

Friends Forward



Special Issue – Spring 2011
Membership

National Wildlife Refuge System
www.fws.gov/refuges

Secrets of Membership Success

A strong membership program is vital to a successful Friends group. New members bring fresh energy and ideas, community connections, leadership and funds. Returning members give your organization an institutional memory, wisdom earned by experience, solid relationships built on trust, leadership continuity and a stable financial base. And it's always less expensive to retain members than attract new ones.

If you want your Friends group to grow, endure the inevitable setbacks and thrive over the long term, you will need a strategic plan for attracting new members and retaining current ones.

As part of its ongoing effort to help Refuge Friends groups, the National Wildlife Refuge System in 2010 published *Soaring to New Heights: a Guide to Creating a Sustainable Friends/Refuge Collaboration* (www.fws.gov/refuges/friends/SoaringToNewHeights.html). The handbook, written by Beverly Heinze-Lacey, offers these guiding principles for membership development:

Work Together: Refuge visitors are a major source of potential new members. Work with the refuge manager, refuge staff and volunteers to ensure that visitors have a positive experience. Visitors who enjoy their interactions with refuge staff and Friends will be attracted to your partnership.



Volunteers from Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges celebrate a successful weed pull.

Take Your Time: It's best to start slow and offer a few well-run programs than to spread yourself too thin. For every activity you undertake, draw up a plan that outlines what you plan to accomplish, who will do the work, what resources will be needed and how you will measure the outcome. Make sure you offer programs that members will value. Look at them from the viewpoint of a potential member who asks, "What's in it for me?"

Have a Recruitment Strategy: Take an organized, strategic approach to membership. Think carefully about where to look for

new members. What will attract them and keep them interested? What benefits will motivate them to move from simply paying dues to getting actively involved?

Develop Sound Operating Systems: Members want to hear from their Friends group. They want to know about important refuge issues, upcoming events and volunteer opportunities. Reach them with newsletters, event notices and reminders about membership renewals. When you're planning the annual budget, you need to know how

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eFriends: Gathering Members Electronically

Do what you love, post it online and the members will follow.

That's a lesson some Friends groups are learning as they experiment with Internet projects. These may be high-tech team ventures, like a round-the-clock critter cam, or low-budget labors of love, like an email bulletin. While they may not be launched to attract new members, if they tap into public curiosity or concerns, they may become powerful membership tools.

That's what the Friends of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge learned after running a popular eagle cam (www.friendsofblackwater.org/camcentral.html) for seven years. From a perch 80 feet up in a loblolly pine tree, the eagle cam provides an online glimpse into the life of a bald eagle pair, from courtship to their eaglets fledging.

The eagle cam Web site gets more than 6,000 visits a day, said Friends Web site designer Lisa Mayo. And in the first two months of 2011, at least 21 became Friends.

Friends of Blackwater has nearly 600 members in 21 states. It sponsors annual events such as a Christmas open house, an eagle festival and a fishing derby. The eagle cam draws more new members than any event, said membership chair Peggy Tillier.

"Sometimes visitors will come into the visitor center, watch the eagles on the monitor and then ask how they can support what we do," Mayo said.

Friends treasurer Tom Hook, who pioneered Blackwater's first raptor cam in 2001, estimates it cost about \$1,400 to start, plus the price of a solar panel to power it. Annual operating expenses run about \$2,500 a year. Hook has a how-to fact sheet for groups considering a wildlife cam;



Members of the Loxahatchee Refuge Friends group lead a canoe tour of the refuge.

to request a copy, send an email to tomhookjr@gmail.com.

The eagle cam Web page is designed to encourage viewers to join the Friends. Next to a tab labeled "raptor cams" is a tab that says, "Join." The cam page also features a donation link.

Communicating in Florida

At the opposite end of the spectrum is a monthly email news bulletin compiled by Elinor Williams, membership chair of Friends of the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge. Williams' bulletin, with more than 600 subscribers, is separate from the Friends' printed newsletter, which is posted on the Loxahatchee Friends' Web site.

