

# **Membership Retention and Recruiting: A Program for Success**

**Pacific Northwest Region  
National Model Railroad Association**



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## Introduction

When the discussion among model railroaders turns to NMRA membership retention and recruiting, eyes glaze over, breathing slows, heads nod, and the weak (or wise) head for the exits. The reaction to membership discussions is nearly universal, regardless of organization. For some reason it appears to be most pronounced in those organizations that exist primarily for the direct benefit of the members. NMRA is such an organization.

A common membership discussion is the never ending reiteration of why outsiders won’t join and how frustrating it is to recruit new members. It never occurs to members how ridiculous the reasons given and accepted are. After all, *they* are members of NMRA, so there must be good and valid reasons to join.

The goal of effective membership retention and recruitment is to encourage existing members to remain and become more active while convincing others that the benefits of membership are worthy of their time, money, and effort. Good programs require energy and effort to start, plus continuing care and feeding to remain effective. At the heart of all effective organizational membership programs is the ability to positively and clearly answer three basic questions:

*What’s in it for me?*

*Why should I devote my time and money to this?*

*What is expected of me if I join?*

In addition to properly responding to these questions, effective programs recognize that each current member is a recruiting agent, active or inactive, positive or negative. Good programs make members positive, active recruiters.

## Membership Benefits: What's in it for me?

Identifying and quantifying the benefits of membership is critical to retention and recruiting. If current members do not acknowledge or use their benefits, we must question the benefits' value or the members' knowledge of them. To support membership programs, the benefits of membership must be well defined, easily understood, satisfy the needs of, and have positive value to, current and prospective members.

NMRA provides a wide array of benefits, formal and informal, to each member. The importance of each benefit may vary from member to member, but the benefit package makes the NMRA unique and desirable.

**1. Direct Link To The Core Of The Hobby.** NMRA leadership, committees and industry members provide a direct link with the manufacturers and service providers of the hobby. 20,000 NMRA members, acting with a single voice, represent the single strongest lobbying force in model railroading. As a large group of dedicated consumers, NMRA members have the ability to exert strong influence on the variety and quality of hobby products and technological change. NMRA members come from all walks of life with many members active on the professional or industry side of the hobby. They serve as strong direct advocates for NMRA. The hobby industry is well aware of the power exercised by identified consumers and works hard to stay abreast of NMRA programs and policies.

**2. Standards and Conformance.** Perhaps the single most noticeable and valuable effort of the NMRA was developing a set of standards for models and associated equipment. The Standards support interoperability of equipment regardless of manufacturer. The Standards, widely accepted in the hobby industry, have sustained the hobby's growth. Standards let the hobby embrace new technologies without abandoning more traditional equipment. NMRA technical committee volunteers monitor and test a substantial number of equipment new to the market to validate that manufacturers conform to standards. Most manufacturers covet the award of the NMRA "Football" that certifies conformance and work hard to make the grade.

In addition to setting the standards and completing conformance monitoring, NMRA offers members a stronger and more direct voice when equipment fails quality expectations. This is especially critical when a manufacturer can't resolve the problem of a lone modeler who needs resolution.

Along with Standards and Conformance, NMRA has developed and published a number of Recommended Practices to assist modelers in constructing high quality reliable models and layouts. Recommended Practices on electrical wiring and equipment installation are a compendium of lessons learned. The civil engineering RPs, if observed and followed, will avoid passing train collisions on corners or cars jammed in tunnel portals. Learning from the experience of others is one of the objectives of the Education Program and RPs document those experiences. If you are a module builder and expect to connect with other modules, the module standards lead the way.

**3. Research.** The members of the NMRA own and operate the Kalmbach Library, one of the largest collections of prototype and model railroad information in the world. This extensive repository of information and historical data is available to NMRA members to solve their problems, from configuring a specific railcar on a particular road, to locating an instruction sheet for a model kit no longer in production. The collection of books, periodicals, blueprints, plans, prototype operating manuals and regulations, photographs, slides, and historical records is a valuable resource for all who model or wish to replicate structures or equipment.

