

Engaging the Next Generation in Rotary

5 Strategies for Growing Your Club with Young Members

By Michael McQueen



If you believe all you read about Generation Y, you could be forgiven for assuming that the very last thing this group would want to be a part of is Rotary. After all, aren't they the most self-absorbed, materialistic, impatient and disloyal generation of young people the world has ever seen? Much of the media would have us believe so.

While sensationalist descriptions like these may sell newspapers, they are simply not accurate. Contrary to the negative press Gen Y have received in recent years, this dynamic group born between the early 1980s and late 1990s actually represent exciting news and a huge opportunity for Rotary.

In contrast to their older cousins Generation X (born mid 1960s to early 1980s), Gen Y want to be a part of something bigger than themselves. This is a group who crave community, truly want to make a difference, and have been raised with the confidence and self esteem to believe that they really can. Contrary to their self-centered reputation, a study in 2005 indicated that over 70% of Gen Ys actively volunteer on a weekly basis. What's more, they are an ambitious cohort who are actively looking for opportunities to network and connect with mentors in order to gain a competitive edge in their careers. What all this means is that Rotary represents many of the things this group are looking for – it's just that they don't know it.

That said, it can be very challenging to capture the attention of Gen Y and attract them as potential Rotarians. Below are 5 simple ideas that may help you engage the next generation as club members at a local level;

1. Look Back to Plan Forward

In the same way that businesses can accurately predict future sales by looking at their 'pipeline' of prospects, contacts and past activity, Rotary clubs would benefit from adopting a 'pipeline' perspective to membership growth – particularly with younger people.

The most common question I am asked by Rotarians as they look to attract young members is '*where can we look to find them*'. My response is that the young people you should be looking to invite to join your clubs are not somewhere 'out there' – in fact, you probably already know them!

In theory, there need be NO shortage of young people coming through as new Rotarians. After all, every year thousands of youth are involved in a myriad of programs run by local clubs and districts. Whether it is past participants in youth exchanges, RYLA camps, RYPEN programs, Interact or Rotaract clubs, I would urge you to think about all the young people in your local community or district who have been positively impacted by Rotary. Where are they today? Are they members of your club? If not, why not? Could it be that they were never invited to join?

If you want to grow your club with Gen Y members, a good place to start is to re-connect with the mass of young people who already know you and have benefitted from what you do. You may be surprised at how many of them will be very eager to 'give back' - all they may need is someone to ask.

2. Start Small

It is true that young people today are often very hesitant to make long-term commitments. Regardless of why this may be the case, if you are looking to attract younger members to your club you may find it more effective to start by inviting them to be a part of small, short-term projects rather than trying to persuade them to lock into a long-term membership commitment.



Only a few short weeks after I joined Rotary, the world was confronted with the devastation of the Christchurch earthquake. In response, my club organized a collection drive in our local area one Saturday and I put out the word on Facebook to see if any of my non-Rotarian friends were able or interested in helping out. Within minutes, Luke (pictured left) eagerly replied saying he'd love to lend a hand. As we spent the afternoon collecting funds, conversation naturally turned to Rotary - what it was all about and why I had joined.

Whether Luke ever joins a Rotary club is not really the point. The key message here is that many young people will be more than willing to help out with short-term targeted projects. As they do so, they may well 'catch' the vision and DNA of Rotary and build relationships with other club members which will make the choice to become a full member a less daunting one.

3. Focus on Outcomes rather than Process

Although both outcomes and process are two sides of the same equation, many organizations and businesses can easily fall into the trap of losing sight of **why** they do what they do (the outcome) and purely become focused on **what** they do and **how** they do it (the process). Over time, these historical practices get embedded in culture and become traditions, rituals or sacred cows – the things no-one dare question or change.

Naturally, young people come into organizations where there is a heavy emphasis on practices, traditions or protocols and the first question they ask is WHY? Typically there are two expressions of this question:

- a) Why do we do it **that way**? Gen Y will come into your Rotary clubs & innocently ask why you ring a bell to start the meeting, why you say a Rotary grace, why the club president wears the bling around their neck, why it is called 'fellowship' and the list goes on. Of course, how you respond to the why question is of critical importance - if you dismiss it or become defensive, this young group will disengage almost immediately.

