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SWCS MEMBERSHIP
Ensuring Growth & Vitality

Any organization's effectiveness depends on its ability to attract and hold active, committed members. SWCS needs to continue development and maintenance of a large and broad membership base of individuals from many disciplines, institutions, and nations so that we can foster the science and art of natural resource conservation.

The best opportunity for growth begins with your local chapter!

The size of any chapter's membership primarily reflects the chapter's program. A chapter with a strong program and vision for the future will attract and retain members. Without specific short- and long-term activities which encourage and require membership involvement, people will simply not join or remain members of that organization.

This guide provides guidelines and techniques that SWCS chapters and other groups have proven to be effective. There is no single event or campaign that is guaranteed to produce and maintain longterm memberships. The membership strategies you choose must be part of your overall chapter program and not an isolated activity.

Set a goal! Then organize for action; carry out your plan; evaluate your efforts; and share your experience with other chapters.

This guide can help your chapter grow so that you, SWCS, and every member can accomplish more.

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Organize For Success – The Membership Committee

An important key to your membership effort will be to set up, energize, and follow up with your Membership Committee.

Chapter officers should establish the purpose of the Membership Committee. This may simply be to get new members directly or to get all current members to solicit new members. The officers should also provide written goals and measurable tasks that are short-term and achievable. They need to find the right mix of people who can direct the membership effort, and provide some budget for the committee's efforts.

An elected chapter officer should be assigned to assist the membership committee, but someone other than the elected officer should be designated as the chair.

Continuity is extremely important. The membership recruitment season must run throughout the year, although a brief period or two of special effort can help. Membership recruitment strategies are more effective if they encompass more than just annual campaigns, with new leaders or workers each time.

Why People Join SWCS

Your chapter should develop a list of specific reasons why people would want to join and become active in your chapter. This list should include local benefits for each kind of member, agency, or group. The list will help you target recruitment efforts to specific potential membership segments, which will greatly increase your success.

There are many general reasons that people join and stay in SWCS. These reasons are very important for retaining and adding members. Therefore, we have included a list of them herein.

Why Should the Employer/Supervisor Encourage SWCS Membership?

Active SWCS members are valuable assets to employers and supervisors. Your chapter can invite employers and supervisors to actively encourage their employees to join SWCS and other professional organizations. You can tell them some compelling reasons. For example, employees who are SWCS members…

- are better sources of information for the organization because they read the Journal of Soil and Water Conservation; talk with other people in the same discipline or related fields; hear about the plans and activities of many other organizations; and are knowledgeable about emerging environmental and community issues.
- approach their jobs with a little broader perspective, and can more easily work with people in other groups to think of solutions for resource constraints or administrative problems.
- obtain professional development outside the job by talking with people, by working at or leading meetings, in resolving conflicts, and in putting thoughts on paper or in the computer.
- can help tap some useful ideas that are not present within the organization. They can help get ideas across to others in a way that their organization cannot do itself, because SWCS is made up of so many disciplines, institutions and nations.
- help organize activities or programs in SWCS, write for the Journal of Soil and Water Conservation or other publications, earn awards from SWCS, or even gain certification as conservation professionals. Their supervisors thus gain something positive to tell others as well as to commend the employee.

Recruiting New Members

SWCS through the dedicated involvement of local chapters and individual members must continuously strive to bring in new members in order to gain a net expansion of active, dedicated natural resource professionals and other interested citizens in many countries.

Review the checklists at the end of this document for suggestions on how to identify potential members and how to contact them. The key is not to just develop lists of likely candidates for membership, but also to be diligent in making contacts and following up with them.

The SWCS headquarters staff will be glad to work closely with you in designing your membership effort including several recruitment aids. Headquarters will provide upon request new membership/termination records, chapter rosters, membership brochures, membership labels, tabletop display, announcements in the Conservogram and announcements in Chapter notes.

Motivating Members To Remain Active

Membership growth is easiest by far if you can keep your current members! Recruiting new people to become members is never enough. The key to maintaining your members is to encourage and invite them to be active participants. This is accomplished, in part, through frequent communication. Some specific suggestions are included on a checklist herein.

