

# STEP RIGHT UP!

In Rotary's  
membership game,  
everyone's a winner







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hen it comes to finding new members for his Minnesota Rotary club, Tom Gump doesn't just walk the walk, he trots the trot: the turkey trot.

Gump is a former president of the Rotary Club of Edina/Morningside, which makes boosting membership a priority. In fact, that's the fourth item on a list of 10 tips to attract and retain members which has been prepared – and practiced – by the club. It's tip No. 10 that finds Gump clad in a turkey suit. More on that shortly.

The tips work: During Gump's 2016-17 stint as club president, Edina/Morningside added 31 members. Eleven of them were women; 10 were under 40 years old. With 94 members, the club "went from being classified as a medium-size club to being one of District 5950's large clubs," says Gump, who will be the 2020-21 district governor. "There were 13 clubs larger than our club in our district, and now there are only four."

The tips have proven so effective that Gump has taken the Edina/Morningside show on the road, using a PowerPoint presentation to coach other clubs on specific ways they can expand their membership. "I have been called a good salesman," says Gump (who, for the record, is a real estate lawyer and a developer). "But to me, recruiting new Rotary members is not really selling. It's matching up potential members with what he or she wants in a club."

So if you're looking to add members to your club, consider taking a page from the Edina/Morningside playbook. Read on for the club's 10 tips, as well as five suggestions for increasing membership from other Rotarians and Rotary clubs.

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## Create a list of all the great things about your club.

List your star members, the advantages of your meeting location, how many members you have, the kinds of projects and events you host, and so on. The list can serve as a template when sending an email or letter to a potential member. Make sure to tailor any correspondence so it addresses the specific interests and wants of any potential member. For instance, if someone is interested in international work, your email or letter should focus on that.

## Keep a list of potential members.

It doesn't matter if it's a paper list or if it's kept on the desktop of your computer. Either way, it makes you think about those people who might be a fit for your club. Discuss the list at board meetings – not just the concept of bringing in new members, but the specific names and who's going to contact them and when. And don't overlook some obvious suspects, such as members' spouses, Youth Exchange host parents – “they already have a taste of what Rotary is about” – and even former members. “We had two founding members re-join recently,” Gump says. “Sometimes people need to leave for a reason and then later they have more time and just have to be asked to come back.”

# THE POINT IS NOT JUST GROWING YOUR CLUB, BUT BOOSTING ROTARY'S CAPACITY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE AROUND THE WORLD.

## Know your club's strengths.

Most things are strengths if you target the right audience. If you meet in the morning, you're probably a good fit for someone working 9 to 5. Meet at noon and you're more likely to appeal to retirees or parents of schoolchildren. "Not every club is right for every potential member," Gump says. "If someone doesn't fit your format, recommend them to another club." Keep in mind that the point is not just growing your club, but boosting Rotary's capacity to make a difference in communities around the world. And with any luck, that other club will send you a potential member one day. Gump points to one member who joined his club last year after a recommendation from the Rotary Club of Edina, which typically meets middays. "Morning meetings worked better for him than noon meetings," Gump says. "He has already become a Paul Harris Society member, leads our beer tasting committee, and led our 100th anniversary celebration for The Rotary Foundation."

## Make membership growth your club's top priority –

and make sure every member understands that. "I always tell presidents and presidents-elect that the best way to make their year as president easier is to bring in more members," says Gump. New members bring new energy to a club, he explains, and mean more people to serve on committees, work on projects and events, and raise money for the Foundation.

## Look to young Rotarians for fresh perspectives

Want some suggestions about attracting younger members? Look at what's going on at the Roc City Rotary Club in Rochester, New York. "We are the next generation of Rotary," proclaims its website. "The baton has been passed. It's now our turn."

Chartered in February (and a provisional club since June 2016), Roc City targets recent college graduates and young professionals by keeping dues low (\$120 annually) and meetings infrequent. "We meet once a month and have a solid turnout at every meeting," says Kristina Chartrand, who co-founded the club with her longtime friend Kelsey Christiansen (they met in 2005 as Interactors while in high school). "We want the game changers and move makers, people who are busy and thriving in their everyday lives. We attract young people who want to get involved but crave flexibility."

