

Tools for Neighborhood Organizers

The Secrets of Membership Recruitment

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Introduction

RECRUITING NEW MEMBERS FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION

Big organizations are more powerful than small ones.

Organizations that want to get things done can always use more members. Some empowerment organizations have tens of thousands of members. Others but a handful. Clearly, bigger organizations are more powerful than small ones.

Do the big organizations know something the small ones don't? Is there a secret to recruiting members?

People join because someone asks them to join.

Not really. The simple fact is, big organizations have more members because they *ask* more people to become members. They don't invite just a few people to join, they ask lots of people. They don't do it in a haphazard way. They do it constantly and they do it systematically.

If there is a secret to membership recruitment, this is it. Be methodical. Do what the big organizations do:

- Define your community.
- Define a member
- Determine the most effective way of reaching potential members
- Set a membership recruitment goal.
- Systematically ask people to join.

The Membership Community

Who does your organization represent?

Most organizations have a natural constituency. For a "turf" or geographically based organization it is the people who live and work in a particular neighborhood. For a labor organization it's the people who work for a particular employer or do a particular kind of job. For a political organization it's registered voters. For a business organization it's the people who own or manage businesses. For an issue based organization it's the people affected by a particular issue. Groups also organize around interests as varied as ethnic background, race, religion and hobbies.

The point is, a potential member is not "anyone," and no one

**No organization
represents everyone**

organization is of interest to everyone. The very first step in developing a membership recruitment plan is to clearly define just who might be interested in your organization.

Targeting

Once an organization's universe or potential audience has been defined, the savvy organizer will narrow the search for members even further by "targeting" particular groups of people (a salesman might call this "segmenting the market." Take for instance, the economic justice organization that selected rising electric rates as an issue. Virtually everyone is a consumer of electricity. However, the organization's research found that low and moderate income residential customers using relatively small amounts of electric power paid the highest rates per kilowatt hour. Learning this, the organization's leaders decided to "target" or recruit low and moderate income families by developing a membership recruitment campaign reaching that particular segment of the population.

**Find potential
members through
research.**

But, how could the organization find and reach this targeted audience? In this case, the organization narrowed its search for members by conducting systematic door-to-door membership recruitment campaigns in low and moderate income neighborhoods. Using data from the most recent Census, the organizers first selected neighborhoods with average household income below the median. Next the census data was used to further screen neighborhoods for racial makeup, age characteristics and density of population (especially important in door-to-door drives). Finally, the organizers conducted windshield surveys and undertook test door knocking before finally choosing a handful of neighborhoods for an intensive membership recruitment campaign.

A turf-based or neighborhood organization has a slightly different problem. Everyone residing within a defined geographical boundary is a potential member. However, even a small neighborhood includes 3,000 or 4,000 people in 1,500 to 3,000 households. Many neighborhoods are twice or even three times as large. Although the long term goal is to reach out to everyone, few neighborhood groups have the resources to do so on a regular basis. Here then, census data can also be helpful in gaining an accurate understanding of the neighborhood's income, ethnic and age make-up. If the organization's leaders find the active membership of the neighborhood group is not reflective of

