



Feeding *the* Membership



Lorrie Penner, IAC 34 Secretary

Pancake breakfasts, chili cook-offs, and Friday fish fries. Do any of these sound like your chapter's latest membership drive or club meeting? Does the sweet smell of **free food** circle above your best-attended meetings? Most chapters I polled mentioned using these devices as the way to the aerobatic pilot's heart. But is it working?

Could it be as simple as "Bake it and they will come?"

I asked several International Aerobatic Club (IAC) chapter leaders about the key to retaining members and growing their chapters. They all agreed free food was fine for growing a pilot's waistline, but the factors for maintaining a chapter's health and well-being were a bit more complex.



"A chapter that grows, must have some established members who take an interest in new members . . . and help them feel they are a part of the group."

Mark Mattioli, president of IAC Chapter 52, thinks flight school affiliation is important. "Chapters that are affiliated with flight schools have a definite advantage," he says.

"In my experience, IAC chapters rise and fall with their connection to at least one successful aerobatic flight school," echoes Michael Church of IAC Chapter 120. "So, in the long run, it is the rise and fall of the schools that determines club health."

Of course, there are IAC chapters still growing that are not affiliated with a flight school, but most are. Many current and longtime members came to the chapter through their connection with a flight school that provided aerobatic training. In many cases there was an existing IAC chapter presence on the field or some IAC chapter members who flew at their airport.

Church gives an example of the rise and fall in one IAC chapter's history: Chapter 49 in Los Angeles. "[They] had no strong school and shrank annually through the '90s," says Church. "Then, two years ago, an existing school began strong contest support, and the chapter is again on the rise."

What if an aerobatic school isn't available? Bob Hart, IAC Chapter 1, offers that the next best thing is making those critical connections at the local airport—even if it doesn't have aerobatics. He says their chapter actively seeks members from local airports through cross involvement with local EAA chapters. So, the first rule of any marketing: Drop your bait where the fish swim. Got it.

Then there's IAC Chapter 52 Webmaster Doug Lovell, who explains the importance of the personal touch. "The club needs some people who enjoy getting to know new people and helping them succeed," he says. "Those are the same people who strike up a conversation with a stranger at the airport and talk with them long enough to interest them in the club." Fly friendly skies: check. Exposure to general-aviation pilots is the best bang for the buck—they already like to fly; they just need to hear more about aerobatics. Preach to the converted: check.

But wait. We're getting ahead of ourselves. Why would anyone want to join IAC in the first place? What keeps them paying dues? Hart tackles



Courtesy Laurie Zaleski

Volunteers were ready to help at this year's IAC Chapter 52 Blue Bowl.

that question. "[By] demonstrating to all current and potential members there is value in our product," says Hart. "Although we may be passionate about our sport, not everyone considers it at the same level. With discretionary income becoming more restricted, people tend to ask, 'What do I get for my buck?'" As Hart begins to make clear, at the end of the day we are selling a product. And our product ranges from the tangible to the intangible. Whether we are demonstrating through enhanced websites or resource availability and communications and networking tools, or simply the social interaction that comes from being surrounded by enthusiastic and like-minded pilots, we need to be clear that we offer a quality experience they want to be a part of.

Gordon Penner, IAC Chapter 34, points out an obvious benefit, often overlooked, that our chapters can offer to all pilots, from novice to expert. It's a unique, tangible resource unavailable anywhere else and easily accessible: At IAC chapters, we know a lot about flying airplanes. Obvious?

"Some of those people may want to join our merry little band," Penner says. "But overall, we want them to

know that we are here and that we are the aerobatic memory bank they can go to. Our collective knowledge of traditional aerobatic aircraft and their performance is extensive."

Why Google it? We have it right here firsthand. Some of the best, most experienced pilots around the country are IAC members ready to share their knowledge.

"One of the main missions of our club is to reach out to other groups of pilots about aerobatics," says Mattioli, dovetailing Penner's outlook. "By far, our educational seminars are a key offering of IAC chapters to other pilots and groups."

So, attracting new people to aerobatics is about outreach and making it a priority to attract and retain membership. As a club, we have to be noticed, but how?

Be there. Be visible. Kent Misegade's IAC Chapter 19, a regular presence at local fly-ins, engages attendees with a static display it shares with other area EAA chapters. Hart points specifically to his chapter's visible presence at an air show in northern Illinois. These venues offer both the flying and nonflying public a chance to interact and gain interest in the

sport of aerobatic flying; they are valuable tools used to increase sport and name recognition. Penner's Ohio chapter has also hopped on board by attending local air shows and regional fly-ins three times a year.

