

*NWU 2000 Delegates Assembly:
Scuttlebutt also
Management and Recruitment Techniques*

by

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Accounting and Administrative Problems

National officers rejoiced exceedingly at the recent National Writers Union 2000 Delegates Assembly about the increase in NWU membership. However, for some delegates that rejoicing sounded like laughter from a fool's paradise in a wise delegate's hell. The treasurer admitted not knowing the actual membership costs then blamed a former NWU bookkeeper who apparently suffers from dyscalculia. To his credit, the treasurer accepted full personal responsibility for the overall accounting debacle.

The assembly resolved that an independent, certified public accountant should immediately conduct a forensic audit covering a three-year period. That auditor will receive a brief to evaluate the bookkeeping and accounting systems then recommend changes that will insure conformity with generally accepted accounting principles.

However, accepting responsibility for problems and auditing books does not solve myriad problems that emanate from administrative neglect. If members cannot compare the cost of recruitment and retention with dues income then recruiting becomes a catch-22. Inherently illogical rules and administrative conditions will then probably precede another undesirable financial outcome.

Union Dues and Staff Retention

Despite erratic delivery of membership data and a lack of local computerized record keeping, the membership increased phenomenally: a phenomenon that apparently has a financial downside.

A rough estimate by the treasurer showed that each new member will pay average dues of \$111.00/year (\$95.00/year at the lowest level). However, it will cost the National \$231.00/year to service and maintain them: an average per capita deficit of \$120.00/year. In that scenario, even a mathematically challenged bookkeeper will understand that increasing membership before increasing dues will increase the overall deficit. One delegate likened the situation to that of the retailer who priced all his inventory at \$50.00 below cost as a loss leader then claimed that he would make a profit on increased sales volume.

In contrast to NWU with 6,152 members, the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) with 5,629 freelance members in the UK and Ireland charges them £127.00/year (\$203.00/year) for similar services. NUJ does not expect its members to pay more than 1% of gross taxable income in dues. In cases of financial hardship, it charges only 0.5% when a member's income drops below £12,000.00/year (\$19,200.00). This dues scale serves to keep the union viable and accommodates those members who cannot afford full dues because of low income. The Graphic Arts Guild charges \$165.00/year (\$12,000–\$30,000/income) and \$215.00/year (\$30,000–\$55,000/income).

The NWU membership development director recently left union employ for higher pay and the union fired an allegedly incompetent bookkeeper. These changes cost the union, directly and indirectly, large sums of money and perhaps more significantly, time. If NWU pays its employees properly, and the members hold them strictly accountable, then it will not fear losing them to other employers. Staff dissatisfaction with salaries below the going rate results in incompetence and high turnover. Moreover, attrition of employees trained at union expense subsidizes other employers.

Common sense dictates that members face a substantial dues increase to keep the NWU viable. If members believe in the union and accept privileges and benefits from it then they should expect to pay the going rate for services and support.

Recruitment

Recruitment consists of three primary functions: finding new members, keeping them, and remaining financially viable. Membership attrition and deficits can negate many months of preparation. They result in taking one step forward and two steps backward. Attrition causes two financial disadvantages that Locals should consider when planning recruitment:

1. The per capita cost of finding members and persuading them to join.
2. The cost of replacing them when they do not renew their membership.

Moreover, the Locals need to receive up-to-date membership data and accurate fiscal information from the National before they turn their recruitment assumptions into conclusions. This will enable them to make the important and irreversible decisions necessary to efficient membership drives.

The National needs to change the erratic data delivery system that presently exists. Besides membership data, Locals also need a database that shows them, on a monthly cumulative and

comparative basis, the cost of, and income from, their recruitment efforts. Then they can make valid judgments based upon cost analysis and discard their ouija boards.

Historically, unreliable data and the lack of a suitable computer application have precluded many Locals from recruiting new members effectively. However, the National has started to clean up its act. The ubiquitous membership development director prepared a generic database as his swan song before leaving NWU to direct alumni services at Stanford University. If the National does not immediately find a computer savvy replacement for him then the investment in this database will probably fall into the same black hole as the financial records. The National has promised to distribute up-to-date files containing raw membership data free to Locals at regular monthly intervals. One can only hope that its employees will honor that promise.

The new NWU membership raw database has a generic format usable with many computer applications. However, practical evaluation exposes some drawbacks that, if corrected, would make it more useful to Locals. The database content does not directly correlate with information obtained from new members. For example, only "primary genre" information reaches the locals although new members can enter sixteen different genres on the application form. Similarly, "format" includes six categories. Both have the ambiguous "other" category and format also has "miscellaneous copy." Apparently, no naming convention exists that allows correlation of members by genre with the organized divisions. This creates more confusion.

National places great importance on its efforts to diversify and collects unrestricted information to that end. However, it omits the gender, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation, information from the Locals database. This information hardly classifies as private when new members enter it on an unrestricted membership application form. They also tend to preface almost every utterance with a declaration of their special interest grouping which further confirms that a privacy issue does not exist.

