



SPORTS FIELD
MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

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Membership Outreach & Recruitment

Introduction

Recruiting and retaining members is at the core of every association's existence. Without a plan to gain new members as well as a continued effort to retain members, there will not be growth at best, and the demise of the organization, at worst.

It is a well-known axiom that it is more expensive to recruit new members than it is to retain your current membership base. True, but membership outreach to recruit new members should be a strong element of your membership plan, too. These two components may be separate in theory, but they work in tandem, and in some cases, overlap. Strong retention can bring in new members. Current members become advocates for your association and can be the

ambassadors you need. And those in the profession want to be a part of a growing thriving association.

Associations provide a valuable space for members to come together, learn from each other, and network. However, they cannot be everything to everyone. They must define their purpose, who their target market is, and then devise a strategy to reach and engage those potential members and keep them involved. It is a process; one contact with a potential member usually does not result in success. You must show the value of belonging to your association and realize that many organizations and marketing efforts are competing for their time and money.

Personal contact is a tried-and-true method for engaging new members, but it is also a very resource heavy process. It is also important to be mission-focused; keep your mission at the forefront of your recruiting efforts. If your mission does not resonate with some of the new groups noted below, no amount of marketing will be successful. You should assume that your mission's focus is why your current members joined. Do not make the mistake of expanding outside of that mission. You could end up losing on the retention side.

Ideas for Consideration - Recruitment

State Associations – Customize your Search by Adding your State's Name –

Targeting state associations can save time and resources by creating awareness with that association about the importance of a sports field manager overseeing athletic fields. Often it is difficult to find the names and contact information for the individual members of the associations listed below. A dedicated approach to the governing association could be very valuable to your recruiting efforts. It is important to remember that you cannot be viewed as attempting to "steal" their members away from them.

Interscholastic Federation - This is the organization that governs all high school athletics in most states. Usually, chapters drill down to that association's members, and they seek to recruit athletic directors, coaches, and the grounds departments at the high school level and not the governing body.

State Association of School Business Officials - This group is part of a national organization (ASBO) and typically they conduct quite a few seminars regionally. A focus on safety and how financially having a sports field manager will benefit a public school is a message that would resonate with this group.

State Parks & Recreation Associations – This association is most closely aligned with SFMA, and there is an overlap of members. Some Chapters already collaborate with them, and in fact the Minnesota Chapter and that state's parks and recreation association officially reorganized as one, combined association. At the national level, SFMA has partnered on several initiatives; most recently on distribution of the Route to Recovery Guides.

State Coaches Association – As you know coaches are very busy and their focus is on winning. However, many coaches are charged with maintaining the sports fields that their teams play on. To that end, safety of the playing surface would connect with them and how your Chapter can provide education to them on appropriate field management practices.

State Athletic Directors Association – The national association has been difficult to forge a partnership with; many Chapters have had good success with reaching out to their state associations – others have found it difficult to connect. Going the route of having your members contact nearby schools' athletic directors and inviting them to an event may be a successful strategy.

Little League & Other Youth-focused organizations, such as Pop Warner leagues at the state level. These organizations are all about fun for youth with the safety of the players being paramount. Dedicated field management should be top of mind, yet they may not recognize that there is a local chapter of dedicated professionals who are willing to share information.

Advantages of targeting the statewide association:

- :: **Sharing of information between the Chapter and the peer association.** This can lead to awareness of each organization's goals and strategies of reaching those goals and help to craft joint possibilities. Consider:
 - Holding joint events.
 - Providing articles for each other's communication vehicles
 - Conducting a co-community volunteer field renovation
 - Speaking at each other's events/conferences.
 - Developing specific educational fact sheets for them to publish to their members.
 - In addition to field management education, tailor education to their specific needs. For example, potential members who work for a school district, community college or in parks and recreation may also need to maintain the surrounding landscape. Be sure to include tree and plant maintenance in several of your educational events.
- :: **Relationship Building.**
 - Invite their officers to a Chapter board meeting as guests. Craft an agenda that has discussion items that affect both associations.
 - Consider adding an ex-officio position to your board for the President of the peer association. This means that as the President of the peer association changes so would this ex-officio board member. Voting privileges should be granted to the ex-officio board member; it is illegal in some states to designate them non-voting.
 - Consider a special joint pricing for membership in both organizations for their members and your Chapter's members.