**4. Education.** A primary objective of the NMRA mission statement is the education of its members and the general public on railroading and the model railroad hobby. NMRA education programs extend from the national level to the local division clinics and meets. At the national level, NMRA has an extensive collection of VHS tapes and DVD programs on virtually every aspect of railroading and the hobby. It also

has a large collection of clinic materials available. Regions and divisions frequently offer similar materials. On the local level, regularly scheduled live clinics offer information on many topics. Those local gatherings, as well as the conventions at the region and national level, offer the opportunity to exchange ideas and seek solutions to member problems. Layout tours and prototype visits offer unique educational opportunities to gain real world perspective on railroad operations and understand how things work. Layout tours offer the chance to see how other modelers have solved problems and provide additional ways to increase and improve modeling skills.

The NMRA web site contains significant information about the hobby. There is a page dedicated to helping those new to the hobby get started. Another page has schedule information and links to all regions and divisions. There is the Standards and Recommended Practices page that assists in building a good layout and maintaining equipment in operating condition. A page is dedicated to links to special interest groups and organizations that provide further assistance, including those for layout design and operation, historical groups, and scale-specific organizations. Another page links to numerous manufacturers, suppliers, clubs, organizations, and railfan sites. It's the best starting point for a web search for model railroad information or assistance.

**5. Achievement Program.** Although a part of the overall NMRA Education Program, the Achievement Program offers a unique opportunity for the individual modeler to challenge their individual skills and abilities as measured against established standards. The Achievement Program, covering the full range of modeling skills and NMRA organizational participation activities, provides individual recognition when the member demonstrates appropriate performance. The AP gives out Merit Awards for individual models and Achievement Certificates for various categories on the path to formal recognition as a Master Model Railroader. Achieving MMR status may not be for every member, but the Achievement Program offers the opportunity to all.

**6. Contests.** Model railroaders tend to be non-competitive in the enjoyment of their hobby. They may challenge themselves to improve, but few model with the primary consideration of contest entry. But for those who do, NMRA offers the finest and most inclusive contest program anywhere. Contests begin at the local clinic level where "People's Choice" awards and "Bring and Brag" sessions are common. Division and regional meets and conventions may include formal NMRA contests and "People's Choice" contests. Some regions and divisions have theme module or diorama challenges. These are fun, a step away from more serious contests, and provide unusual challenges for the modeler like building a 1'x1' diorama or modeling within a peanut butter lid. Formal awards at region and division events are common and may be simple certificates or ribbons.

At the national level, the formal contest is associated with the annual national convention, bringing entries from through (and outside) the country. National contests include all categories and recent efforts have included kit-built models (judged) and works in progress (not judged). The intent is to open the contest room to a large variety of work so entrants and attendees may learn from the contest experience. At the National contest, awards are more formal. Several vendors sponsor special awards for specific categories. Contest awards are presented at a formal awards ceremony and the best in show recipient is honored during the Annual Banquet. Models receiving recognition at the national are featured in a photographic spread in *Scale Rails*, the monthly NMRA magazine.

**7. Newsletters.** NMRA membership entitles the member to a variety of newsletters and access to a number of member-only web sites that are NMRA specific. Because of the cost of publishing and mailing printed documents, a major effort has been made to publish many newsletters electronically. The Internet means more modelers have access to publications from all regions and divisions.

*Scale Rails*, the NMRA's house organ, is published monthly and is available to all members by subscription. Members have the choice of receiving it or not. *Scale Rails* is dedicated to NMRA concerns. Its sub-

scription cost is well below commercial hobby-related periodicals and, at \$19 a year, about half the cost of commercial magazines.

At the region and division level, the publication schedule and distribution process is controlled by each region and division. Since they do not collect membership dues, they may impose subscription fees for delivering hard copies of newsletters to members. Most regions and divisions post their newsletters to the web, where they are available for member viewing and download.

**8. Member Aid Program.** It is frustrating to be confronted by a problem and not know where to get help. The NMRA Member Aid Program meets that need. Supported by member volunteers, it accepts questions and provides answers. It may take a while for the volunteers to find the answer to your question, but they *will* come through. Virtually any question related to the hobby can and will be handled by Member Aid.