Membership growth is easier, too, if your chapter makes sure through systematic efforts that you are meeting the needs of existing members. Whenever possible, chapter leaders and other members should informally invite comment from existing members on their views of SWCS and the chapter. These comments should be passed on to the Executive Committee.

Periodically, you might bring a number of members together in a focus group to explore their specific views on the SWCS and the chapter. This will give the chapter a set of written suggestions for action.

At least once every year or two, you might send out a survey questionnaire to every member with specific items on which you want feedback. Leave space for the member to make specific comments or suggestions.

At four or five-year intervals, your chapter should engage in a more formal strategic planning exercise to make certain that you are meeting the needs of your members and the communities that you serve.

Why People May Consider Dropping Out

Your chapter must find out specifically why people want to drop their membership in SWCS. Make every effort to say clearly to them, "We want you, we need you. How have we failed you? What will it take to keep you in or get you back?" Share your results with chapter officers and with SWCS headquarters. There may be many reasons why a member will choose to leave SWCS or any other group. There are "real" reasons why people want to leave an organization. Some reasons may mean we need to accept their decision. It still would be useful to talk to them or send a brief questionnaire to record their reasons and their suggestions for use by SWCS. Several other reasons, however, suggest that SWCS or the chapter can respond in a way that keeps the member in the group.

Members may decide not to renew because:

1. Lack of Communication
   They were given no orientation.
   No one returned telephone calls.
   No one responded to questions sent by mail.
   No one communicated with them after dues payment.
   No one asked them to renew!

2. Involvement
   They were not asked to be involved nor did they get involved.
   Felt left out or slighted by the leadership.
   May have left due to not being elected to office, or get the committee appointment they wanted, or otherwise didn't get their way.

3 Disagreements

There was some minor disagreement within the chapter or the organization.
They complained and no one paid attention.
After terminating their membership no one followed up and asked why.

4. Unorganized meetings
   They thought meetings were chaotic (or boring).
   Actions of the chapter Executive Committee were not explained.
   The group didn't seem able to accomplish its stated purposes, or had lost its original purpose and direction. The group seemed to take the easy way out on tough questions.

5. Different goals and mission
   The group made decisions that they couldn't agree to support.
   Did not receive the degree of prestige or status from their involvement in the group, or otherwise the group didn't meet their needs or measure up to their expectations.

6. Cost
   The cost and the time involvement seem unrealistic or unfair to them.
   They feel burned out.

It is important to ask how people feel about SWCS and the chapter for another reason -- they can help you build a stronger and more effective group that is worth their involvement. The key element for involvement from members is one on one communications. Members talking with members and communicating with each other on important issues regarding chapter involvement is key to creating strong stable chapter involvement. These conversations can include, but not limited to, potential new members, workshops or even future chapter leaders and officers.

MEMBERSHIP PLANNING CHECK LISTS

ORGANIZE THE MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE FOR SUCCESS

Mark with an "X" those activities which you are doing or have done recently. Mark with a "0" those activities you plan to do this year.

- ❑ Establish the purpose of the Membership Committee including written realistic goals for retention of current members, reattraction of old members, and solicitation for new members.
- ❑ Ensure Membership Committee is equally represented for diversity of agencies and cultures.
- ❑ Look at previous years' figures and this year's market conditions. Create measurable tasks to help achieve the goals that are short-term and achievable.
- ❑ Get the Membership Committee and Executive Committee to buy into the goals. Get each member of the two committees to pledge to bring in a certain number of new members and get them to challange all other committees and task force members.
- ❑ Appoint a Membership Committee and Chair whose primary goals are to increase membership and retain current members. Committee members should be appointed for more than one year; from agencies, firms, and organizations you wish to include in your chapter membership, noting skills needed or personal characteristics desired.
- ❑ Orient the committee as soon as possible to its task, gain the commitment of each member, and put the group in contact with former membership committee chairs.
- ❑ Ask the committee to identify current, past, and prospective members' needs and desires upon which chapter short- and long-range plans can be based.
- ❑ Have the committee schedule regular meetings or teleconferences.
- ❑ Develop a committee budget with the committee for recruitment awards and materials.
- ❑ Recognize the committee's accomplishments during the year and/or at the close of a special campaign.
- ❑ Evaluate the committee's actions and results and suggest changes for the following year(s).
- ❑ Keep records of committee activities and evaluations to aid future efforts.
- ❑ Encourage committee members to attend the regional chapter development workshop.

