

Step right up

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

By **Geoffrey Johnson**

When 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 top 10 tips.

### **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 rejoin 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.”

### **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.

### **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.”

### **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.

### **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.”