

*USING REINFORCEMENT-BASED METHODS TO
ENHANCE MEMBERSHIP RECRUITMENT IN
A VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATION*

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The present study employed reinforcement-based methods to induce existing members to recruit new members to join a chamber of commerce. Three interventions took place during June and July of 3 successive years. The investigators trained chamber leaders to use reinforcement methods (e.g., contingent tokens) to reinforce recruitment and dues collections. All three interventions produced substantial increases in their targets.

DESCRIPTORS: behavioral community psychology, membership recruiting, reinforcement, token reinforcement

Population increases combined with cut-backs in government spending portend unmet public needs. Political leaders hope that private citizens will take up the slack (Brudney, 1990), but these citizens are becoming less involved in public life (Putnam, 1995). Membership is dropping in service clubs, associations, civic organizations, and social clubs. What can organizations do to recruit more members and reverse this trend?

Volunteer managers and membership recruiters rely on shared practical wisdom rather than experimentally tested methods. With one exception, the literature is bereft of membership recruitment research. Henkel (1995) tested a behavioral approach to a membership campaign in a nonprofit organization, but flaws in record keeping precluded the attribution of membership increases to recruiter efforts. The present study employed reinforcement-based methods to induce existing members to recruit new members to join a chamber of commerce.

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METHOD

Setting and Baseline

In a small chamber of commerce in northwestern Florida, three 2-month interventions were implemented during June and July of 3 successive years. The 2-month recruitment season permitted a naturally occurring reversal (multielement) design. June and July comprised the intervention phases; the months before were the baselines, and the months following comprised the reversal phases.

Historically, recruitment practices in this organization consisted of requests from chamber leaders for members to solicit recruits. Newspaper articles, radio announcements, and speeches to community groups promoted the chamber's activities and prompted people to join. These activities had not significantly increased memberships. During the 8 years since its founding, membership totals ranged from 77 to 125, with a yearly average of 96. Renewals were due in January. During the calendar year prior to Intervention 1, an average of 4 recruits joined each month (range, 0 to 5). Monthly dues from recruits averaged \$205. Except during intervention periods, publicity via newspaper, radio, and speaking engagements for the years reported conformed with that of the 3 years prior to Intervention 1.

Intervention 1

In response to a chamber newsletter, 8 male and 12 female current chamber members, ages 30 to 60, volunteered for the project. Ages and occupations were representative of the chamber population. During Month 1, public messages urged people to join the chamber. These included a 16-page newspaper supplement, five news articles, and 10 radio public service spots. Chamber staff also sent letters to 50 prospective members inviting them to join. At the end of this month, chamber leaders presented a 2-hr training session on chamber history, membership benefits, and recruitment techniques (door to door and telephone). They explained the upcoming recruitment drive and distributed a list of prizes for the drive and award criteria.

During Month 2, participants competed in a recruitment drive. Chamber leaders held a party at the end of the 1st week and awarded a ribbon to each person who had recruited at least one member. Participants brought in signed, authorized applications and annualized dues checks daily. Chamber staff recorded, verified, and charted memberships and dues. Daily tallies and drive totals were displayed at functions and in the chamber office. Staff members posted membership totals daily on two portable signs in the community. Leaders held another party at the end of the 2nd month. They awarded trophies to the top 3 recruiters (most dues and memberships). They also distributed play money (tokens) to participants, equal to actual dues collected. The tokens could be used in an auction to bid on donated prizes (retail values, \$20 to \$100).

Intervention 2

Seven male and 10 female chamber members, ages 25 to 55, volunteered, 4 of whom had also participated in Intervention 1. Ages and occupations were representative of the

chamber population. The chamber published no newspaper supplement prior to or during the drive. The remaining procedures for this intervention were identical to those employed during Month 2 of Intervention 1.

Intervention 3

Seven male and 7 female chamber members, ages 26 to 56, who were representative in ages and occupations, volunteered. Four members had participated in Intervention 1, 1 in Intervention 2, and 2 in both Interventions 1 and 2. All procedures were identical to those of Intervention 2, with one exception: No play money was awarded and no auction was held.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 shows the number of monthly recruits and the amount of dues collected for the three interventions and for the 2-month intervention totals. The data reveal large increases in both recruits and dues when the reinforcers were in place and large decreases when the reinforcers were removed. During Intervention 1, the number of recruits increased 68% above baseline, and dues from recruits increased 32.4%. Four people outperformed the others, accounting for 68% of the recruits. When we removed those data, recruits still exceeded baseline by 22.7% (individual performance range, 2 to 11; $SD = 2.82$). Intervention 2 generated an increase in recruits of 61.3% and a 57% increase in dues. When we removed data from the top 3 performers, recruits exceeded baseline by 18.2% (individual performance range, 1 to 8; $SD = 2.46$). During Intervention 3, number of recruits increased 26.4% and dues increased 19.7%. (No individual data are available.) Costs included parties, awards, and receptions for new members. The ratios of intervention cost to intervention gains were 1:34, 1:39, and 1:24, respectively.