RETAIN MEMBERS

Mark with an "X" those activities which you are doing or have done recently. Mark with an "0" those activities you plan to do this year.

- ❑ Contact people immediately after they join or transfer into the chapter, welcome them to the chapter, determine their interests and background, and notify them about upcoming chapter events. Include in a letter of welcome "One of the treasured traditions of our chapter is that each new member brings in at least one high quality new member in their first year of membership."
- ❑ Recognize new members at meetings and by publishing their names, titles, addresses and telephone numbers in your newsletter and membership directory.
- ❑ Periodically survey specific segments of your membership (i.e. students, retirees, regular, etc.) about program preferences by mail or telephone. Conduct focus groups with prospective members to determine why they are not members and what it might take to get them to join. Also,telephone former members to determine why they discontinued their memberships. Pass these responses on to all of the members.
- ❑ Hold more meetings through the year varying their format, timing, and location to meet the identified interests and needs of the current members and former members.

- Increase the diversity of activities and issues, perhaps including some not-so-traditional, to meet the identified interests and needs of your members and former members.
- Involve student members in chapter activities and maintain effective liaison with student chapters and their advisors. Conduct joint activities including action events on or near campus that attract visibility and members as well as meet local conservation needs.
- Involve retirees and make it easy for them to participate in chapter activities such as being spokespersons for legisIative positions or mentoring students and young professionals, while recognizing them for their long-term service to the Society and to land and water conservation generally.
- Communicate your chapter's plans/activities to members frequently and regularly through a newsletter, an annual activities calendar, or agency and other organization newsletters,
- Recognize members for their accomplishments through local, regional and international awards programs of SWCS and other organizations.
- Distribute the “terminated members” list provided by SWCS headquarters to all Membership Committee and Executive Committee members.
- Assign appropriate members (volunteers are best) to contact terminated members.
    - Ask them if they inadvertently forgot to renew their membership.
    - Ask them why they did not renew.
    - Address concerns at Executive and Membership committee meetings and through correspondence.

THE UNIVERSE OF PROSPECTIVE MEMBERS

Mark with an "X" the groups of potential members which you have focused membership recruitment efforts toward during the last year. Mark with an "0" the groups of potential members you plan to focus on this year.

Your lists of prospective members can be compiled from many different sources; from member suggestions, chapter meeting attendance lists, directories or mailing lists, etc. In addition to names, addresses, telephone numbers, and occupation or affiliation, it helps to have other information that may assist you in motivating them to join This may include items such as environmental interests, hobbies, employment history, etc.

- New employees and newly transferred employees from many agencies
- People who used to belong to SWCS or a similar group
- Retirees from other professional careers who may wish to volunteer their skills to land and water conservation
- Employees of local, state, provincial, and federal government in departments or agencies you haven't thought of before, in those you have considered, and those you are in!
- Conservation district supervisors and employees, and people who are affiliated with similar groups
- Members of planning or coordinating committees or boards and their staffs
- Legislators at all levels, and their staff members
- Judges and attorneys
- Employees and executives of corporations and industry groups of all kinds
- Members of other organizations, clubs, and societies, especially those interested in natural resources and the environment or in education
- Farmers and ranchers
- Miners and mining companies
- Private self-employed consultants
- Rural Water Associations

- ❑ Public Utility Services
- ❑ Bankers, and bankers' organizations
- ❑ Members of the clergy
- ❑ College and university professors, in many departments, and other staff.
- ❑ Elementary and secondary school teachers, science teachers, or other coordinators
- ❑ Students in many university/college departments and majors
- ❑ Libraries and individual librarians
- ❑ News media people, in both print and electronic media
- ❑ Leaders and staffs of international agencies and organizations
- ❑ Citizens of other nations
- ❑ Others

MEMBERSHIP STRATEGIES

Mark with an "X" those activities which you are doing or have done recently. Mark with an "0" those activities you plan to do this year.