Launched in 2007, the bulletin focuses on issues of the Everglades ecosystem. Williams started the bulletin when she discovered no good source of information about a multi-billion-dollar environmental restoration project. The bulletin also has raised the profile of Loxahatchee

Refuge. "I wanted our Friends group to be relevant," Williams said. "We're trying to get the word out that we have a piece of the Everglades here."

Each bulletin opens with a list of upcoming refuge and Friends events. Next may be tidbits of Friends news, like the appointment of a new board member or a request for volunteers. Then comes news on topics that affect the Everglades and Loxahatchee Refuge.

Williams often urges readers to attend public hearings or write letters to the editor. "People will respond to my emails and tell me what they've done," she said. Today, the Friends are often represented at public meetings on issues that affect the refuge – which wasn't necessarily true in the past.

Williams occasionally uses the bulletin to give a soft-sell pitch for Friends membership.

"I know there are connections made between people that never would have been made before." 

Member Management in a Digital Age

While many Friends organizations debate whether and how to follow the latest trend in social media, there are even more basic questions about how to gather and maintain information about members and donors. Is a simple spreadsheet enough? Is an online donor management package too complex?

The challenge is to determine exactly what your organization needs and identify the software or Web site that best meets those needs.

What's Important?

Andrea Berry, director of partnerships and learning for Idealware, an online company that provides software advice to nonprofits, advises: "Prioritize the features you need. List the 'must haves,' the 'nice to have' and the 'wish list.'"

1. Do you want one system to record all member interactions (membership, event registration, donations, volunteer hours)?

2. Will one person be using the system at home or will multiple people need to access the information, either from their homes or from a single computer? How computer-savvy are the members who will use your system?
3. Do you need to generate reports for your board, refuge staff or a grant application?
4. How many choices do you want to offer your members for newsletters and payments (mail, credit card, online)?
5. Do you want to survey members or generate a discussion online?

The online hosted service Wild Apricot lists six key considerations in choosing either software or a Web-based solution for "constituent relationship management," or CRM: ease of use, support and service, user reviews, vendor reliability, security and product roadmap or track record.

Choices

There are three broad options for member/donor databases:

1. multi-use spreadsheets (Access, Excel)
2. stand-alone software
3. online hosted services

Friends of the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, NM, uses a Microsoft Access database built by a volunteer. Executive director Leigh Ann Vradenburg says someone must know how to manipulate Access and the software must be used on a single computer in the office. Access does allow different subsets of membership to be generated: for example, notifying only local members of public meetings, or alerting members throughout New Mexico, or promoting the annual crane festival nationwide.

Vradenburg says the organization is looking for an online hosted service such as eTapestry. The advantages? It can be used to record all incoming funds, including donations, memorial gifts, festival registration and membership dues. It is free for smaller groups (under 500 members). It is accessible to anyone who is on the Internet. It provides tech support.

Friends of Hakalau Forest, HI, has happily used eTapestry for four years. Membership chair Lorraine Ellison considers it a powerful tool, with online tutorials and regular updates as well as newsletter and Web site management capabilities. "Because of eTapestry's capabilities, we've had only one person doing our database," wrote Ellison in an online comment, "from tracking and sending renewal letters and thank you letters to managing various encumbered



Friends of the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, NM, uses a database to promote both local events and its national Festival of the Cranes.

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Reaching for Diversity

Huge demographic changes are ahead for the United States, which is projected to become a nation of minorities before 2050, when non-Hispanic whites are expected to make up less than 50 percent of the population. As Friends groups work to diversify membership, they are discovering diversity doesn't happen overnight. They're sowing the seeds of change now.

New Jersey's Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge lies in the heart of the Atlantic Flyway – and 12 miles from Atlantic City, where a majority of the population faces high unemployment, poverty and little access to nature.

“The only outdoors part of Atlantic City is the boardwalk,” said Ann Marie Morrison, an Atlantic City native who began visiting Forsythe Refuge at age 4. Now at 35, she is one of the youngest members of the Friends of Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge.