At press time, the club had 24 members, aged 21 to 33, as well as 20-plus "Friends of Roc City." Members are recruited through word of mouth and social media; it helps that Roc City convenes during happy hour at a local pub. "So many people see us and what we're doing and just stop by," Chartrand says. The club plans service projects three months in advance so members can plan ahead, and it regularly schedules speakers for its Adulting 101 series (topics have included "Paying Off Debt" and "How to Buy a House"). "We want this to be something club members look forward to every month" – for years to come.





# Appeal to local volunteers

In fall 2014, the Rotary Club of Evanston, Illinois, held its inaugural “Heads Up, Evanston!” an event that’s equal parts community outreach, game show, and, as one member puts it, “organizational speed dating.”

“We encourage participants to connect with each other during and after the meeting and find new ways to collaborate and partner based on what they have heard each other say,” explains Past Club President Paul Larson. “We follow up by sending all participants a PDF with everyone’s contact information as an added convenience.”

The participants in this service-oriented dating game are local not-for-profit organizations, about 25 per annual session. Representatives from each organization get exactly two minutes to, as Larson puts it, “give a commercial or news item about themselves.” The time limit is rigidly enforced, albeit in a lighthearted manner. Talk too long and speakers are cut off by a “cheesy disco song from the ‘70s,” Larson says. “This makes it fun since people do their best to finish before the dreaded sounds of an old Bee Gees tune or the theme from *Rocky* tells them time is up.” Finish your “commercial” in 90 seconds or less and the Rotary bell rings, meaning the speaker gets invited back for a free lunch with the club and another opportunity to speak. The “Heads Up” gathering includes a modestly priced lunch – which “organizations are happy to pay,” says Larson – and post-gathering mingling around tables laden with promotional materials.

“While the event definitely has the potential to build membership in the long term, we use it strategically as a supplement to more direct recruiting efforts,” Larson says. But, he adds, it’s also a way for the club to provide “a service to the community – a way for us to offer unique value as a forum for leaders.” And because the club also presents its own “commercial,” he notes, it’s also an opportunity for “awareness building about what Rotary is and what we do.” Sounds like a love connection.



**“IF YOU WANT YOUNGER MEMBERS,  
HANG OUT WHERE THEY HANG OUT.”**

## **Talk about Rotary wherever you go –**

at work, family gatherings, neighborhood get-togethers, parties. You will be amazed how easy it is after you practice awhile. “Getting a lot of ‘nos’ helped build my confidence, because it didn’t hurt as bad as I thought it would,” Gump says. “And most people were happy I asked, even if they did have to decline.” And remember: It’s never not a good time to invite a potential member to a meeting. “People say it’s a bad time, for example, because it’s the holiday season,” says Gump. “Our club recruited and inducted three new members during the holiday season.” Nor is there a bad place to talk about Rotary: Gump landed one new member he met at Chipotle. “You never know where you will meet your next member,” he says. “And if you want younger members, hang out where they hang out.”



## Emphasize service

After attending a Rotary event with her mother, Fiona Bassett decided her town in the north of Wales needed another Rotary club – to complement the three it already had. To attract new members, the Rotary Club of Wrexham Glyndwr – Wrexham's the town; Owain Glyndŵr was a legendary Welsh leader – puts the emphasis on projects rather than meetings. "We feel that having a meal and weekly meetings puts some people off joining," says Bassett. "As a club, we believe that the money we would spend on food every week could be put to better use." Members are encouraged to attend one meeting a month, where the mood is informal and parents may bring their children if the sitter's unavailable. The tech-savvy club relies heavily on social media to promote itself, its projects, and Rotary: One post notched 42,000 views in 24 hours. It collaborates closely with other clubs in the district – the Rotary Club of Wrexham Yale helped Glyndwr get on its feet – and relies on high-wattage events to raise its profile. "We host a family fun event that's going into its third year," says Bassett. "It attracts between 3,000 and 4,000 people, and everything is branded so there's no mistake who's organizing it." Last December, the club's annual Christmas Lights Switch On drew about 10,000 people, thanks to promotional help from local celebrities, radio hosts, and the town council. "Everyone in Wrexham knows who we are," says Bassett. "We gained six new members from our first Christmas event and three last year" – and the club raised money for End Polio Now and other charities.