**9. Pike Registry.** Many model railroaders travel extensively and enjoy seeing what is going on in the hobby. Hobby stores and museums are easy to find, but finding layouts and home modelers is a challenge. The Pike Registry Program offers information about members' layouts throughout the country and internationally. Members list their layouts, including owner contact information and opportunities to visit. Placing your layout on the registry makes sure that others know that you are available. In return, you receive a hard copy of the listing.

**10. NMRA Insurance.** The NMRA offers liability and property insurance covering NMRA-sponsored events, providing much-needed safety to the Regions, Divisions and members who conduct or participate in those events. The financial risk of personal injury, loss of, or damage to, private property is always a major consideration in scheduling any event, especially those open to the public. If a member opens his home layout to visitors and an injury accident occurs, the member must rely on his homeowners insurance or liability umbrella policy to protect him. If the event is NMRA-sponsored, NMRA insurance covers the accident. The protection provided by the NMRA insurance program is important.

**11. Fellowship.** One of the most enjoyable parts of being a model railroader is the opportunity to meet with other modelers, to share experiences inside and outside the hobby, and establish lasting friendships. While it is possible to experience some of this through local hobby shops and clubs, those relationships are limited in scope. In NMRA, because of its identified membership and attendance at events around the country, the range of opportunities is much greater. Members know a primary reason to attend regional and national conventions is to continue long-term friendships. While fellowship may seem less tangible than other benefits, it provides the glue that makes NMRA strong.

## **Membership Cost**

The cost of membership is a critical factor in becoming a member. Overcoming or avoiding an initial negative reaction is important. The ability to discuss cost of membership in a variety of ways and in relation to other hobby-associated costs or expenses, or the cost related to other common personal discretionary purchases, normally leads to success. Model railroading is a discretionary funds hobby. Few who can afford to participate in the hobby cannot afford membership. It just needs to be factored into their hobby budget. The current cost of membership at \$39 a year, equates to 75¢ a week, and may be the lowest cost of any professional membership organization anywhere.

## **Membership Time**

Busy people tend to make time for the things they really want to do. Individuals must factor personal responsibilities into their limited free time. Demands on individual members for time and service must be flexible and sensitive to their needs. At the same time, the organization must find ways for persons with heavy real world responsibilities and time constraints to participate at a level appropriate to them. Making a part-time contributor welcome and invited to participate in all activities is a sound membership policy.

## Membership Expectations

Payment of dues and possession of a card kept in a drawer constitutes being a member but not membership. The membership card recognizes a formal agreement between NMRA and the member. But active participation is how real membership is achieved. Model railroading, like most other endeavors, is one of both receiving and giving.

During the early stages in NMRA, a member is a *receiver*, learning and increasing skills through help and support from other members. They attend clinics and layout tours. They ask questions and learn from the mistakes and successes of other members. They learn about quality of products and where to get what they need. Soon, they get involved in group activities, requiring some degree of guidance and support.

Over time, as the member's knowledge grows and they gain comfort in the hobby and NMRA, they shift from *receive* mode to *give* mode. When properly approached, they become more active in clinic or group activities. They accept responsibility for something and perform with appropriate support and ever decreasing guidance. The member now willingly joins activities and discussions, offering sound opinion and good recommendations. They are comfortable in the hobby and in the group. Unofficially, they have graduated from newbie to established member. It's not a skill or experience difference, but a social relationship common to all groups.

When the assimilation and transformation is complete, the member reaches the status of old hand, fully engaged in both the hobby and NMRA activities. While retaining some degree of receiver status, they have become *givers*. While they may not take on total responsibility for anything, they cannot escape the mantle of respect they have earned and leadership they have demonstrated. A primary responsibility for old hands is not to remind everyone that "we've always done it that way" but instead to encourage new ideas and to seek out and mentor new members. The old hands have experienced and benefited from their membership in NMRA and have an unspoken responsibility to pass on those benefits to those who follow.

How long this process takes depends on members' desires and needs. While the group may have some effect by their willingness to delegate responsibility and authority, that impact should be minimal. Few local groups, clinics, or clubs in NMRA suffer from an excessive number of volunteers or members willing to take on necessary tasks. Positive mentoring of new members and an overall positive and enthusiastic attitude within the local group makes the difference.

