people at events and will remedy any "I meant to go to that!" laments.

Create Small Opportunities

Not everyone has a lot of time to contribute to the League. Many people want to help but are afraid that they will get assigned to be a chair of a committee if they speak up. In all League undertakings, make sure that there are small opportunities for members to help out with and be sure to announce that these small opportunities exist. Whether it is sending out the reminders or delivering voters' guides to the library, small tasks make people feel like they are contributing without being overwhelmed.

Make Members Feel Special

Always, always, always make members aware that they are special and appreciated. Send thank you e-mails or notes to the committee or members that helped put together an event. Recognize League members who have give 15, 25, 35 or even 50 years of service to the organization. Recognizing birthdays with a cake at one meeting a month is a nice addition to the business at hand. Whatever way your League chooses to express appreciation, just be sure that members know that they are extraordinary for all that they do in the service of the League.

Member Interests

Try surveying member interests at the beginning of the year after you create your calendar. This will give event leaders a better feel for who may want to assist with their event. Interest surveys also provide you with an opportunity to ask what sort of tasks members would be willing to undertake throughout the year. You can plan events accordingly when you know who is going to be available to help. You will also see if there are any topics of interest to your members that may not be being covered during the year. This can be remedied early in the year, before their interest in the League drops. Sample surveys are available on the CD.

*Knowing what people like to do and discuss
is very important in keeping interest in the League high.*

Satisfaction Survey

A survey will examine ways in which your League can better meet your needs. The information members provide is vital to the betterment of your League. This is a time for them to voice any comments, concerns and criticisms. Let them know that if they don't feel like answering a specific question, they shouldn't. Assure them that their personal information will not be shared and responses will be kept anonymous.

Have Fun!

Above all else, make sure your members enjoy the League and are having fun. Just because we take on the important issues facing our communities does not mean we have to be serious all the time. Bring a bottle of wine or have a potluck at your next meeting. Have educational reception events - combining the League with some hors d'oeuvres or finger foods. Strictly social events can lift the spirits of League members and are just as important in creating change in the community. The League is a social network by nature and League friendships often last a life time. Why not make the time we spend together as enjoyable as possible!

DON'T GIVE UP ON MEMBERS

It's always discouraging when members drop from League rosters. However, your League doesn't have to be passive when members decide not to renew. Reach out with the tactics below to ensure you have done everything possible to keep that person a member of the League.

Ask

When a member doesn't renew their membership, make sure that someone is assigned to reach out to them. First, send out an e-mail reminding them that they have not renewed (some people just need a reminder). If they don't renew, call the member and ask why they are not renewing. Listen to their concerns and make note of them to take to the Board, but also be sure to ask them to reconsider. Have your local League president send a note or call the lapsed member and ask them to reconsider again and address their concerns. Be sure to let them know that the League values their membership and wants them to continue to grow with the League. Make sure you exhaust all three of these methods before giving up. The personal ask always has tremendous power in recruitment and retention.

Follow Up

Whether a member does or does not rejoin after asking, make sure someone is responsible for following up with either a "Thank you" or a "We'll miss you" note or e-mail. Again, making the member feel wanted and valued (whether they renew or not) is crucial to future interactions. Sincere follow-up leaves the member with a good impression of the League, and the former member will be more likely to reconnect with the League at a later date or perhaps support the organization in some other way.

Reconnect

Revisit your old member lists and reconnect with members who have dropped in the past five years. Send them "We miss you" post cards or e-mails, an invitation to an event, or a discounted membership rate if they reestablish their membership. Former members know the importance of the League and are more likely to rejoin the League than those not familiar with the organization.

SUCCESS STORY:

The LWV of New Castle County (DE) Voter often contains an entire section welcoming new members. When space in the Voter isn't limited, they include a picture, contact information, and a brief biography of the new member! Personal contact and making people feel welcome is one of the most important aspects of membership recruitment. Identifying new faces, bringing them "into the fold" at meetings, and extending positive messages is the best way to make new and prospective members feel welcome. The Leagues in Delaware are also working to do away with some of the "League lingo" that is used at their meetings to help make them more inclusive experiences.