## Make a list of club members' responsibilities.

It's important to engage with potential members beforehand. They will want to know how they can fit in with your club and what opportunities there are for serving. The list should also include information about dues, attendance guidelines, and other club expectations – and it should emphasize the many benefits that come with being a Rotary member.

## Realize there is no finish line.

Even if your club is the optimum size, it's no reason to stop recruiting. There are always reasons people leave. Of the 31 members who joined Edina/Morningside in 2016-17, eight eventually left the club: Three had a job transfer, one had a family issue, and two had conflicts with work. Only two people simply stopped participating. Among those who remained, 10 are now very active in leadership roles, and two are "on the presidential track." What's more, the club added 11 more members between July 2017 and April 2018. "You're either growing or you're dying as a club," Gump says.





## Embrace diversity

In February, Rotary welcomed its first LGBTQ club, the Rotary Club of San Francisco Castro. The initiative to form the club came from the top down after local Rotary leaders acknowledged that members of the LGBTQ community were underrepresented in District 5150, which encompasses San Francisco and other towns in Northern California.

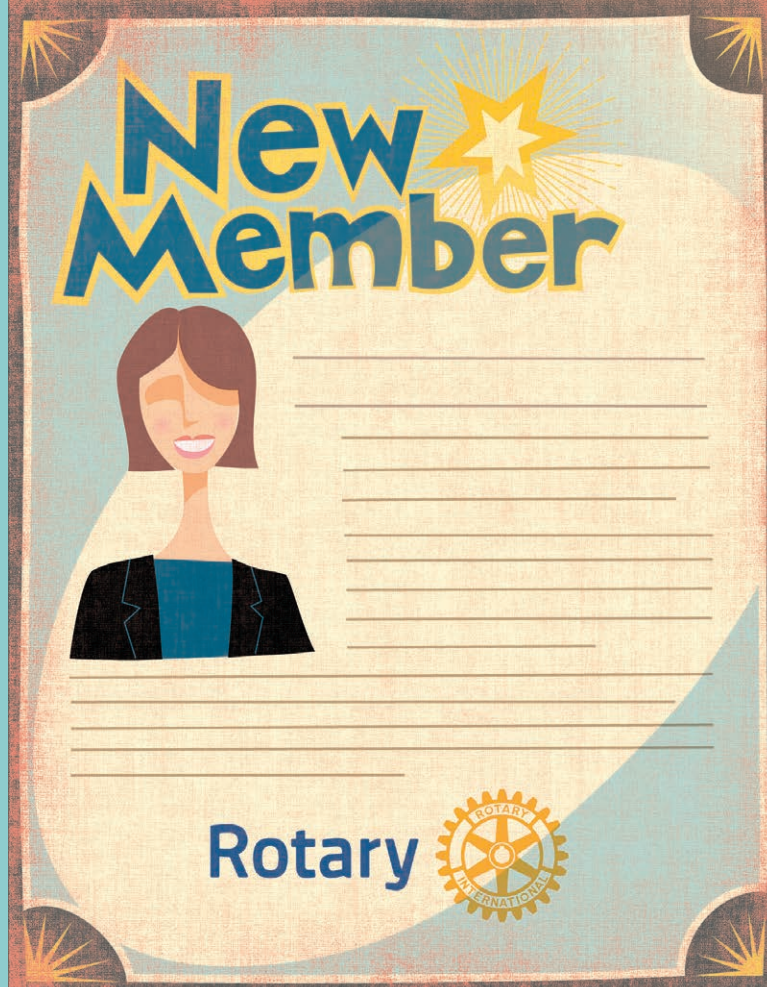
"We received a ton of support from our district," says the club's founding president, Lisa De Zordo. "It was invaluable." She especially singled out two past district governors – Eric Schmutz ("he planted the seed") and Leah Lambrecht – and lauded her former club, the Rotary Club of South San Francisco. "They were our sponsor club and our cheerleaders," De Zordo says.