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Landscape Maintenance Companies

Do not count them out! There are many landscape companies that have begun maintaining sports fields for cities, Little League, and other sports groups, such as soccer. Reach out to them. The amount of money they spend on memberships for their employees in your Chapter could be far less than what they would spend on similar educational events for their employees.

Commercial Members – Your commercial members may be your biggest asset. Your commercial members see more people in a day than you may see in months. Ask them to recruit for the Chapter, arm them with the information they need, such as the date and time of the next event, applications, website address, Board of Directors names, contact information, etc. Some commercial companies may be willing to provide a special program, i.e., buy a particular product and receive a complimentary membership to the Chapter (to be awarded at the chapter's discretion to avoid any appearance of a conflict of interest).

Students – If you are fortunate to have a junior college, college or university in your city that offers turfgrass studies, reach out to them through their turfgrass instructor. Offer to be a guest speaker during one of their classes. Invite them to a field day. These young adults will be the future of our industry.

Board Members – Board members are your ambassadors! Equip them with free memberships for them to hand out to potential new members.

Ideas for Consideration - Retention

According to Higher Logic, an association-focused company that provides engagement strategies for retention, a recently completed study identified the following reasons why members do not renew. (multiple responses were allowed)

- ∴ **37% do not renew because an employer stops paying for their membership.** These members may have found your association valuable, but not valuable enough to pay for it personally. There's little you can do to prevent this, other than continue to provide as much value as possible for the cost and continually communicate the value to employer groups. Chapters can also develop a membership scholarship program that awards a membership to an individual whose employer will not pay for it.
- ∴ **33% left the field.** Unfortunately, not much can be done to change this. A former lawyer is not going to continue paying dues to the state bar association, for example.
- ∴ **49% are not engaging enough with the organization.** You can change this. To prevent this lack of engagement, communicate often and provide services members will want to utilize.

Remember there are real reasons why chapter members may not renew, some of which have nothing to do with the chapter benefits and programs. Don't let the lack of renewal discourage you.

There are two main elements to retaining a member: Benefits and Engagement.



means to the audience

- For example:



various parts of the landscape

- Lower water bills, more for everyone else, can be a good steward of a precious resource
- Activity: Now, try it yourself – theme and message points



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Benefits

The number one strategy for retaining members is providing benefits that are sought after by your members. Identify what unique benefits your Chapter provides to its members and work to enhance them. Be sure to continually remind members of their benefits. Emphasize what your Chapter can provide that no other organization can.

SFMA's research has shown that its members join for three reasons:

- 1) **Continuing education and information**
- 2) **Networking with peers**
- 3) **Professionalism of belonging to a national industry association.**

Engagement

A welcoming culture is the first step in engaging members. Make certain that your Chapter members are not unintentionally being cliquish during events. Use your board members and active members as your event ambassadors to specifically meet and talk with new members and guests.

- :: Track attendance at your events and other activities to better understand engagement of those who are attending. Send out surveys post event or have board members serve as listening posts during the event. Have them ask the important question of why did they decide to come to today's event? Were they pleased with the education? What could the Chapter do to improve their experience?
 - :: Identify an event, possibly a fall field day, and invite potential members for free and provide a guest membership for the remainder of the year. Follow up is critical to retaining those members.
 - :: Track years of membership. Recognize those members for their years of service on your website, at meetings or in your communication vehicles. Everyone likes to see and hear their name!
 - :: Develop an appealing awards program. Recognition goes a long way to keeping someone committed to your Chapter.
- :: Reach out to new members at about the eight- to nine-month time period with a loyalty survey. Consider asking what their expectations were of the Chapter and if their needs are being met. This timing will allow you to gain feedback (and adjust) before the end of the membership year.
 - :: Personalize your communications to your members as much as possible. An email that is sent directly to them with a strong, personal message line will increase the likelihood of it being opened.
 - :: Ask members to take on a task. Many Chapters do not have the luxury of a huge base of volunteers to set up a full committee system. Reach out personally and ask a Chapter member to help with an event or activity; this usually has positive results for both the Chapter and the volunteer. Involvement begets engagement.
 - :: Start early on your renewal process and be prepared to continue to reinforce the benefits they have received and will lose by not renewing. Consider a discount or "free" something for early renewal.



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