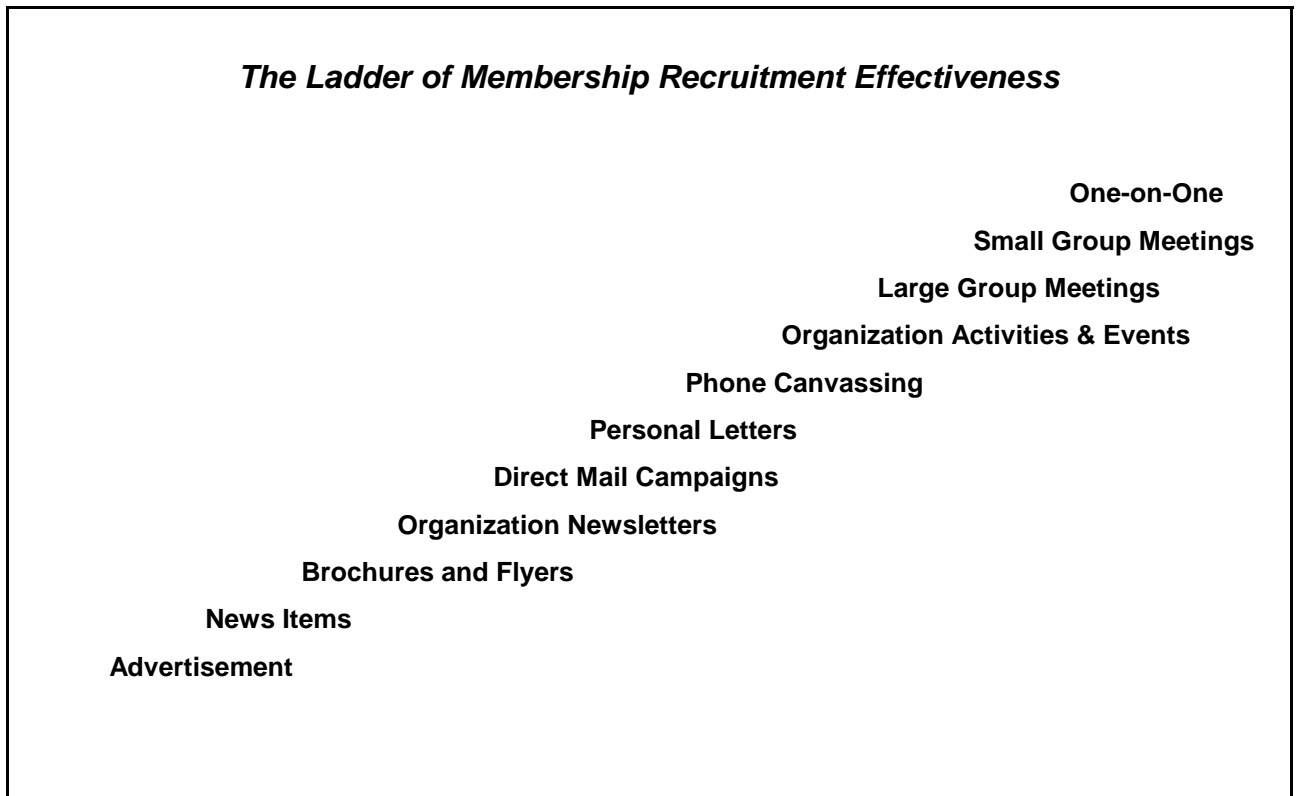
the neighborhood as a whole, the membership outreach program might target the "missing" membership.

Reaching the Targeted Audience

“The only way I know to organize is to talk to one person, and then you talk to another person, and then you talk to another...”
Cesar Chavez

The late Cesar Chavez was once asked how he organized the United Farm Workers. "Well," he said, "the only way I know to organize is to talk to one person, then you talk to another person, then you talk to another person, and then you talk to another person." Chavez had discovered what all successful organizers eventually come to understand. The way to recruit people is to talk to them, one-by-one.

As depicted in the following scale of effectiveness, there are other, but less effective ways of organizing people. The scale is like a ladder. The lower rungs get you started, but to really reach and involve people you have to move to the higher rungs.



One to One

ONE-TO-ONE RECRUITING

As Chavez said, in organizing there is no substitute for the person-to-person meeting or interview. We're not talking about a chance meeting or an off-hand membership pitch during a social engagement, but about an appointment or time set aside just for the purpose of discussing the organization's business.

Generally, there are two common ways of conducting a one-on-one membership recruitment meeting: the door-to-door canvass or the personal "interview" or meeting. The door-to-door canvass is the most effective method of personally reaching each household in a targeted area, and an organization with a staff of organizers may canvass routinely. On the other hand, an all volunteer neighborhood based group might canvass just once or twice a year. Neighborhood organizing drives are described in more detail later.

The One-on-One Interview

In a door-to-door organizing drive, the conversation is necessarily very short, often only a few minutes long. The scheduled "interview," on the other hand, may take up to an hour. Why do it? Because it's an opportunity to learn about someone's interests, values and talents. The interview is particularly useful in identifying and recruiting new leaders and is often used as a follow-up to other recruitment programs. For instance, a door-to-door canvass, a phone canvass, a direct mail campaign or sign-up sheets from meetings can all be used to identify the people to be interviewed. Regardless of how names are gathered, the process is about the same:

Use the interview to learn more about someone's interests, values and talents.

Make a List: Begin by making a list of people you believe should be members of your organization or who will make good volunteers or leaders. Make an appointment to see them, tell them you want to talk about your group.