Morrison and a half-dozen other Friends are guiding 15 local children and their parents, from different social and ethnic backgrounds, through the refuge's first Nature Champions program, in which health professionals write “nature prescriptions” for youngsters to spend time outdoors. Families were recruited for the six-month program through Atlantic City community groups: Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts; a non-profit that helps families living with cancer; a network of home-schooling families.

On the second Saturday of each month, the children and their parents take a guided hike. “Quite a few of our families have never done this before,” Morrison said. Some parents are nervous about the outdoors; “most of the kids

really enjoy it and have asked to come back.”

The Friends have added monthly adults-only activities and will add a Friday night family campfire in the spring. The group does not push Friends membership, knowing some families can't afford the \$25-per-family fee, Morrison said. Instead they hope to build lasting relationships. One family is especially enthusiastic, Morrison said. “We're looking at them as future Friends.”



Friends and other volunteers join members of Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge's Nature Club.

Please Join Us

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge on Virginia's Eastern Shore has found it challenging to connect with minority families because the town and surrounding communities are predominantly white, said Barbara Thackray, president of the Chincoteague Natural History Association, the refuge's Friends group, which has about 400 members.

“We have a very diverse population coming through the refuge,” Thackray said, “but they're not necessarily interested in refuge activities.” The refuge staff and Friends are hoping to entice beachgoers into the visitor center “to see that there's more than they knew.” So, the Friends, whose membership is only about 10 percent local, offer low price tours to restricted parts of the refuge on summer weekdays. In July, at pony penning time, the group runs a free shuttle to an area where the wild ponies are led down the beach. On the shuttle, tour guides offer information about Friends membership.

In 2008 the group began a free monthly lecture series featuring speakers on history and nature, promoted in local schools, colleges and community newspapers. Recent talks on the area's Native American history and on historical research in local African American graveyards drew about 40 people.

The Chincoteague Natural History Association has a table with membership information available. No one who attended the talks on Native American or African American history became a member. But that's OK, Thackray said. “The first step is to show these groups that we want them to join us.” 

Members Beyond the Boundaries

Midway Atoll is one of the most remote coral atolls on Earth with a total human population of about 40. Yet the Friends of Midway Atoll (FOMA) has more than 250 members representing all 50 states. The Friends newsletter is published in Hawaii; the treasurer lives in Oregon; the president is in Indiana. Other board members join a monthly conference call from Massachusetts, Georgia and Washington.

The Battle of Midway, which took place June 4-7, 1942, is widely regarded as the most important naval battle in the Pacific Campaign of World War II. The U.S. Navy decisively defeated the Imperial Japanese Navy. But by the time the atoll was transferred from the Navy to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1996, its function had radically changed. Then Secretary of the Navy John Dalton announced that the land's mission had changed from "guns to gooneys."

Nearly two million birds call it home for much of each year, including the world's largest population of Laysan Albatrosses, or "gooney birds," as well as Hawaiian monk seals, green sea turtles and spinner dolphins. Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge is now part of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.

Spreading Your Refuge Story

FOMA attracts members because of its unusual wildlife, several significant historical connections and its exotic volunteer opportunities – all promoted regularly through a quarterly newsletter, a Web site (www.friendsofmidway.org/) and word of mouth. "We keep our Web site current and attractive," says FOMA president Darlene Moegerle,

"and we urge people to tell the Midway story."

The story that first brought Moegerle to Midway was her uncle's World War II service on the island. Other veterans who served on Midway have also joined the Friends organization.

Moegerle tells of one man who kept receiving the FOMA newsletter from his mother: he had attended school on Midway while his father was in the military and now wanted to take his own children there for a visit. He decided to become a FOMA member and start getting his own copy of the newsletter.

Midway also has a variety of lesser known historical connections that have helped generate new members. Midway also has a variety of lesser known historical connections that have helped interest new members. For example, Midway was a stopping point when cable was being laid for worldwide communications in 1906. When the Pan American Clippers, the first commercial planes, took to the skies in the 1930s, Midway was the first stop after Hawaii. FOMA uses all these details as lure to new members – and suggests that other Friends groups do the same.

