Membership-Raising”
Tips about Memberships for Friends Organizations

Growing membership support for the Friends is just as vital as fundraising. Membership is pivotal in creating a base for activities and a source of operating income. Membership building happens by establishing a relationship with the community and library users. It is necessary to constantly recruit new people into the organization, especially community leaders.

Membership dues should be kept affordable to attract the largest number of participants while still covering expenses and providing operating funds. Many organizations set up categories of membership with different rates for individuals, students, seniors, families, and businesses.

Make it easy to join. The bulk of Friends members are library patrons. Post signs in the building. Keep Friends membership brochures in the library's literature racks and in holders on the public services desks (i.e., circulation counter, reference desk). The staff does not have time to make these photocopies at a moment's notice; help the staff help a potential member of the Friends by having a good supply of the membership brochures there at the desk. A Friends volunteer can be assigned to regularly check the quantities and restock the forms as part of their volunteer duties. Not having forms can make it difficult for the patron, who must remember to join and may not have the ability to download a form off the library’s website. Some people will make the effort, but most won’t. Strike while the interest is high—hand them a form! The “personal ask” is vital: encourage staff members to ask “Are you a member of the Friends?”

There are a wide variety of ways to attract new members:

▪ Solicit members at all library programs, for all ages, if the Friends underwrite the programs. Whether it’s an author reception or a toddler storytime, a Friends volunteer should have Friends brochures in quantity to hand out to audience members.
▪ Identify Friends members at library events with a button or sticker: “I’m a Friend of the Library.”
▪ Tap into “all residents” mailings by the town or school district by including an article about the Friends, their activities and accomplishments, and how to join.
▪ Hold an open house at the library, hosted by the Friends, with a membership table.
▪ Place Friends membership forms in library materials as they are checked out.
▪ Buy a display ad in the high school yearbook or other student publications (e.g., theatre or sports programs).
▪ Send a mass mailing to all residents. A town-wide mailing could include a Friends membership form, a list of upcoming events at the library, and a cover letter asking for assistance, itemizing volunteer opportunities (“where we need help”).
▪ Have a “members only” pre-sale event for the book sale and sell memberships for admission to those folks who have not joined yet.
▪ Promote the organization at Friends social events.
- Participate in community groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, service groups, Welcome Wagon, and Newcomer's Club.
- Contact participants in Friends raffles with membership literature – ask for a mailing address on the raffle form.
- Design bookmarks with a message about the Friends and distribute them at the library's circulation desk.
- Include a message from the Friends on the bottom of printed date due receipts.
- Ask local merchants to include Friends membership information in their mailings and place of business. Have Friends literature at a variety of community locations (e.g., the town recreation center).
- Send speakers to other community groups whenever possible to talk about the library and Friends membership (e.g., Lions, Rotary, Kiwanis, merchant organizations). Build credibility: take along a packet with membership forms for everyone, a goals statement on Friends stationery, a sample newsletter, and the Friends annual report.
- Submit press releases regularly to the local media. Constantly stress the benefits of membership and the Friends active involvement in making the library a better institution for the whole community.
- Publish a Friends annual report. The report should itemize the group’s accomplishments and outline goals for the next year. Remember to send it to the Town Council, local and state legislators, the school superintendent, Board of Education members, other “movers and shakers” in the community, and of course, the local newspaper, along with a membership brochure!
- Have a column in the Friends newsletter to say “Welcome New Members!” and list their names. Always include a standard paragraph in the newsletter about joining the Friends and links to membership forms on the library’s website. Encourage “recycling” the newsletter to other family and neighbors.
- Develop a PowerPoint show that features Friends volunteers, activities, and contributions to the library. Is there a large screen TV in your meeting room? The show could run constantly before an audience arrives for a program. A photo frame size monitor on the reference desk could bring the slides to folks who are waiting to be helped. Some libraries’ meeting rooms are sites for the Department of Motor Vehicles once a week: now there’s a captive audience that might appreciate the distraction of your message!

A law in NYS requires school districts to distribute information to students about the public library and applications for a library card. This information is to be given annually to every student entering kindergarten, grade six, and grade nine, and to all new students in the district regardless of their grade. This literature is to be available at all times in the school library for students and their parents. Make sure information about the Friends of the Library is included in the brochure that outlines the library’s services and programs.