From De Zordo's perspective, the formation of the new club recognized what was already a reality: Many members had already been participating in Rotary events and projects. "We did not let not being chartered get in the way of our service," De Zordo says. Now the club is partnering with Larkin Street Youth Services and other local organizations to help at-risk youth, neglected seniors, and the homeless.

De Zordo thinks it's essential that Rotary embrace diversity if it intends to grow. "Rotary has a real opportunity here," she says. "We need to be open and affirming to everyone. If we're interested in bringing peace to the world, that peace has to start with us."

That process is well underway Down Under. According to Steven Aquilina, past president of the Rotary Club of Southbank (in Melbourne), Australia has a well-established LGBTQ Rotary network. And in June, Monica Mulholland completed her term as the first transgender president of the Rotary Club of Queenstown, New Zealand. During her tenure, the club hosted an LGBTQ "information night"; in a letter, then-RI President Ian H.S. Riseley endorsed the event and encouraged other clubs to welcome people of diverse backgrounds.

"At the core of it all is that we're Rotarians who are LGBTQ," De Zordo says. "The focus is always on Rotary."



## Celebrate when you get a new member.

"You have to make potential members feel wanted," Gump says. "Our club makes a poster of the individuals after they've been voted in, and we put it in the front of the room at our next meeting. They love it. Some ask if they can take the poster home. One wanted to mail it to his mother." While celebrating new members, don't forget that clubs also stay strong by retaining current members. If you ensure that they are having a good experience and realizing the full value of their membership, the club's current members will be proud to invite a guest to a meeting – and those guests will want to join an attractive and welcoming club.

## Be persistent.

At times, it will take more than one or two requests to get someone to attend a meeting. Keep asking. "It took my workout partner two years to convince me to come to a meeting," says Gump, who joined the club in 2013 after attending just one meeting.

## Be vibrant.

If Gump's fowl finery is any indication, this is a tip he takes to heart, dignity be damned. "The week before Thanksgiving, I contacted people on my recruitment list and told them I would be wearing a turkey suit to the next meeting and that they should come and see it," he says. "A few took me up on the offer – and some of them joined. It's all about making club meetings and events fun and vibrant. Other simple things we've done is make outrageous centerpieces for our meeting tables. It gets people talking. For example, at Easter we put baskets in the middle of the tables with plastic eggs, and inside the eggs were blue and gold M&Ms with the Rotary logo on them. At St. Patrick's Day, we had shamrocks with members' pictures on them; same thing at Christmas, but on foil trees. My club is so welcoming, sometimes it just takes getting a potential member to the first meeting and then they join. Balloons, posters, streamers – it all helps. It really does work." ■



## Get them in the door

In April, at his induction ceremony into the Arch Klumph Society, Rustico "Chito" Recto Jr. explained how, almost against his will, he came to join Rotary in 1980 when he was 26 years old. "A close friend of mine had recently joined," Recto explained, "and he attended the Rotary Convention in Chicago, the year Rotary was celebrating its 75th anniversary. Upon coming home to the Philippines, he was so upbeat about Rotary that he practically twisted my arm to attend a meeting."

Initially, as Recto confessed after the ceremony, he did not share his friend's enthusiasm. Not easily deterred, his friend picked him up for a lunch date one day. Unbeknownst to Recto, their destination was a Rotary meeting. "I was a little surprised," he says today, but once introduced to the organization, he was hooked: "I became a member, and from there on, there was no stopping me."

Recto went on to assume a number of leadership positions, including president of the Rotary Club of Lipa South and governor of District 3820 (Philippines). In addition to their generous contributions to The Rotary Foundation, Recto and his wife, Lydia Miral, have been Rotary Youth Exchange hosts, joined the fight to end polio, and helped provide aid to residents of Mindanao after Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, among other endeavors – all because a persistent friend "convinced" Recto to attend his first Rotary meeting.

## MEMBERSHIP

Rotary International provides a wide range of resources, tips, and tools to help clubs build and sustain their membership. For more information, go to [rotary.org/membership](http://rotary.org/membership).