"Look at all your refuge has to offer," says Moegerle to Friends groups seeking to attract members from beyond the refuge boundaries. A young girl in England wrote a school paper on the albatross, found the FOMA Web site and promptly joined. Volunteers who come to help



Friends of Midway Atoll attracts members from all 50 states in part because of its unusual wildlife – especially the short-tailed albatross.

eradicate invasives or count albatross often become Friends. Tourists who visit Midway on cruise ships have become members.

Friends are Friendly

"I've never seen lots of our members," says Moegerle, "but we develop a personal relationship. When members send an email, they get a personal response." The response is even more personal if Moegerle happens to be on Midway greeting potential Friends, as she was for the 60th anniversary of the Battle of Midway. She escorted two elderly veterans in a golf cart to see the places where they had been as young men – and she promptly signed up one gentleman as a new Friend. 🦅

Secrets of Membership Success—Continued from page 1

much income to expect from dues. So you need a good membership database. Investment in a sound computerized system for tracking membership will pay off.

Keep It Fun: Potential members are making a choice to give their time and effort to your Friends group. In many places, you may be competing with other community groups for a limited pool of potential members.

Almost anywhere, competition for members can be intense. That's why it is important to make events fun and fulfilling. If people enjoy themselves, they'll come back – and bring their friends.

Think Holistically: Everything your partnership does has an effect on membership. People are drawn to organizations that are well-run; have a vision and take action to carry it

out; create positive partnerships; respect members' talents, time and effort; and celebrate successes large and small. A Friends group that achieves those goals will attract new members and keep existing ones.



Member Management in a Digital Age—Continued from page 3

funds and tributes. The only thing that's manually done is inserting letters into envelopes.”

Cathy Harrington with Friends of Balcones Canyonlands, TX, has high praise for Wild Apricot, saying it is a time-saver, offers good web conferences about nonprofit issues in general (including increasing membership) and provides top-notch technical support.

Many of the same companies offer both software installed from a CD on your computer as well as Web-based solutions. About three years ago, “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society, FL, switched from Access to DonorPerfect software and more recently to DonorPerfect Online. The service provides regular upgrades and backs up all data; the searchable database is helpful for fundraising and communicating. However, office manager Gary Ogden has been disappointed by tech support personnel whom he has found inaccessible and uninformed. “Stay with Access as long as you can,” advises Ogden.

Whether you are choosing software or an online service, counsels Andrea Berry, make sure you can get written documentation or instructions; try a



Nick McCullum/SPWS

The akepa is common in Hakalau Forest Refuge, where Friends manage member information with eTapestry.com.

demo; know someone who is using it; and get real answers to real questions from tech support personnel: “How do I add a gift from one donor and then generate a thank you letter?” “How do I send an email to all our members?” “Can I create a list of people who came to our festival but are not yet members?”

Other software used by Friends includes Google Docs, Volunteer Reporter, Gift Works and Blackbaud (Raiser's Edge).

Idealware and TechSoup offer a wide range of free or inexpensive articles, webinars and software products to

guide nonprofit organizations in making the best choices. Wild Apricot offers a software selection guide and comparison chart. Idealware also publishes an annual *Field Guide to Software*.



Idealware
www.idealware.org

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Google Docs
www.docs.google.com

Volunteer Reporter
www.volsoft.com

Gift Works
www.missionresearch.com

Blackbaud
www.blackbaud.org

Tech Soup
www.techsoup.org

"They Signed Up Right Away"



Friends of Deep Fork Refuge, OK, keep an eye on student archers at one of the group's bow-hunting workshops for young people.

Special events are effective tools for attracting new members and retaining existing ones, and they don't need to be elaborate affairs. The keys are to take advantage of your community's greatest strengths and tailor the events to members' interests.