Prepare Yourself: Become familiar with your organization's issues and history so you can comfortably answer the most common questions (but don't feel like you have to know all the

When meeting with people, be clear ahead of time why.

answers, because you won't). If you are nervous, it helps to practice ahead of time by role playing the interview with another organization member. Prior to the meeting, think through what you want to accomplish during the meeting. Most of all, be yourself.

Legitimize Yourself: So that the person you are interviewing doesn't wonder the whole time what it is you *really* want, explain early on why you are meeting. (e.g., that you'd like to get to know them better, or that you are going to ask them to join your organization). Tell them a little bit about your organization and say a little something about yourself, why you joined and how people working together can accomplish what no one person can. However, don't talk too much. Mostly, you are meeting to learn more about the person.

Listen: Draw people out. Find out about their self-interests and their concerns by asking open ended questions and listening. "Tell me about yourself?" "What are some of the issues that concern you?" "How does an issue like that affect you?" "What would you like to do about it?" "What have they heard about our organization?" "What other organizations do you belong to?" "Why did you get involved?" "How are you involved?" "Who else should I talk to?"

Get a Commitment: Don't leave the question dangling. Ask the person to join your organization (or, if they are already a member, to undertake a specific volunteer job in line with their skills and abilities, but most important in line with their interests). If you are seeking a volunteer, ask them to do a specific thing on a specific day. If you are seeking a major commitment or a large contribution, and the person isn't prepared to decide, ask "when can I get back to you?"

Follow-up: Immediately following the meeting (but not during it) make a note to yourself about the the important points of your conversation and of the person's commitment. If you've said you'll get back to them, do so as scheduled. They'll be impressed. And appreciative.

House Meetings

HOUSE MEETINGS

The House Meeting is an easy way to introduce friends and neighbors to your organization and a natural way to recruit members. Some organizations use a combination of individual meetings and house meetings for both membership recruitment and for leadership development.

For instance, potential leaders are first interviewed one-on-one by an organizer or by one or two members of an organizational development team. Those interviewed are then invited to meet with others at a house meeting. At these small gatherings, people learn a little about one another and of their concerns for the community. The gathered leaders then collectively agree to conduct additional house meetings in their community.

In a common neighborhood organization scenario, ten or so leaders at the first house meeting might each agree to host a house meeting for ten or so of their neighbors. The agenda for the second round of meetings is similar to the first one, with a discussion of community issues and the role of a neighborhood organization. The folks attending the house meetings are, of course, encouraged to join the organization. The original group of leaders meet again to report back to one another on each of their house meetings. They might report on how many people attended, how many became members and the issues that were discussed.

Overview of a House Meeting

A House Meeting is an informal affair, most often held in the home of a current organization member. Several members may work together as "hosts." At the meeting, the host welcomes and introduces everyone, and explains the purpose of the meeting. Usually, a second member will then make a short presentation explaining how the organization works, why it was founded, its philosophy and goals and its importance to the neighborhood. A good presentation will include a briefing on current activities, including when and how often the organization meets, the current number of members and how people attending the house meeting can get involved in the organization's activities.

Following questions and answers, the host, or another organization member, may ask everyone present to become a dues paying member. Often, at this point, the host gets out her own checkbook. In keeping with the informal nature of the event, the "program" should take no more than 45 to 50 minutes and refreshments are served.

House Meetings Are Simple If You Follow These Five Easy Steps:

- 1. Give yourself at least two to three weeks to prepare for the meeting.**
- 2. Make a list of 20 to 30 people to invite. Friends, co-workers and neighbors are best. Remember that only about one-third of the people you invite will attend. So, if you want 10 people, invite 30.**
- 3. Personally invite people. Two weeks before the meeting, hand deliver or mail a personal invitation to the people on your list.**
- 4. Ten days before the meeting call everyone you've invited. Ask if they are planning to attend. (Record: "Yes", "No" or "Maybe"). If "Yes" or "Maybe," see if they have directions, time and date.**
- 5. One day before the meeting, call back all the "Yes" and "Maybe" responses to remind them of the meeting. This might seem excessive, but people do forget. This reminder phone call is very important!**

A Sample House Meeting Agenda

7:00 p.m.	Welcome and Introductions	—	Host 1
7:05 p.m.	Review of Meeting Agenda and Purpose of Meeting	—	Host 1
7:10 p.m.	How and why organization was started.	—	Host 2
7:25 p.m.	Issues organization is working on	—	Host 3
7:35 p.m.	Questions & Answers	—	Host 2 & 3
7:45 p.m.	How to become an organization member	—	Host 1
7:50 p.m.	Refreshments		

Meeting Planning Turn-Out Record

Make a list of people to invite. Send a personal invitation at least two weeks in advance. Call them 7 to 10 days before the meeting to see if they plan to attend. Call all “Yes” and “Maybe’s” the day before the meeting to remind them.

