

The American Clan System: Growing and Retaining Membership

Clan Sinclair USA

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Growing and Retaining Membership

The growth and retention of membership is one of the most pressing and prevalent problems among clans in the United States. Many clans have experienced a decrease in membership over the past ten to twenty years. In fact, 64% of the clans contacted for this study mentioned this problem. This is attributable to any number of causes including the economy, lack of youth involvement and relevancy of the clans to the current population.

Methodology

The question “what does your clan do to both obtain and retain new members” was queried to the 169 clans and clan associations that had an American address and were listed in the 2012 Directory of “The Highlander” magazine. Although this problem is worldwide among the clans, it was determined to only query those American associations at this time. Emails, when possible, were used. If an email address was incorrect (a common problem) or unavailable, a letter was posted to the listed address. Twenty-five clans, or 14.79%, responded to the question. Although this was a lower than normal desired response rate, the uniformity of the answers across a wide spectrum of clans and associations makes this report significant.

Commonplace Practices for Increasing Membership

Sixty-four percent of the clans responding named a clan presence at Highland games to be of great importance in recruiting new members. Many listed this as their primary recruitment tool.

Almost as important as the presence of a clan at the Highland games is the publication of a newsletter or other written source of clan news (52%).

Most of the clans appear to have some sort of renewal process for the retention of members. These processes range from one follow-up letter or call to a series of formal notices to the lapsed member.

Four of the 25 clans responding to the survey purchase advertisements in Scottish publications. Two clans have stopped this practice due to a lack of response.

Many of the clans indicated the value of personal contact in the retention of members. If possible, a clan commissioner or similar official should notify members in his or her district or state of the future games where a clan tent will be present. Some clans encourage state commissioners to occasionally conduct a social event for the clan members in the area.

Many of the clans have a genealogy section on their web site or in their newsletter for members only. Some of the clans have an established site of family trees which may entice new members.

Innovations in Practices for Increasing Membership

None of the responding clans had a “magic bullet” for increasing and retaining clan membership. Instead, many clans are using the same historical practices to attract new members but are refining those practices using modern day communication tools.

Newsletters are being emailed to members to save money on postage. Emailed newsletters can also be sent in a timelier manner than mail.

Twenty-eight percent of the clans who responded now utilize Pay Pal to pay for new memberships, renewals, and purchases of clan memorabilia. One clan mentioned that they are experimenting with the credit card mechanism that is placed on smart phones so as to have instant credit available at Highland games.

Almost half of the clans (48%) now have Web sites; several indicated that their site has attracted new members, particularly those using Pay Pal. The key to a successful Web site is to find someone who can create and maintain it. This is becoming less and less a problem as more people have these skills.

Facebook is a tool used by 16% of the reporting clans to communicate with their members and potential members. Facebook is a relatively new phenomenon that will appeal to both young, and now older, members.

Two of the clans claim non-profit (501(c)(3)) status. Non-profit status is relatively easy to obtain. It allows a clan to mail using non-profit mail rates and may afford members the right to deduct at least a portion of their membership dues on their income taxes.

Two clans conduct list serves (discussion groups), where members, (and non-members, if allowed) communicate with one another. One clan indicated that it has 170 active members on its list serve.

Another innovation practiced by several clans is automatic renewal of memberships. By obtaining prior approval of the member, the membership is automatically renewed by using an existing credit card number. More and more companies are using this method of renewal for their services.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious from the various responses of the participating clans that not every method of recruitment will work in the same way for every clan. It seems evident that the clans

claiming the most success in their membership drives and retention are those that are willing to try new and innovative methods.

The use of new techniques of communication and modern media is essential. At the very least, it could appeal to a younger audience. The use of new techniques will save money and time and increase efficiency. Use of the new media will also require fewer volunteers.