## Groups and Organizations

Although model railroaders may give the impression they are lone wolves, safely sequestered in their hobby rooms or layouts, just the opposite is true. We are adults who have spent our working lives around other adults; we thrive in that environment. While we may enjoy and on occasion require periods of solitude, in the end we gravitate back to the company of adults. Grandkids are fun to share our railroading experience with but to them our trains are little more than toys. We need to deal with people who understand and appreciate the knowledge and skill that allows us to create our own world and operate our own railroad. Our younger members are much the same. They lack the resources to do all the things they dream of and have parents who temper their time and dedication to the hobby. They are just as dedicated and want just as much to be a part of the hobby and hobby groups.

**1. Clinics.** The most productive arena for both retention and recruiting is the local clinic. (The term "clinic" has several meanings in NMRA; here it means a gathering of modelers for educational and social purposes. Clinics may also be an educational presentation. Thus you may give a clinic at a clinic.) In clinics, the member or prospective member is given maximum exposure to the hobby and the opportunity to learn, participate and enjoy fellowship. Well-run clinics combine social activities with short learning sessions. Many clinics provide members the opportunity to demonstrate their current modeling with "Bring

and Brag” sessions. “What’s New at the Hobby Shop” presentations get local hobby shop owners involved, acquaint members with owners, and inform members about new products. “Make and Take” clinics are a popular way to work on a project at a clinic and, when done, take something home. Clinics offer an easy way for current members to participate by helping with setup, refreshments, presenting clinics, or writing reports on the clinic for the division newsletter.

Prospective members get to experience the benefits of membership while starting new friendships. Prospects should be assigned a sponsor, if they are not brought there by a member. They should be introduced to the group, formally and informally. Name tags facilitate conversation with prospective members. Knowing more than the prospective member’s name leaves the impression that “they actually care about who I am.” A good introduction includes the prospect’s name, where they live, family information, years in the hobby, scale, era, road, and if they have a home layout or are looking for a modular group to join. The information allows the clinic members to better appreciate the prospective member and provides them with topics for immediate conversation. Letting a prospective member know you think they are important, makes them feel welcome in the group. The assigned sponsor should contact the prospect between clinics, offering help and providing membership information. The sponsor should also make sure the prospect is aware of local events and, when appropriate, offer to escort them there. Recruiting does not happen by magic; it requires dedicated effort.

**2 Modular Groups & Clubs.** Some divisions sponsor modular groups for various scales in different locations. These groups provide members without the time, space, or funding to construct their own home layout the chance to build modules and participate with others to create a larger, portable layout. Division-sponsored groups require every participant to be an NMRA member. Non-NMRA-aligned groups may appear to offer similar benefits and opportunities without the expense of NMRA membership, so, to be effective in both retention and recruiting, Division-sponsored clubs must ensure that they employ all the benefits of membership, provide greater opportunity for modelers who participate, and encourage others to join. Many clubs’ dues exceed those of the NMRA.

Modular groups function as special purpose clinics, with membership based on common purpose and interest. Groups meet periodically to work on modules, discuss and learn new skills and operating techniques, and exercise the other benefits of NMRA membership. The Kalmbach Library is available to them for research and should be employed as appropriate. Certainly NMRA standards and Recommended Practices should be followed in module design and construction. Individual effort should be recognized through the Achievement Program. Group activities should be organized to aid those who desire to meet AP certificate requirements, particularly Chief Dispatcher and Volunteer. The organization, operations and activities of a Division club should differentiate it from non-NMRA organizations and offer greater opportunity and benefit to any model railroader.

**3. NMRA Membership Clubs.** Other organizations exist that, although not sponsored by Regions or Divisions, are valuable parts of NMRA. 100% NMRA membership clubs are recognized by NMRA and receive all the benefits available to all NMRA members and activities. A number of 100% NMRA Membership Clubs have the good fortune to have permanent homes for their fixed layouts. The 100% modular clubs’ layouts operate like Division-sponsored groups, serving many of the same functions with regard to retention and recruiting. The permanent clubs have the advantage of a fixed meeting place, a layout available for operations at any time, and, in most cases, the ability to recruit and retain a larger number of members. The permanence of the central point of immediate interest, the layout, is a major advantage. It is much easier for a member to gain ownership of something that stays in one place, where he may work as his time permits, and that does not require major effort to prepare for operations. Recruiting opportunities are increased when the prospective member can see the group’s “product” and immediately engage in modeling activities. The 100% modular clubs enjoy the same recruiting and retention opportunities as Division-sponsored groups.