Name and Address	Phone	Yes	No	May-be	Notes

THE NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZING DRIVE

Perhaps the single most effective way to organize a neighborhood is with a door-to-door organizing drive. There is no big secret on how to conduct a drive, but the work involved is considerable. On the other hand, the payoffs are considerable too.

The payoffs include an opportunity to talk, one-on-one, with nearly every household in your neighborhood. In doing so, you will learn about the real issues that concern the vast majority of people in your neighborhood, recruit a large number of members for the organization and discover some very talented people.

Below, the eight essential steps that go into a neighborhood organizing drive that culminates in a large neighborhood meeting are described.

1. Form an Organizing Committee

Use your one-on-one interviewing skills first to form an Organizing Committee. The Organizing Committee should include 10 or more neighborhood people committed to starting a new neighborhood organization or, in the case of an existing organization, conducting a serious membership recruitment campaign. If you have fewer than 10 people, spend some time visiting your friends, neighbors, church or other institutional acquaintances. You are looking for people concerned about neighborhood issues and, more important, people who are willing to do the work of forming a new organization or reinvigorating an existing one. Be sure the Organizing Committee is diverse and representative of the neighborhood. If you are building a permanent, multi-issue neighborhood group, the ideal Organizing Committee member is one respected by other neighborhood residents, isn't into a power trip and isn't viewed as a single issue zealot.

2. Identify the neighborhood to be organized

Ideally, the area targeted for the organizing drive will be made up of several hundred (500 to 1,000) households, be fairly compact and home to the members of the Organizing Committee. If you

aren't already familiar with the neighborhood, spend some time driving around and surveying potential "turf." Use a city map or precinct maps to define the neighborhood for the organizing drive.

3. Research

As you survey the neighborhood look for obvious issues: abandoned or boarded up houses, junk left in vacant lots, poorly maintained streets or parks, poor drainage, etc. Find out more about the neighborhood from census data (average income, racial and ethnic groups, number of children, number of seniors, etc.). Various governmental agencies may have reports or documents that will be of help in learning more about the neighborhood and help you anticipate issues. Check with the Planning Department, DCLU, Metro, etc. And, of course, spend some time interviewing neighborhood leaders, city and other government employees, religious leaders, business leaders and others who are familiar with the neighborhood.

4. Prepare address labels

With the help of other members of the Organizing Committee, prepare address labels for all households in the targeted area. Use Coles or a similar city directory (found in the reference section of most public libraries) as the source for names and addresses. If you are using home computers to prepare the labels, consider obtaining an inexpensive shareware database program, like File Express, so that the work can be divided up among several people and the information shared

5. The Mailing

A few days before beginning the door-to-door membership recruitment drive, a letter is sent to all households in the targeted neighborhood. The letter tells a little about the organization, invites people to a neighborhood wide meeting that will be held in about two weeks, and informs them that someone will be knocking on their door to talk about the organization and invite them to join. The letter is signed by the 10-20 people on the Organizing Committee. (A sample letter is attached).

Because mailing can be expensive, some groups use the letter as a "door hanger," covering the neighborhood a few days in advance of the door knocking drive.

6. Door Knocking

The best time to reach people at home is after 5 p.m. week days and Saturday mornings. The Organizing Committee meets for coffee on a Saturday morning, is briefed, and hits the doors by 9:30 a.m. Each member is assigned specific blocks. At first they work in pairs, but after the first few doors they will probably feel comfortable working solo so more turf can be covered. Limit the conversation per door to an average of about 5 minutes. If you find an exceptional person who might make a good leader, set up a time to return and talk at more length or invite them to the next Organizing Committee meeting.

At the door, introduce yourself, remind them of the letter they received, solicit their ideas about the issues the organization should work on, ask them to join, and invite them to the neighborhood wide meeting. Thank them for their time, leave a meeting notice flyer and move on. If no one is home, leave a meeting flyer behind.