The Friends group that supports Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge, SC, has two irresistible assets. The first is Bulls Island, largest of the refuge's four barrier islands. Three miles offshore and accessible only by boat, the island has a pristine beach, native forests and marshes that are waterfowl magnets. The second draw is naturalist Rudy Mancke, famous among South Carolinians as the host of "NatureScene," a long-running natural history program on South Carolina ETV, the state's public television channel.

Mancke "has a voluminous knowledge of everything that's out

there," and is a gifted storyteller, said Cape Romain refuge manager Sarah Dawsey. "He can spot a caterpillar and give you a five minute talk about its entire life history."

The South Eastern Wildlife and Environmental Education Association (SEWEE), the Friends group for Cape Romain, has hosted an annual friends-only boat trip to Bulls Island for 15 years. Mancke volunteers to lead a morning and an afternoon tour, with a catered lunch in between.

The full-day trip in October is the only way to get an expertly guided tour of the island, Dawsey said. With a limit of 75 people, the tour sells out almost as soon as the \$75 tickets go on sale. Members are notified of the tour first. A one-year membership is included with the ticket price, and most of these new members continue their membership for many years. The event is an important showcase for the refuge.

Move west to Oklahoma's Deep Fork National Wildlife Refuge, where the 9,600-acre refuge practically embraces the town of Okmulgee, along a bend in the Deep Fork River, a waterfowl haven. The refuge, established in 1993, contains a patchwork of privately-owned properties. While the refuge's onsite offices are under construction, refuge staff works on the top floor of the Okmulgee post office.

Many of the Friends of Deep Fork National Wildlife Refuge's 45 members are hunters, said Lori Jones, the refuge's visitor services coordinator. The Friends group takes a neighborly approach to member recruitment, inviting a few non-members to the Friends' annual holiday party, a popular Okmulgee tradition.

Before party invitations go out, the Friends board and refuge staff select 15 or 20 names from a list of hunting permit holders. Some are property owners whose land borders the refuge. Others have volunteered at the Friends bow-hunting workshops for children. "We especially want to interest youngsters," Jones said.

The party is a potluck, with refuge staff cooking ham and turkey for 80 or 90 guests. "We invite whole families because in Oklahoma everything's family oriented," Jones said. Santa makes a visit with a packful of goodies for the children, and everyone who attends gets a stocking of useful gifts – last year, a flashlight and a pocket knife. Every Friends member or special guest is acknowledged.

The strategy works, Jones said. "This year we received two new members at the party. They had so much fun that they signed right up." 🦋

Hold Those Members

By Dan Dzienkowski

How do you hang on to Friends? Encourage – even entice – individuals to renew their Friends membership? As noted in the overview, it’s always less expensive to retain members than attract new ones, but it does take some thought.

Reminders for membership renewal can be included as brief newsletter segments or in a mass mailing. Either will reach the majority of your membership. Here are four ideas on strategies to reenlist the others.

- **Renewal letter:** Personalize a letter to those individuals who have not renewed. Even after receiving a newsletter article and a mass mailing, some will say “nobody asked me” because they didn’t view these two items as personal.
- **Personal contact:** Many members were brought into the group via personal contacts with existing members. Utilize those contacts to ask for membership renewal. This is one of the most valuable tools because it’s hard to say no to a friend.
- **Members-only event** (see page 7): If you make it exciting, many will rejoin for the opportunity to attend. There’s another advantage: such events attract new members as well. At Tennessee National Wildlife



Joan Stevens/USFWS

Friends of Tennessee National Wildlife Refuge holds an exclusive duck banding event for members and their families.

Refuge, we offer members an exclusive opportunity to band ducks.

- **Special program:** Some of your members may have special interests and may have joined at a one time event. Try repeating events such as an art and photography show, hummingbird banding or monarch tagging that drew new members in the first place.

There is no one right answer to retain members. Try a mix of solutions and chose those that work best for the size and age of your group. The key is to actively address the issue before membership loss becomes a large problem that affects the efficiency of your group.

Dan Dzienkowski is the former president of Friends of Tennessee National Wildlife Refuge. 

FriendsForward

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