- ❑ Telephone or visit nonrenewers during the month preceding their anniversary date.
- ❑ Encourage chapter members to participate in a SWCS annual membership campaign to receive individual and chapter recognition.
- ❑ Send SWCS headquarters lists of nonmembers who attended chapter conferences or seminars so they can be invited to join. Arrange for chapter members to make follow-up contacts.
- ❑ Ask chapter members who are on university faculty or staff request that their library, department, or division become a subscriber to the Journal of Soil and Water Conservation.
- ❑ Distribute "Spread the Word" sheets at chapter meetings and in committee activities or other events.
- ❑ Prepare a brief set of past chapter accomplishments and goals for the coming year as an aid for members to talk with prospective members.
- ❑ Display SWCS publications at chapter meetings as well as at meetings of other organizations.
- ❑ Develop a system to determine members' interests (and preferences for service), plan chapter programs accordingly, and give members opportunities to be involved in chapter activities.
- ❑ Increase the number of special conferences and seminars on conservation and professional development topics.
- ❑ Strengthen communications to members and prospects about chapter events, plans, and people.
- ❑ Encourage participation in SWCS Insurance Plan and Credit Card Program as worthwhile services and useful membership retention tools.
- ❑ Encourage USDA members to renew through payroll deduction to increase membership retention.
- ❑ Develop a training module for new employees on professional development, including participation in professional societies.
- ❑ Develop a training module for Technical Service Providers (TSP) on professional development, including participation in professional societies.

CHAPTER OFFICERS' COMMITTMENT TO THE MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE

Chapter officers will:

- Give the committee the responsibility of membership with enough flexibility to “do what they think is best” and to make changes along the way.
- Help the committee find volunteers.
- Provide as much funding and support for the committee activities as they can.
- Help the committee communicate with members and SWCS.
- Help the committee invite nonmembers to join.
- Help the committee keep abreast of what other committees in the chapter and region are doing.
- Make the committee chair a member (ex officio in some chapters) of the Executive Committee so that the committee can contribute to the whole of the chapter.
- Contact the committee regularly to see how it is doing and to assess together its progress.
- Reward good efforts by members of the committee and by other members of the chapter.
- Participate in a SWCS membership campaign, if one exists.

THE MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE'S COMMITMENT TO CHAPTER OFFICERS

The Membership Committee will:

- Work with the chapter officers to set overall and interim goals for each class of membership.
- Agree early in the year to accept the full responsibility for the committee and work with chapter officers to make the chapter successful.
- Suggest members serve on the committee in subsequent years who reflect the desired make-up of. the chapter membership.
- Prepare a proposed budget for the year's activities.
- Report to the chapter regularly on committee activities.
- Keep records of activities and results to assist planning for subsequent years.
- Complete all committee’s duties and responsibilities as outlined in the state’s committee description.
- Review monthly membership reports and provide guidance to Chapter Officers and others, as appropriate.
    - Encourage membership renewals (terminated list)
    - Recognize new members (new members’ list)
- Annually analyze membership reports and provide results to the SWCS Board
    - Define trends
    - Evaluate membership demographics (location, employers, membership levels)
    - Perform other analyses as requested by the SWCS Board of Directors
- Collaborate with other SWCS Chapter Committees to integrate membership recruitment into Committee endeavors and use projects for membership recruitment.
- Communicate often and in varied ways with:
    - area/section directors or Council members
    - newsletter editor

- chapter officers
- other members of the chapter
- student chapter members, officers, and advisors
- university department chairs and libraries
- regional member of SWCS's Chapter Development and Membership Committee
- SWCS Board of Director member representing our region
- SWCS international headquarters
- other