With each conversation record the persons name and phone number, the issues about which they are concerned, whether or not they plan to attend the neighborhood wide meeting, and if they need a ride. Keep track too of the addresses where no one was home so you can return at a later time.

At around 2 p.m. return to "home base." Turn in the completed interview forms and the tally sheets (sample attached). De-brief the days events and make plans for continued door knocking the next Saturday or during the evening of the following week.

7. The Neighborhood Meeting

The goal of the Organizing Committee is to canvass the entire targeted area or neighborhood before the big neighborhood meeting. Before the meeting the Organizing Committee reviews the "data" they have collected. Because they have been asking about issues and concerns, they know in advance what to expect at the big meeting and they will be prepared to move into action on the "best" issue. The Organizers have also been asking people if they plan to attend the neighborhood meeting so they have a pretty good idea on the turnout.

The Meeting Agenda

The meeting is carefully planned in advance so it starts and ends on time. The goal is to create a sense of power and accomplishment from the beginning. The meeting is chaired by a member of the Organizing Committee and with roles for other members of the Committee (greeters, sign-up tables, specific agenda items, etc.).

The meeting starts with a welcome a review of the evenings agenda and key people (the Organizing Committee) are introduced. If there are twenty or fewer people in attendance, ask everyone to stand-up, give their name and address. A member of the Organizing Committee (OC) then gives a brief background of the organization.

Next, a member of the OC leads a discussion on neighborhood issues. This is not a gripe session. Everyone in the audience is asked to state, in a word or two, the most serious issue in the neighborhood. When all issues are listed, a vote is taken (by a show of hands) on the one issue people want to tackle first. Because you have done your homework (see below) you pretty much know the top few issues and already have a plan of action prepared. This action plan is outlined (by yet another member of the OC) and the audience votes to affirm it. Since the plan includes a role for a large number of people, commitments are obtained from people right then and there.

Finally, an OC member makes a pitch for memberships, the Chair person summarizes the decisions that were made and reminds everyone of their commitments. The time, date and place of the next meeting (which will be to take action on the top issue) is announced and the meeting is adjourned.

Research

During the door-to-door canvass, the members of the Organizing Committee have kept track of neighborhood "problems" that have been mentioned and by keeping a tally of issues raised so they know before the big meeting what neighborhood issues concern most people. The Committee has also researched the most common issues

to know what can be done immediately and effectively. Therefore, at the big meeting, the OC will suggest an action plan to the full membership.

Turn-out

The door knockers have also kept track of who they talked to. A week before the meeting, they will call those who indicated an interest and ask if they are coming to the meeting. One or two nights before the meeting, they will give a reminder call to those who said "yes" or "maybe".

8. Follow-Up

Immediately after the meeting, the Organizing Committee gets together for a few minutes to "de-brief." The next day, those people who said they would attend, but didn't, are called to find out why, and are informed of the actions taken at the meeting.

The Organizing Committee will continue to meet regularly and plan for the next neighborhood meeting and for the "actions" planned around the issues identified by the organization.

SAMPLE LETTER
FOR ORGANIZING
DRIVE

THE OLDE NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION P.O. Box 123 Nice City, USA

August 28, 1994

Dear Neighbor,

We live near you in the Olde Neighborhood. We're writing to let you know about the ***Olde Neighborhood Association***.

You may have already heard about us. We're an independent, grassroots, membership organization working on neighborhood issues. We believe that all of us who live in the Olde Neighborhood should be making the decisions that change or affect our neighborhood. We are also committed to working together to keep it a great place to live. We're concerned about issues like:

✓ CRIME ✓ TRAFFIC ✓ PLAYGROUNDS ✓ AIRPLANE NOISE

as well as other problems or neighborhood opportunities people feel are important enough to work on.

We invite you to join us, help decide what needs to be done and work to build real neighborhood power. The ***Olde Neighborhood Association*** is owned by the people of our neighborhood—it's not government sponsored—and only members decide which issues to pursue (dues are only \$15 a year per household). Plan to attend our next neighborhood wide meeting:

DATE:	Tuesday, September 19
TIME:	7:30 p.m.
PLACE:	Olde Neighborhood Community
Center	4000 Maple Street

Soon, we'll be visiting your home seeking your ideas and asking you to join the ***Olde Neighborhood Association***. Working together we can make a real difference!