The key thing to remember is that young people's questioning of why need not be perceived as a threat or challenge to the status quo – they really do want to understand the reasons behind the way things are done. Further still, smart leaders are beginning to recognize that the question of why from young people can actually be a gift. It can be a fantastic source of innovation and often causes us to pause and reflect on historical practices to evaluate whether are still relevant.

- b) Why do we do it **at all**? As a colleague once told me, people never go to the hardware store to buy a drill because they want a drill – they buy a drill because they want *a hole*! In the same way, young people will not be attracted to Rotary simply because they want to become a club member; they are attracted to clubs because of the benefits and outcomes that membership will lead to. In other words, when young people ask why you exist as a Rotary club, what they are really asking is *'what are you achieving; who are you helping; how are you making an impact; what's the point?'*

If local clubs are simply going through the motions of Rotary, meeting for meals once a week and achieving very little, it is highly unlikely that young people will want to join. Gen Y are action-orientated - they want to know what the tangible benefits and outcomes of being a Rotarian are long before they look to make a membership commitment. Whether these benefits are for them personally or for the broader community through service projects is beside the point – what does matter is that the outcomes and purpose are explicitly clear from the outset.

4. Use Stories to Get Your Message Through

Generation Y are highly experience-driven - their mantra is *don't tell me it is right, show me it works*. As a result, if you are looking to encourage a young person to consider joining Rotary, simply giving them impressive statistics or logical reasons for becoming a member will not be enough. Rather, what will impact and inspire them most are the stories and experiences you can share of the impact Rotary has made in your life and the world at large.

When I was looking for a Rotary club to join, the deciding factors for me were not the professional caliber of the club's members, the prestige of the club, the number of Paul Harris fellows or past district governors that were members, or the quality of the food. Rather, the decision of which club to join was made easy for me the day I sat down for coffee with a local club president who spent over an hour telling me the *stories* of his club. He told me about inspiring service projects the club had been involved in over the years both locally and abroad. He told me of the relationships he'd built with fellow Rotarians who were always there to lend a hand in good times and bad. As this president shared story after story of his local club, how could I help but be inspired and want to be a part of it.

If you are looking to attract young people to your clubs, get good at telling your Rotary story – the facts and logic may impress them, but your stories and experience will inspire them.

5. Concentrate on Common Purpose not Common Interests.

One of the things that makes Rotary so unique and powerful is that way in which it's guiding purpose and core values bring together people who would otherwise have very little in common. Rotary transcends ideological, political and cultural divides in a way few organisations can.

While Rotary is very effective at building communities that bridge continents, in the coming years the challenge you face is to build communities that bridge *generations* too.

It is highly likely that this next generation of Rotarians will look, sound and think differently to you. One young Rotarian I spoke with at a district conference recently described the surprise of club members when they discovered that she had a belly button ring and tattoos. For her, it spoke volumes that her fellow Rotarians were able to see past their initial shock at differences in outward appearance and rather focus on the thing they had in common – the purpose of being a Rotarian.

With currently only 2% of Rotary's membership worldwide being under the age of 30, there is enormous room for growth in attracting the next generation of Rotarians.

Young people truly do represent a huge opportunity for Rotary in the years and decades ahead. I assure you, there are a generation of passionate, talented and inspired young people in your communities who are ideally placed to join your ranks and continue the amazing work of Rotary. However, it is up to local clubs and members to make sure they have the invitation and opportunity to do so.



Michael McQueen is recognized internationally as a leading authority in youth trends & strategies for engaging with Gen Y.

Known for his upbeat and entertaining conference presentations, Michael featured as a plenary speaker at the 2011 Rotary International Convention in New Orleans.

To purchase a copy of Michael's bestselling book *The 'New' Rules of Engagement* or to find out more, visit www.TheNexgenGroup.com

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