A Dozen Tips for Membership-Raising for Friends Groups Supporting Rural and Small Libraries
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Here are some tried and true approaches to grow your Friends in a variety of ways! Membership is a combination of efforts: volunteer engagement; incentives to join and perks for Friends supporters; recruitment of volunteers to support the group; and volunteer recognition and donor relations. Several tips encourage you to read more in the FLS “Friends News and Notes” newsletter. All issues are archived on the FLS website: www.nyla.org/friends > Publications.

To watch the FLS-sponsored webinars referenced here, go to www.nyla.org/career-resources. Select Continuing Education > NYLA e-Institute Webinars and follow the link at the bottom of the page to the Webinarary, NYLA’s webinar archive. Resource materials are posted, including slide decks and handouts. See also “Events” on the FLS website.

Membership and Volunteer Engagement

“Be visible” is a good tip for member engagement. When the library shines on the outside as well as the inside, patrons will notice! The Arnett Branch is in the 19th Ward of Rochester. When you drive through this ethnically-diverse neighborhood, you cannot miss the colorful literary murals on the façade of the library. In 2020, the library coordinated a special fundraising project with the Friends & Foundation of the Rochester Public Library to expand the number of existing murals. Local artist Richmond Futch was able to paint seven additional murals depicting the biographies of Austin Steward and Harriet Tubman, African and Seneca folk tales, a Motown music CD, and the Jackie Robinson Story DVD. Read more in “More Murals at the Arnett Branch Library: Gifts from Our Dear Friends” in the December 2017 of “Friends News and Notes” and an update on the murals in “Fundraising Beyond the Book Sale” in the May/June 2021 issue.

Micro-volunteering, not micromanaging. At our “Friendly Partnerships Strengthen Communities” webinar in March 2021, the Friends of the Ethelbert B. Crawford Public Library shared that much of their success was due, in large part, to offering meaningful volunteerism to their members in a limited capacity. Micro-volunteering allows for a short-term commitment, such as staffing a table at a community festival for two hours,
soliciting gift certificates from area businesses for raffle baskets, providing assistance at the cash-out table at the book sale for one shift, assembling raffle baskets, or baking cookies.

All of these are manageable tasks one volunteer can agree to take on, helping the library directly, without being chair of a committee or sorting book sale donations every week. Not every supporter of the Friends will be active in the organization, but developing uncomplicated, time-limited tasks allows for involvement by many individuals in a timeframe that matches their interests and abilities.

When making a gift, donors are giving to groups that they feel passionate about. It could be literacy, early childhood education, or the equity of "libraries are for everyone" that is their passion. Friends have a mission and purpose that the community wants to support—it's not all about "here's your membership card so you can get into the book sale on preview night." You don't want to just meet the member's expectation to get a thank-you; you want to exceed it.

Can you strive for a hand-written signature or a personal message from one of the Friends officers on a thank-you letter? Who can engage that donor? If you have an electronic giving tool in place, send a brief email acknowledgement, so the donor knows the gift was received, but follow-up with a snail-mail thank you and tell them how the donation will be used. Strengthening your acknowledgment program has the potential to reap benefits that surpass the proceeds of your next fundraising event, as the giving and memberships continue year-after-year. Read more in “Learning to Say ‘Thank You’ “ in the August/September 2020 “Friends News and Notes” newsletter.

Incentives to Join and Perks for Friends Supporters

**WIIFM? What’s in it for me?** Whatever they are called – incentives, perks, deals, “deliverables” – everyone likes to receive something for their donation. One of the most common perks groups offer to their Friends members is being included in a “members only” early bird opportunity at the Friends book sale. The “Members Pre-Sale” or “Friends Preview Night” can be the evening before the sale opens to the general public the next morning. (If you call it a “preview,” be certain Friends know they can shop, not just look!) You’ll be pleasantly surprised how many people take advantage of this privilege to have first dibs to purchase the best inventory. Have a membership table staffed at the sale entrance where people can become Friends members on the spot to increase your membership ranks incrementally!

If you are a shopper, you love a sale, and if you can get there before anyone else to get first dibs, then you are all in! (But please respect my “No Early Birds” sign at my

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yard sale!) Discounts for Friends supporters can certainly appeal to potential members and help to increase the number of advocates you have. If donating to the Friends gives you year-round discounts, what’s not to like?

After twenty hours of volunteer service to the Friends Book Shop at the Saratoga Springs Public Library, volunteers can purchase items in the shop at a 50% discount. Members of the Friends of the Ogdensburg Public Library may use the library Conference Room at no cost. What about other discounts? Let’s have a Friends member price for tote bags or 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? Start brainstorming at your next Friends meeting – there certainly are many discounts that could attract new champions to support the library!