Your truly,

Millie Florescent	P.O. Tensal
Sally & Bob Jones	
1829 Royal Oak	1624 Cedar 2781 60th

P.S. List you special concerns on the back. We'll discuss them when we stop by.

ORGANIZING DRIVE - ISSUES TALLY

(List each issue that was mentioned and the number of times it

ISSUE	TALLY

NOTES :

**NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZING DRIVE
INTERESTED PEOPLE & NEW MEMBERS**

NAME	ADDRESS	ZIP	PHONE	JOIN? (\$)	MEET (Y/N)
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NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZING DRIVE WEEKLY SUMMARY REPORT

ORGANIZER: _____

ADDRESS: _____ PH: _____

NEIGHBORHOOD: _____
(Area Canvassed)

SUMMARY STATISTICS: (Interested (+) Neutral (0) Not Interested (-) ¹

DATE	DOORS	VISITS	HOURS	+	-	0	MEMBER	MEET

NOTES:

¹ Record the number of doors knocked on (DOORS); the number of people talked to (VISITS); the number of hours spent knocking on doors (HOURS); the number of people who are interested, neutral, not interested in getting involved; the number who actually joined; and the number who plan to attend the next meeting.

Activities

Opportunity knocks with every activity.

✓ **Tip:** Above all—keep lists. At every meeting, every event, pass around a sign-up sheet: name, address, phone number. Then follow-up. Ask those who aren't members to join, involve those who already are in active roles.

OPPORTUNITY ORGANIZING

1. Build recruitment into every activity.

Opportunity, the opportunity to recruit members and involve people, knocks. With every activity, with every event. Be prepared.

Public meetings, committee meetings, house meetings, group sponsored public hearings, dinners, potlucks and recreational activities all present the opportunity to recruit new members and volunteers. At every event, build time for recruitment into the agenda.

Other opportunities present themselves as well. Phone calls from people asking for information allow you to ask, "are you a member yet?" An invitation to speak at an event is also an opportunity to distribute literature and recruit members. Public hearings on issues of concern to your organization are a perfect chance to set up an information/membership recruitment table.

2. Recruitment is Every Leaders Responsibility

A leader is someone with a following. The strength of an organization can be measured, not just by the number of its members, but also by the number of its leaders.

Leaders involve people in the day to day details of an organization. It may not be quick or efficient, but efficiency is not the goal. Volunteers don't always "do it right," but that's not the goal either. The goal is to make the organization strong, vibrant and filled with the energy of people doing things.

It takes time to recruit new members, to train volunteers and to turn the energy loose, but the returns will be worth it in a strong and growing organization. Take the time and encourage other leaders to do the same.

3. Plan for Recruitment

Set Goals: How many members does your organization have now? How many do you want in three months? Six months? A year from now?

Be Accountable: Each leader should be asked to set an individual goal for membership recruitment. Review progress towards goals at each leadership meeting.

Be Strategic: Make lists of potential members, assign leaders to contact them. Make a list of upcoming events and, in each case, figure out a strategy for recruiting members and volunteers. Plan all events with membership recruitment as a priority.

Acknowledge Success: Membership recruitment is the lifeblood of all volunteer public-interest organizations. Members and leaders who bring in new members and involve volunteers should be praised and rewarded.

4. Keep People Involved

Back up your recruitment plan with a plan for involving members and volunteers.

For each special event, and for all on-going activities, make a list of jobs to be done and leadership roles to be filled. Find something for everyone to do, rotate leadership roles and express thanks. As often as possible, build a sense of community by celebrating and relaxing together.

5. Provide opportunities for growth and fun

Move people up. As people gain experience and confidence, provide them with new challenges and opportunities for growth. An inexperienced volunteer might start by "staffing" the welcoming table at an event. Next, she might lead a discussion. In time, she might chair a public meeting. Take time to train people for new jobs and for leadership roles and to involve them in training others.

A little known fact: Having fun and involving people builds

Sources

strong organizations. If people are among friends, laughing and enjoying one another, even hard work and long hours are okay.

SOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

Bruce Ballenger, *Membership Recruiting Manual*, Northern Rockies Action Group, 9 Placer St., Helena, MT 59601, 1981, 96 pgs.

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