

Putting First Things First: Formulating & Applying a Member Retention Strategy

“It’s easier to keep a member than find a new one.” It’s a cliché ... because it’s true. For your Toastmasters club, area, division and district to grow, a steady stream of new members is needed, but so is a plan — applied continuously and successfully — to retain existing members. This article is intended to help you, as a District 25 Toastmasters leader, work with your club(s) to boost member retention.

Member retention is a key performance indicator of how well we’re meeting the needs of our members. At all levels of our operations (club, area, division and district), we should certainly be examining our member retention statistics and comparing our results to previous years. At this point in the current Toastmasters year, we still have an unusually large number of members (more than 800) who didn’t renew club memberships when they came due at the end of September.

Understand the Challenge

The reason why retention is important becomes clear when you consider the analogy of water being poured into a leaky bucket. There’s limited value in recruiting members until you know why members leave and put resources behind obvious ways of encouraging vulnerable members to stay. Existing members simply want to feel there are one or more reasons to stay a member. It’s our job, collectively, to ensure that each member can easily identify the reason(s) that matter enough to justify the relatively low cost of participation in a program for which there’s no true competitive alternative and which can have life-changing benefits. (For proof of this, see our [D25 testimonials](#).)

Unfortunately, there can be few or even no opportunities to talk with individual members about their club experiences within the constraints of club meetings. So it’s necessary for the club, and especially its leaders, to set aside time for a “check in” process with each member. Are they getting what they need from the club and the Toastmasters program? **Find out!** Ideally, you would do so **before** a member faces the deadline for renewing membership — or worse, when the grace period for membership renewal is imminent or has expired. In any case, if you have not spoken with members at risk of leaving, do it as soon as you can.

Conduct Research

There will always be ‘natural’ reasons why members leave — with corporate layoffs or closures, relocations, or major life changes being three obvious examples. But are there other reasons why your club loses members that you could retain? Member exit research can start to tell you why. An exit survey is easy to construct, and if you need help with that, please contact District Governor [Diana Patton](#). Once you know why members leave, you can work toward fixing problems.

Conducting the [Moments of Truth](#) module is another effective way you can research how members feel about your club. In addition, if yours is a low-member club, you can contact [James Hansen](#) to secure a club coach who will follow a formal program to evaluate your club’s operations and help you make changes to address both member retention and membership growth. To gain further insight and practical ideas, you can attend club officer or other education sessions at the bi-annual Toastmasters Leadership Institute (TLI) [trainings](#) and at the district fall and spring [conferences](#). You can and should contact or visit other strong clubs in the district and seek out guidance from their leaders. Getting some independent, expert opinions is a great place to start when there’s evidence a club should make some changes to retain members and otherwise enhance its effectiveness.

Engage New Members

Typically, new members are the least likely to renew. Their departure can be devastating for clubs who need new members each year to grow. Solving the problem of keeping new members may be as easy as taking three steps: 1) **Get them involved.** New members tend to stick with the club if they get involved in Toastmasters in meaningful ways. 2) **Reach out and contact them** over the phone or through personalized e-mails. 3) **Learn as much as you can** about them and put their talents to work. By learning a member’s name and addressing the member by name, as well as giving the member chances to take roles in meetings, you improve your chances of keeping that new member.

In addition to meeting and interacting with new members yourself, consider conducting a club party or mixer so members can interact with each other outside the rigor of a structured Toastmasters meeting. As they do so, they may find common interests and become friends. These personal relationships strengthen membership commitment and camaraderie, which is a significant benefit of the Toastmasters program for many members.

Leverage What Toastmasters Offers

The Toastmasters program offers built-in ways to help clubs address member retention. Here are three general suggestions that fall in the heading of club best practices: 1) **Provide mentoring:** For new members, especially, but even for experienced members, it's essential that clubs provide mentors who can share insights and experiences that help members achieve their goals. The most successful clubs are those that do this consistently, methodically and well. 2) **Provide rewards and recognition:** Recognize member involvement, both active and passive, in ways that will encourage the member to move up the ladder of involvement. Consider offering member-specific recognition or incentives. At a minimum, be sure to simply be courteous by, for example, saying thank you to your members, verbally and ideally with a hand-written note. 3) **Maintain full disclosure and be collaborative:** Do not limit important decisions on club operations to club officers. Seek and heed members' opinions. Work with your club Treasurer to prepare and deliver club financial reports. Be open and honest about where member contributions go.

Craft and Implement a Plan

Proper execution of a good member retention plan ensures that each member has clearly and easily been able to express their involvement expectations and is seeing the club work to satisfy them. What goes into the plan is up to your club, but here are a dozen ideas to consider as a starting point:

1. Key club leaders periodically send "check in" notes or e-mails to members or call them.
2. VP, PR, reaches out to ensure members have access to club Website, are featured or quoted in news stories, and/or are encouraged to write stories.
3. Club sends invitations to members to attend group social events.
4. Club periodically conducts a written or online survey of member interests, needs, and satisfaction.
5. Club collects and shares testimonials from members getting value from the program.
6. VP, PR, sends meeting invitations with a description of what's happening at future meetings as well as writes and share a compelling recap of what happens at meetings.
7. VP, ED secures interesting guest speakers to liven up meetings.
8. Members personally welcome each new member with welcome packets and phone calls.
9. New members promptly get assistance adding their profile to club Website.
10. New members promptly are assigned a mentor (as is anyone who requests one).
11. New members are told about additional information or programs that would be of value to them.
12. Club uses social media (e.g. Facebook, blogs, etc.) as a means of extending member communication.

Remember, each interaction with a member may determine whether the member stays or goes. Determining what individual members want and then meeting those needs may seem like a huge task. However, your club can meet the challenge. Development and execution of a solid member retention plan is among your club's most important activities; all of your members should be part of the effort.

Note: This article was written by [Dean Lampman](#), DTM, District 25's Lt. Governor, Marketing; it incorporates material from multiple online sources, especially an article posted by [The Center for Association Leadership](#).