

From Paltry to Plenty



How One Club Grew to President's

Distinguished Status

By Roxanne Ruzic, ACS/ALB

A couple of years ago, our Toastmasters club was in trouble. The Vapor Trails Toastmasters in San Diego, California, was a friendly group, with enjoyable meetings and a handful of active, long-standing members. But we attracted few guests and fewer new members. During summer vacations and flu season, we might have had four people at a meeting.

We weren't sure we were going to survive.

But then, in the 2007-2008 Toastmasters year, we became a President's Distinguished Club for the first time in anyone's memory. We had guests at every meeting and new members joining on a regular basis. This past year, we were a President's Distinguished Club once again. It seems the club has created true, lasting change.

How did we do it? How did we – after years of trying – finally make the transition from *wanting* new members to attracting and retaining them?

Ironically, we stumbled onto success largely as a side effect of beginning to work the Toastmasters education and leadership programs more actively. Here is the story of our progress, and the six steps we discovered along the way that have helped us grow.

Step 1: Get the Entire Club to Work Together

Our club members were eager for new faces, but they were also a little cynical. After all, we'd tried a number of membership-building activities over the years to no avail. Then in July 2007, I began working from the newly revised advanced manual *Facilitating Discussion*, thinking the projects would help me in my business. As our new club Vice President Public Relations, I decided to make those presentations – where I was to guide a club discussion – more relevant to our group by focusing on something this audience cared about: how to attract new members. For Project One, we brainstormed ideas. For Project Two, we focused on three of our suggestions in depth.

Through these discussions, we formed a novel idea: We would contact the human resources departments of local businesses and let them know that we were nearby so that they could inform their employees about Toastmasters and encourage attendance at our club.

Suddenly, the whole club was involved and excited, because this was *our* plan. We decided to form a public relations committee to put our idea into action.

Step 2: Give Visitors a Reason to Come Today

For the last project in the *Facilitating Discussion* manual, we decided to host an "All About Toastmasters" Open House. It would look like a regular Toastmasters meeting and would include a speech on techniques for public speaking as well as a speech on a non-Toastmasters-related topic. We would monitor time limits vigilantly, choose

the Toastmaster and General Evaluator carefully, and do a practice run two weeks in advance so we'd look competent on the big day.

Step 3: Be Wise About How You Publicize

Club members started volunteering ideas about ways to publicize the Open House. Drawing on everyone's suggestions, we advertised in numerous ways: We contacted the HR departments at local businesses, posted fliers around town, told our friends and colleagues, and listed the information on our club website. We were also able to get an article published in the local community newspaper about our club and the upcoming event.

The day of the Open House arrived. The meeting began on time, all the extra chairs were filled and the event was an unmitigated success.

As it turned out, every single visitor said they came because they saw the article in the local newspaper. Not one was in attendance as a result of our outreach efforts to area businesses. Surprised by this, we polled our existing members on how they originally discovered the club: Every member except one said it was because of a very small ad we had run in the back of the community paper.

We realized that newspaper exposure was critical. And that an article about the club was even bigger and better than a tiny ad. In addition, we needed to host a simple event, like an Open House, on a regular basis to give visitors a reason to check us out.

We had found our club's keys to attracting guests. But could we get any of them to join?

Step 4: Challenge Yourself

Our club has always had positive members and fun meetings, but in general we didn't push ourselves. Because we were a smaller group, we typically aimed for one speech a meeting. But to make sure guests got a good sense of Toastmasters, we presented two speeches for our Open House. Afterward, we asked ourselves, Why didn't we do this all the time?

We began scheduling two speeches each meeting. This led members to participate more – even the shyer ones -- and to make quicker progress toward their educational goals. Now guests who visited were able to see beginning and advanced speakers at the same meeting and realize ours was a club for them, whatever their current level. We were making progress.

Step 5: Have the Forms Ready

In the past when guests had visited our meetings, we subsequently sent them a one-page letter explaining the benefits of the club and inviting them to join. But after the Open House, we decided to also include a membership application already filled out with our club's information and fees. This way, the potential member knew exactly what he or she needed to do and exactly how much it would cost to get started.

Suddenly, we had guests returning for a second or third visit with completed application forms—and checkbooks. First-time guests began to perceive our club as somewhere where you visited once or twice, understood the benefits, and became a member. At long last, we were steadily increasing our roster. Still, we wondered, would the new members stay?

Step 6: Make Sure You Mentor

When I mentored a new club member as part of my work in the new *Competent Leadership* manual, I realized just how important it is for new Toastmasters to have mentors. In preparation for the Open House, our club president established a formal mentoring program, and it has stuck. Every new member picks a mentor immediately upon joining the club, and all veteran members are called upon to serve as mentors at one point or another.

We are now attracting new members and keeping them. They are active and thriving.

“Yes,” you might say, “I see how experimenting with these steps can help my club too. But haven't leaders at the district level and at Toastmasters International headquarters been recommending these same guidelines for years?”

In hindsight, you're absolutely right. I guess sometimes you just have to figure things out for yourself.

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