

## **Members or Supporters?**

### **How to manage your contacts as a membership organisation**

#### **Introduction**

At ChangeStar, we have worked with a number of membership organisations over the years, and each has grappled with the same problem at some point - how to deal with their members and membership from a fundraising perspective.

This issue contains a range of thorny questions , including whether to seek new members or supporters (i.e. donors) in your recruitment programme, whether to send members different communications from other supporters and whether (and how) to ask members for additional cash gifts. We will aim to deal with these questions - and more - in this paper.

There is of course a caveat - this paper contains very general advice from our experience and one size does not always fit all - but we hope this paper provides some useful ways to think about some potentially tricky subjects.

The overall message is that you shouldn't be afraid to ask your members for more funds, as they could be some of your best donors. Also, the simplest and clearest solution to communicating with them is usually best - partly because it makes the options as clear as possible for potential members/supporters and partly because it is easier and cheaper to run for your organisation.

If you would like to discuss your own organisation's situation in more detail, please do contact our Director, Richard Docwra, for a chat - 07968 227 029 or [richard@changestar.co.uk](mailto:richard@changestar.co.uk).

#### **What are members?**

Organisations develop a membership base for different reasons. For some, membership is simply one means of gaining support, but for others representing the needs of their members is the very reason for their existence.

If you're managing a membership and fundraising function, you may first want to understand

why the idea of membership exists at your organisation. Does it still serve a specific, well-defined and important role? If not, you should aim to clearly define what membership is and the role you want it to play within the organisation. Make sure it is clearly differentiated from any other method of individual support. A lack of differentiation could make it harder for you to recruit both members and other supporters.

Overall, you need to have a clear idea of what function membership serves, what differentiates it from other forms of individual support at your organisation - and, most importantly, what people can gain from membership (both in terms of material benefits like additional publications and non-material things such as giving people a greater sense of intimacy with the organisation or more say in its direction).

### **Should we ask members for more money?**

Many organisations are afraid to ask their members for money on top of their annual membership fee, and this usually represents a wasted opportunity bordering on negligence.

This reluctance to ask often stems from a (perfectly reasonable) concern that members will feel they are already contributing through their membership fee and would be annoyed to receive further asks - whether cash or upgrades.

The reality is however that members are probably your greatest resource as an organisation, and in tests we've run, **members are usually more responsive than non-members to appeals.**

To make appeals to members work, you just need to clearly separate (in their own minds as well as yours) their status as a member from the financial contribution they are making. You can then explain how important their membership is, but then go on to tell them how important their financial contribution is too - and how you would like them to increase this.

This point should be made in any appeal you are making (through variable lasered text) but should be particularly emphasised in any upgrade appeals, as it then enables the member to be clear about the separate roles of the 'membership' part of their regular gift and the 'extra donation' part you are asking for.

One final, and important, point we should make about asking members for money. As part of any upgrade campaigns, try to convert as many members as possible into giving by monthly Direct Debit rather than annual cash gifts or annual or quarterly DDs. This is for the same reason as you would do it for non-members - i.e. it brings in a much higher average annual gift. One analysis we did for a membership organisation showed that members who gave their membership (and any additional donations) via a monthly DD were worth nearly **4 times more**

per year than those who gave it through an annual DD. As with all direct response work though - make sure you test these things.

### **Should we send different communications to members and other supporters?**

To a certain extent, this depends upon how much differentiation you have placed between the status of membership and other categories of individual support. For example, if you've presented membership as a way of getting closer to the organisation and its work, you will probably need to address this in the communications that members receive.

For some organisations however, the difference between members and other supporters is largely administrative, as members will simply have a chance to attend the organisation's AGM and vote in key decisions. In this case, they could potentially receive the same communications as other individual supporters, with the addition of invitations or voting materials at the appropriate points of the year.

But overall we suggest giving a tailored, personal approach to as many of your most valuable contacts as possible, and then trying to fit the remainder into a similar basic communication plan to other individual contacts - including cash appeals, newsletters etc. This is for reasons of efficiency and economy. Letters can be tailored to members using laser personalisation, and additional items can be placed in the yearplan for members (such as AGM invitations or special members magazines), as required.

### **Should we recruit members or supporters?**

It depends. If you have a very clear membership offer that is strongly differentiated from every other form of individual support for your organisation (e.g. where it is membership of a political party, rambling society etc.) then it may be effective to have a specific recruitment approach for members and a separate approach for non-members (i.e. supporters/donors). The targeting and approach for recruiting potential members may need to be different from that recruiting donors and supporters as the two audiences may well be different.

In other cases, a good general rule is to recruit supporters rather than members, but offer a membership tick box option below the direct debit form on the response form of each recruitment piece.

The reason for this is that, in our experience, becoming a member of an organisation is likely to be seen by people as a bigger step (and bigger statement) than simply supporting or donating to it. It may therefore be more difficult to recruit members than supporters from a general

audience. In addition to this, explaining the complexities of the membership offer can take away the valuable time you have to ask people to sign up. So, choose the more effective and simple option of getting them to donate some money first and *then* give the option to become members.

Finally, when you provide a membership tick box, make sure you explain the benefits of membership (both material and non-material) in one or two succinct sentences.

### **More information and support**

We hope these ideas have been helpful. If you'd like further support or ideas in approaching this, or any other aspect of fundraising or seeking change, then do give our Director, Richard Docwra, a call on 07968 227029.

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