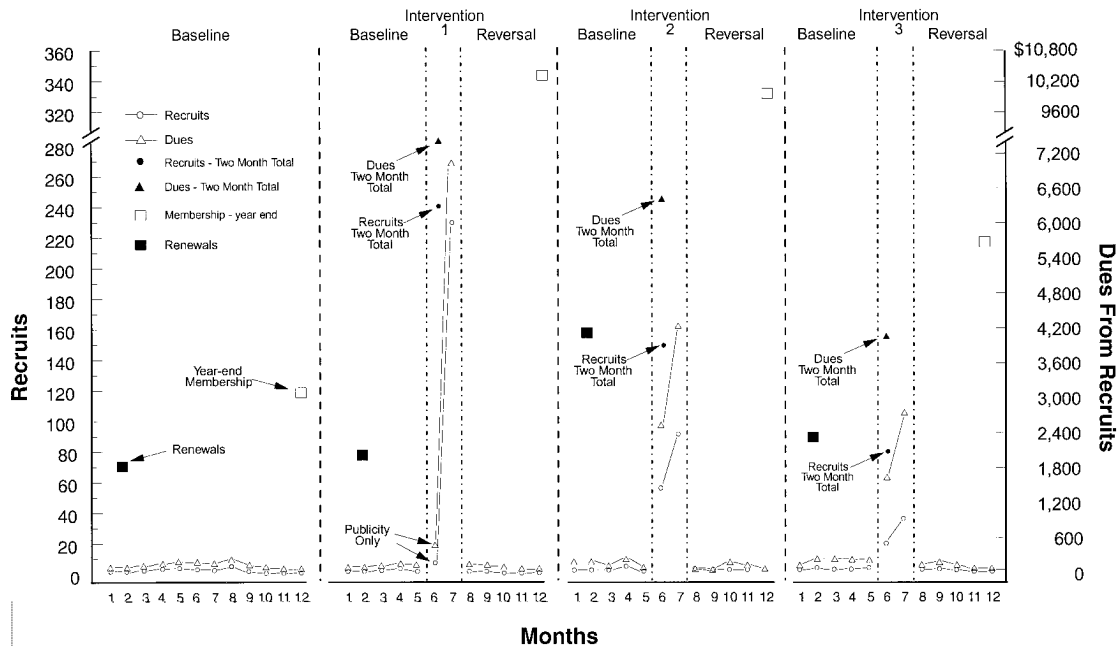


Figure 1. Membership, recruits, and dues from recruits during baseline and Interventions 1, 2, and 3.

The interventions appeared to provide several sources of reinforcement. We did not systematically dismantle these in the replications, so it is impossible to separate their relative weights. However, some findings are suggestive. Whereas 61% as many members joined in Intervention 2 as in Intervention 1, 89% as much money was collected in dues. The tokens (play money) were tied exclusively to dues. In addition, dues declined notably during the third intervention, which (barring confounding effects cited below) differed from Intervention 2 only by the absence of token reinforcement. If tokens alone produce good results, providing tokens for recruitment year-round could promote generalization.

Dues and recruits decreased moderately with each intervention (see Figure 1). Several explanations for this are possible: (a) Measuring recruitment results rather than efforts may have underrepresented intervention effectiveness. Perhaps extraneous factors made it difficult to enroll members despite attempts. (b) Fatigue may have diminished

performance in the 2-month drives. Some volunteers complained of difficulty sustaining enthusiasm for that duration. (c) The pool of potential recruits may have been limited in this very small community (population 2,700). (d) New leaders during Year 3 stressed attracting business to the area, ignored local businesses, and failed to support the membership drive. Thus social reinforcement may have decreased, both for recruiting and for joining. (e) There were fewer participants in each intervention and therefore fewer opportunities to recruit.

Overall, the results of the three interventions show the potential effectiveness of incorporating formalized reinforcement systems into volunteer organizations. Research systematically dismantling components of the interventions is needed to determine their relative contributions. We recommend that researchers measure both efforts and results to avoid underreporting effects. Research applying full-scale token economies in volunteer organizations would also be worthwhile. Implementation of a token

economy might provide an efficient, effective means to address a variety of volunteer behaviors.

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