When is volunteering a member benefit? When volunteers meet like-minded people and share the satisfaction of doing something they truly enjoy, for a cause they want to support. They see the investment of their time as making a difference in their community. Are you the “hostess with the most-ess”? Maybe chairing a fundraising event will bring you joy. Like to garden? Working with other “green thumbs” to landscape the library’s grounds may be the pleasant morning you look forward to each week. Serving in a leadership capacity as an officer of the Friends, leading book discussions with neighbors who like reading and sharing a good book as much as you do, or delivering materials to patrons who are unable to get to the library any more may bring many benefits that most people would say are intangible – satisfaction, joy, fulfillment, gratification, pleasure. We can’t put a price tag on these, but the payback can be significant. Be sure your membership recruitment pitches include some of these “touchy-feely” or emotional incentives to join the Friends.

Recruitment of Volunteers

Friends of Libraries groups across the country enthusiastically look forward to the annual celebration of National Friends of Libraries Week (NFOLW) each October. It is a two-fold opportunity to raise awareness in the community and promote membership, as well as providing an occasion for the library’s Board of Trustees to acknowledge the Friends for their advocacy and support throughout the year. Be certain to approach the President of the library board about recognizing the Friends each year. Consult the United for Libraries webpage for the dates of this year’s National Friends of Libraries Week: www.ala.org/united.

Would you like to increase your Friends membership rolls by 25% in just one week?* (*Truth in advertising: results may vary…) The Friends of the LeClaire (Iowa) Community Library did precisely that in 2018 with a concentrated effort to grow their numbers. In early fall, the group began a multifaceted pre-promotion of NFOLW, starting with a banner on the library’s website announcing “Friends of the LeClaire
Library/Celebrate Friends Week.” Events planned for the week were publicized on the website as well as on their Facebook page. On the Thursday before NFOLW, a feature article appeared in the local newspaper highlighting all the programs and events that were planned for the following week. New members who joined during the week received Friends book bags. Read more about this membership campaign in “Boost Your Membership Numbers with National Friends of Libraries Week” in the September 2019 issue of “Friends News and Notes.”

Kaleb Wilson, a self-described “older Millennial,” began his involvement with the Friends of the Cazenovia Public Library (FCPL) more than a decade ago when a local civic leader invited him to volunteer for the Friends. “I was honored to be approached and knew I could make a difference.” Kaleb served several years in leadership positions for the Friends and then was invited to volunteer for the Cazenovia Public Library’s Board of Trustees. Kaleb found that once someone younger came onto the Friends board, they would in turn tell a co-worker or acquaintance in another group they worked with, and that person would become interested in the Friends as well. FCPL also has two junior members on their Board and these high school students are instrumental in getting their classmates to volunteer at special events like the book sale. Learn more in “Ready to Engage Millennials as Volunteers?” in the June 2020 issue of “Friends News and Notes.”

In their book, All Ages Welcome, authors (and librarians) Tess Wilson and Madeline Jarvis state that “The more open and inviting your group becomes to the community, the more likely you are to attract new members.” But if you are specifically looking to diversify your membership rosters and attract Millennials, your Friends board must consider the person first and foremost, not a persona or stereotype. The individual you recruit cannot just be any Millennial to help bring down the median age of your volunteer corps. You need to see those individuals’ qualities and talents to help carry out projects and services important both to them and to the organization. Read more in “Engaging Millennials as Volunteers” in the December 2020 issue of “Friends News and Notes.” Watch Tess and Madeline’s FLS webinar, “Engaging Millennials as Friends Volunteers.”

Volunteer Recognition and Donor Relations

How can you encourage, praise, and recognize a volunteer and make them feel special? What can the Friends do to show their current volunteers that their efforts are indeed noticed and make a difference in the life of the library?

One simple gesture it to have coffee and donuts for the book sale set-up crew. It’s even nicer if the goodies are homemade by library staffers! Perhaps you have Friends
members who cannot physically help with the bullwork of setting up the sale and slinging boxes anymore but might be willing to bake. Be certain to post a sign by the goodies thanking the bakers – a posed picture of them smiling broadly with oven mitts on their hands, even better! A recognition two-fer! Share their recipes with their pictures in the next Friends newsletter (unless it’s a family secret).

You ought to be in pictures! Show volunteers’ good works on the digital signage in the library. If the library has a large screen TV that has a continuous slide show of program events, talk to the library staff member that makes these slides. Use the signboard to thank volunteers for a great book sale. Take some “action shots,” close-ups of volunteers sorting books (not just a long shot of the room all set up). Stage photos of other volunteers doing Friends tasks, like working on membership renewal letters, assembling “Make or Take” craft kits, or mending books. Use a teaser headline, “Seen in the library....” with the photo. Caption some of the photos with “Please join us!” Maybe another patron will see their neighbor on the “jumbotron” and think about getting involved with the Friends!

Making a difference: Always communicate to your volunteers what a difference their efforts make. Yes, everyone wants to know how much money the last book sale raised. But don’t stop there. Share how the Friends purchases have improved library services for the patrons. Tell the Friends how many new books were added to the children’s board book collection in the last six months or how many hours a day the new computers are being used. Fundraisers are a lot of work! Sometimes we cannot see the net results of our efforts because all we are looking at is the piles of remainders we need to handle when the sale has concluded. Remind the volunteers how much their labors are appreciated long after the last box has been taped shut.

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