The hot topic lately has been attracting fresh public interest and growing the IAC with new members. However, while that's an important aspect to the overall health of the organization—and must not be overlooked—some see it as secondary to retaining membership. How do we hang on to the members we already have?

"I think the single most critical factor in retaining someone who has real interest, who isn't going to drift off, is that they find one or four people in the chapter who are friendly to them," responds Lovell.

Hmm...another member seeing value in the personal touch. Wait a minute—isn't that cheaper (and more effective) than Spaghetti Night?

"A chapter that grows," continues Lovell, "must have some established members who take an interest in new members, introduces them, helps them gain some notice, and helps them feel they are a part of the group."

As chapters, we need to develop and maintain a priority to attract and retain our chapter membership.



Courtesy Lorrie Penner

John Sollinger and the author, Lorrie Penner manning the IAC Chapter 34 booth at the Mid-Eastern Regional Fly-In (MERFI).

For the continued growth and retention of a chapter, there's a general consensus: The chapter needs to make it a priority to remain active and engage as many of its members as are interested. Some suggestions for activities that are working for their chapter come from Misegades:

1. Regular monthly flying and critiquing meetings from spring to fall at an airfield with a box.

2. Meetings at several airfields to attract a membership that is spread over four states (North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee).

3. Website and regular newsletter.

4. Frequent e-mail blasts to the entire chapter to keep people informed and warm.

5. An open-door policy to anyone interested, from tire kickers to Unlimited competitors.

6. Two, family-friendly annual contests focused on low cost, simplicity, safety, and fun.

Bob Hart adds a couple of practical suggestions:

1. Target noncompetition pilots, convincing them of the membership resource value regarding recreational aerobatics, training, proficiency, and maintenance considerations.

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Avin Chakravarti (left) and Gordon Penner at IAC Chapter 34 AcroCamp.

2. Actively pursue current members for their dues. If you haven't seen them in a while, they'll likely slip away. This usually requires reaching out to them with a personal phone call. It's amazing what you can get done with a cell phone and "hands free" on the way to and from O'Hare.

One outreach program our Ohio chapter has already established is

hosting a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Safety Seminar. It's an event that's working well. The beauty of this is that the FAA advertises for us and we usually end up with 25 to 30 local pilots we have never met before. Our chapter members are always interested in learning new things, and cost is minimal, since we serve only coffee and donuts. (The chapter will need a club member who is a certificated flight instructor and

Courtesy Lorrie Penner

will qualify with the FAA to be a speaker. Otherwise, make contact with the FAA Safety Team to set up an FAA speaker: www.FAAsafety.gov.)

On the subject of retaining members, Mattioli says his chapter likes to give as many members as they can a real function within the club. Members who can contribute feel more like a part of the process and are less likely to fade off. Why be a part of the club if you're not made to feel like a part of the club? They actively bring members up through the ranks into leadership roles. Whether the role is occasional guest speaker, new social director, or tapping members for specific jobs in the contest realm, making chapter members an important part of a team can help retention.

"An experienced member lost is worth two new members gained," Mattioli says. That about sums it up.

Did you notice nobody mentioned our contests as a source of new membership? Maybe experience has shown us something. Let's look at contests. Even though most chapters spend a considerable amount of time and effort organizing and running a

contest, they probably aren't the best way to attract new members.

"New members don't want to make a fool of themselves flying at a contest for the first time," says Lovell. "They want to make a good impression."

It is becoming apparent, from most of the folks I've talked to, that providing a welcoming atmosphere to new people and making them feel like they are part of a group are important factors in IAC outreach success. So late on a Saturday afternoon of a contest, with our members juggling a thousand details in their minds, isn't likely the best place to communicate that personal touch.

"There just isn't enough time to give to a new person during the frantic pace of keeping the contest on track," adds Penner, a past contest director.

There are as many ways to attract and retain members as one can dream up, and a few basic tenets that can help along the way. But the key ingredient remains: The chapter must make it an important priority, and not just the leadership is responsible—it's everyone within

Courtesy Doug Lovell



Ron Chadwick (right) entertains Bill Green (left) and Kendal Simpson.

the chapter. From making a phone call to striking up a conversation at the airport, every member is an ambassador for the chapter. And don't forget the free food! 🍷

Lorrie Penner is the IAC Chapter 34 secretary and IAC Achievement

Award chair since 2006, newsletter editor, and website administrator since 2002. She is a private pilot with glider rating, was the recipient of the Primary Achievement award in noncompetition aerobatics, and was the IAC 2008 Frank Price Cup winner with Gordon Penner.

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