**Membership drives**, with a table in the library staffed by Friends volunteers, should be held several times a year, focusing on peak times for the library (e.g., sign up days for the children’s summer learning program). Offer an incentive prize or raffle basket that only new members can enter to win.

**Keeping in touch** with your members on a regular basis is important. This effort can be accomplished through a newsletter, an annual report of Friends activities, or postcards announcing special events. Library staff should help plan member recognition events. Volunteers need to receive regular attention and credit for their work.
Incentivizing Friends Memberships

Incentives, perks, or “deliverables”—whatever they are called, everyone likes to receive something for their donation. There should always be benefits to Friends membership that can be anything from a “members only” early bird buying privileges at book sales to discounts on book bags. A donation at a higher level (e.g., $50) might receive a free canvas tote bag. How can you entice more people to contribute? Does your membership form or website answer “Why should I join?”

In general, so much of the membership literature of Friends of the Library organizations focuses on “what the Friends do for the library” and sometimes “what we do for the community.” Furniture purchases, technology, movie licenses, and programs for all ages top the lists. Far fewer brochures outline benefits for members of the Friends. Make sure potential members know their involvement can be rewarding in many ways!

Some ideas for special members-only benefits:

- A monthly (or quarterly) newsletter and notices of upcoming events
- A book donated to the collection in the member’s name for a $25-50 contribution with a bookplate recognizing that member
- A discount on purchases in the Friends bookstore. What about other discounts? e.g., a Friends member price for tote bags; a 50% discount on the library’s photocopying or printing fees. If you hold a golf tournament fundraiser, can Friends members play for a reduced fee?
- Participate in social and cultural events, e.g., a Friends reception with a visiting author. Joining the Friends will provide the chance to meet fellow community residents with the same mission to help the library, support literacy, and insure information access for the community.
- Opportunities to volunteer for fundraisers, landscape the library’s grounds, serve in a leadership capacity, lead book discussions, or deliver materials to homebound patrons
- Member’s name published in the Friends annual report
- Borrowing benefits (e.g., an extra title loaned from the library’s best sellers collection, reduced reserve fees for materials loaned from other libraries, an extra week on a regular loan period)
- A coupon for a free book once a year at the Friends’ book sale or store
- Discounts at local businesses by showing a Friends membership card
- Used Book Sale Search Service for Friends: specific books, works by a certain author, or books on a particular subject are located for members
- Volunteers to get first choice of a set number of books if setting up at the book sale or a choice of plants for annual spring plant sale
- A free raffle ticket for the raffle basket offered during the month of the member’s renewal date

Consider offering an incentive for higher levels of donations. The Wood Library in Canandaigua extends one year of fine-free borrowing to any individual who makes a gift of at least $50 to the annual
fund drive. If the donation is $100 or more, the benefit is extended to the entire family living at the same address. In the circulation database, patron status is noted as “donor” so the system cancels fines on items that belong to Wood Library. Exclusions include materials borrowed from other libraries, holds that are not picked up, and materials that are lost or damaged.

**Membership Renewals:** Keep the momentum going and make it easy to renew! The more times the member sees your message, the more likely they will renew. If you have a newsletter that is mailed, mark the membership renewal date on the mailing label. Consider including a self-addressed envelope in the renewal notice. Ask Friends officers to add a handwritten, personal note to the letter to those members who have lapsed, “We miss you.” Always send second notices as a follow-up: one renewal letter is not enough. If space, thank renewing members in your newsletter and list them by name.

Up-to-date record keeping is essential to maintain good relations with members. It is embarrassing to receive a phone call: “You deposited my check, but I haven’t received a receipt” (or a newsletter or a book bag or whatever the perk might be). It is vital to acknowledge the receipt of dues quickly and is required by law if the Friends group is a nonprofit organization.

**Your Friends Group Can Do This, Too!**

Friends of the Oxford Library (FOLIO) in Connecticut have a community of less than 15,000 residents to draw upon for support. The Friends had diminishing membership numbers and they were able to turn it all around within a year.

Here are some of the things they did; note that nearly every one of these ideas did not cost anything:

- Regularly updated the Friends Facebook account which features library programs (“likes” increased 85%)
- created an e-mail database of members
- built relationships with the local media to regularly cover library activities
- held an art contest for elementary students and sponsored an art show for high school students with an opening reception gala for family and friends
- reinstated their Junior Friends program
- developed a “Corporate Friends” category of membership for local businesses to support the library

**Resource:**