The application form, the database, and Local user needs require normalization to achieve stated recruitment objectives. Consequently, the generic database should have strictly controlled categories resulting from a poll of the users and not from the arbitrary perceptions of a programmer. The plan to organize Locals by zip-coded catchment areas also needs work to eliminate confusion.

Management and Retention Tools

Locals need tools to help them administer recruitment otherwise their efforts lose impetus. As volunteer organizations they need simple but effective computer programs not only to record membership increase and attrition but to plan events and recruitment drives efficiently.

Despite the problems with the database, the quintessential uselessness of raw data without a means to convert it has spawned two applications. Both applications start to remedy that problem. One uses proprietary software and the other classifies as a customized stand-alone application. Both these tools have merit and give Locals a means demographically to control recruitment. They

have different levels of sophistication but both meet the primary needs of most Locals. The differences relate almost entirely to levels of data massage and operator skills. The price differential also needs consideration. Unfortunately, neither application contains a financial component.

The difference between the two applications touted at the recent delegate assembly relates primarily to sophistication and cost. Microsoft's single user policy presents a drawback to using NWU/Access. If a local does not have the program on all computers that will massage NWU data then that policy calls for the Local to purchase a separate copy for each computer used. This applies now and in the future. It could mean eventually purchasing many copies of the program to avoid piracy allegations. The National has expended considerable effort and resources to develop a database resource without a charge to the Locals. However, it has not agreed to supply or to subsidize the cost of the application to run it. In contrast, the Local 5 Member Database Management System (NWU/WNE) comes as a stand-alone application customized for use by the Locals purchasing it.

Both applications run on Windows 95, 98, and 2000 platforms and use the NWU raw database for input. Both accept the updated monthly replacements distributed free either electronically or through the US Mail by the National. The updates replace the existing data at the local level. They do not synchronize by adding and deleting data. This avoids a process that may confuse tyros. However, it does require data archiving before updating to preserve historical data. The whole process ultimately depends upon improved new member data collection and timely input into the national database. The choice between the two applications becomes one of sophistication versus simplicity and cost.

Those locals who already possess Access and have trained professionals to use it will probably opt for NWU/Access. The application will allow them to extend their demographic database for multiple analyses. Their choice will also depend heavily upon how many vital statistics they need for membership and events promotion.

Access requires a detailed understanding of how organizations find and manage data. Microsoft describes this application as a simple skill set to create simple databases. However, it requires a much greater computer knowledge and information design capability to realize its potential than the NWU/WNE stand-alone application. Those locals who wish only to use the national data for mailing and email contact using untrained volunteers and rudimentary equipment will probably opt for NWU/WNE. The designer claims that he wrote that program especially for them. A practical evaluation of the demonstration software verified that statement. Used for the intended purpose, the application performs well although it lacks the typographic nuances found in more sophisticated programs. It also contains a few overprinting problems when using PostScript printers and drivers like Acrobat Distiller.

Local 5 places no user restrictions on the use of the application. This means that the purchaser incurs neither licence fees for a supporting application (except Windows 95+) nor multiple user licence fees. NWU/WNE customized for local needs costs \$200.00. The package contains a disk,

instructions, and email support. Purchasers will also receive a gift of the prospects database program designed to aid them in recruiting.

The Local sells its application as a fund-raiser. It retains 50% of the gross income and the independent contractor who volunteered programming services and asked for nothing will now receive the other 50%. Assuming the sale of multiple licencing, this nonmember, senior citizen with a fixed income cannot receive more than a minuscule amount compared with that paid under regular programming contracts. This has kept the retail price to a minimum and way below what a customized application would normally cost.

A single-user licence for Microsoft Access 2000 lists retail at \$339.00. Users on different computers must pay multiple licence fees to cover each user. For example, if three members do not already hold licences for the application and use it on three different computers then the Local must pay three licence fees.

Sophistication has its price. Ultimately, one gets the level for which one pays. If any particular Local needs to expand its demographic research into a wider area, then it needs to use NWU/Access. If it only wishes to use the data for local record keeping, or membership and local events promotion, then the NUJ/WNE application will meet its needs. With minimal usage both programs provide similar data. The considerations about which application to purchase relate almost entirely to the levels of data massage and operator skills, also the price. Both vendors offer limited technical support.

Comparing the two computerized tools using design and resource criteria seems unfair. One program combines Microsoft "innovation" with the skills of the former membership development director. The other application uses homespun ingenuity inspired by Gracie the Border collie and the sheep in her charge. Both programs have distinct attributes and some inherent problems. In keeping with industry protocol, Bill Gates and Jonathan Tasini will take any comments about the National program to the Supreme Court for settlement. However, Gracie, anthropomorphically challenged but following trade union tradition, will ask the sheep to vote in favor of a motion to do nothing.

Locals can obtain copies of Microsoft Access at any computer store. They can obtain the Member Database Management System from National Writers Union, Local 5, PO Box 398, Hadley, MA 01035 <info@nwu5.org>. Add \$3.20 for priority US Mail.

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