Some Thoughts on the Process of Bringing Younger People Into Rotary

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On December 10, 2008, the 44th Rotary Club in District 5000 received its charter. The Rotary Club of Honolulu Pau Hana has 33 charter members, most of whom are under the age of 40. Of that group, only 5 had any prior experience with Rotary, and only 4 of those were members of existing clubs at the time they decided to join the new club.

By any measure, the charter of this club was a success. Not only did the membership of Rotary grow, the club has attracted a large group of younger people. For some time, Rotary leaders have posed the question: how can we attract younger members to Rotary? This new club provides one of the answers.

The idea for the club was hatched at a "Membership Summit" in District 5000 in early 2008, as part of a brainstorming session discussing ways that other districts had founded clubs with younger members, by focusing on non-traditional, and less expensive, meeting times, places, and formats. Many people offered suggestions, but one stood out. It was simple in concept: hold a Rotary meeting in a bar or club in or near the downtown financial district, during the cocktail hour ("pau hana"—after work, in Hawaiian), with no meal.

The group agreed that the concept was worth pursuing. Nonetheless, for the next six months, there was little progress. At every membership meeting, leaders discussed the concept of a new club, to meet at the “pau hana” time. People generally agreed that the concept should appeal to younger people, who worked in offices downtown, and who did not want to take the time away from work to go to breakfast or lunch meetings, or away from their families to go to dinner meetings. As a corollary to this theory, people generally agreed that a core group of younger people would attract more young people.

Moving from concept to reality took a lot of effort, from many people. Before the club held its first organizational meeting, the following tasks had be accomplished:

(1) finding an initial meeting place and negotiating with the management for an arrangement for the meetings
(2) generating the survey document required by Rotary International, showing the need for such a club
(3) identifying potential members
(4) scheduling an initial meeting and inviting potential members
(5) planning the program for the initial meeting
(6) convincing experienced Rotarians to attend initial meetings, to discuss Rotary with potential new members
(7) ordering and printing material to hand out at the initial meeting.

We settled on Wednesday, August 27, as the first organizational meeting, to be held at the Brasserie Du Vin restaurant on Bethel Street in Honolulu. The working name of the club became "Honolulu Pau Hana," because that was the simplest way to describe both the concept and the meeting time. The Honolulu Sunset club, as the home club of DG Ayman El-Dakhakhni and Liz Kane, the person charged with spearheading the effort, was expected to be the sponsor.

Approximately 50 people were invited in the first wave. The first meeting was attended by 12 people, six potential members of the new club, and six existing Rotarians who were there to talk about Rotary and answer questions from the potential members of the new club. The meeting lasted several hours. At the end of the evening, three of that initial six agreed that they would like to become a part of the new club.

Thereafter, the group met weekly. For the first month, attendance never again reached the number from the first meeting. We also encountered resistance from existing Rotarians. Why should we support a new club? Instead, shouldn't we be focusing on increasing membership of our own clubs? Each time the question was raised, the answer was the same: of course, we want to focus on increasing membership in our own clubs, but if for any reason somebody does not feel comfortable joining an existing club, perhaps this new club would be better for them.

Slowly, this patient explanation eroded the resistance, and some of the people who had been critical agreed to help with the process. A new committee was formed,

meeting weekly, to identify and screen potential members, and draft and mail an invitation to them. The second wave of invitations went to approximately 100 people, with a second major event scheduled for November 12.

There was a debate in the committee as to whether to suspend meetings before the next major event, or to continue to hold meetings and invite potential members to learn about Rotary in the interim. The group decided not to wait.

That was the right decision. The initial group invited their friends, who invited others. DG Ayman asked clubs to designate a liaison to help identify potential members of the new club. As enthusiasm for the concept grew, committee members became recruiters. Rotarians invited their own adult children to visit the group.

By the time the November 12 event rolled around, the group already had 18 people committed to joining. The target was 25 members.

During this time, the group moved. It met at Murphy's, another popular after-work hangout, for a few weeks. Finally, it settled on the Dragon Upstairs, a jazz club on Nuuanu Avenue in Chinatown, as its meeting place. The Dragon did not open until 6:30 on Wednesdays. The owner agreed to open at 5 p.m., and to let the group use it from 5 to 7 p.m. for their meetings. The Dragon does not serve food. The owner agreed to provide light snacks for a nominal charge at the outset.

The group elected officers and directors. They adopted by-laws and the standard club constitution. They decided how much to charge in dues. They took charge of planning their own programs. They took over the task of buying and bringing in food for the meetings. They designed a club logo. The created their own badges.

The group has continued to grow. As of April 15, 2009, it has 36 members.

The success in forming this new club gives pointers to some ways to bring young people into Rotary.

(1) Don't be afraid to break with tradition in meeting times and places; look for a venue and a time where young people gather, and consider forming a Rotary club around that time and venue.

(2) Look for ways to keep the cost down.

(3) Like attracts like. A club with younger members is more likely to attract younger members. One of the charter members of the Honolulu Pau Hana club, himself the son of two Rotarians, explained: he had been interested in Rotary since he was a youth exchange student in high school, but Rotary always seemed to be for older people, his parents' age. When he first came to the Pau Hana club, he knew right away that "this is not my father's Rotary club."

The formula for the Honolulu Pau Hana club has proved successful. It has brought 31 new members into Rotary, most of whom are young. Of the members, only 11 came as a result of direct invitations from existing Rotarians. The rest came by invitations from the Pau Hana membership itself.

Three of the members of the Pau Hana club are second-generation Rotarians, with parents in existing clubs. They are people who already know Rotary, but want to be in a club with people their own age. The bottom line: to attract young people into Rotary, consider forming a new club.