**4. Other Clubs.** Model railroading interest is not restricted to the NMRA. Statistically, NMRA members make up a small percentage of those who are involved in the hobby or who participate in activities considered as part of the NMRA scope of interest. Many clubs and activities that operate outside the NMRA are scale specific, railroad specific, or era specific. Unfortunately, while those clubs and activities may benefit significantly from NMRA efforts and internal programs, they do not feel the need to be a part of the organization. Their lack of interest in membership or apparent inability to recruit from those individuals is often a lack of exposure to the NMRA and its benefits. It's not that the individuals who belong to "other" clubs don't want to join (although some have made that determination), it may be that they just have not been approached properly. They are a large segment of the hobby; we need to do a better job of making the necessary contacts and telling the NMRA story. They are fertile ground for NMRA recruiting.

**5. Special Interest Groups.** Unlike local clubs, Special Interest Groups are geographically scattered but concentrate on a single interest. SIGs like the Operations SIG (OPSIG), Design SIG, NTRAK, Narrow Gauge modelers, Garden Railway modelers, and LEGO Modelers, although not 100% NMRA members, are important to the NMRA and the expansion of the hobby. Membership in SIGs is open to all, at varying costs, and with a wide range of benefits. NTRAK membership provides its members with a monthly newsletter and the opportunity to attend NTRAK meets and conventions. The OPSIG and Design SIG are very active in their respective fields. They conduct local area meetings and discussion groups, provide a periodical with great information, and hold operating sessions. SIG membership provides concentration in one aspect of the hobby. SIGs are not exclusive of NMRA membership. Many modelers enjoy membership in NMRA and one or more SIGs. SIGs are also fertile recruiting grounds for NMRA membership, providing you use the proper approach and tell the proper story. The NMRA does not offer *more* than a SIG and is not *better* than a SIG, they complement each other.

## NMRA Sponsored Activities

A wide range of activities take place under the NMRA umbrella. Each activity presents either a direct benefit or the opportunity to take advantage of the benefits of membership. In some instances, the activity may be the only opportunity to enjoy a benefit (e.g., a contest) or represent a benefit in itself (e.g., fellowship). Participation aids retention and provides opportunities for recruiting new members.

**1. Formal Meets and Conventions.** Almost every level in NMRA (National, Region, and Division) conducts at least one annual convention or meet to conduct the annual meeting of the membership as required by the articles of incorporation or bylaws of that unit. Activities beyond the membership meeting vary.

**a. National Convention.** The NMRA National Convention is held each year in July. Its location moves yearly to make member participation easier. It usually lasts a week, featuring educational clinics, prototype tours, layout tours, contest, meetings, awards banquet, and other activities. The convention is normally held in a major hotel and convention center co-located with the National Train Show. The NMRA Board of Directors normally meets immediately preceding the convention to address the business of NMRA.

**b. Regional Convention.** Most regions also sponsor a yearly convention to conduct their business, usually scheduled after the National Convention so as to respond to any new policies or programs instituted by NMRA Board of Directors. Regional conventions are shorter than National, often just three days. Clinics, tours, a formal contest, and the annual meeting are scheduled. Convention registration is not required to attend the annual membership meeting. The Region Board of Directors meets immediately before the convention and reports to the members during the annual meeting. The convention usually concludes with a banquet. Region conventions move from division to division to improve attendance.



**c. Division Meets or Conventions.** Divisions are the high activity units of the NMRA. Divisions are in direct contact with individuals and supply gatherings to support the needs of their members. The Division determines the number of meets and activities. NMRA members are welcome to attend the activities of other divisions or regions. Such travel is not uncommon. Division meets are usually informal and include clinics, contest, tours, and its annual meeting.

**2. Train Shows and Swap Meets.** People who attend train shows and swap meets already have an interest in model railroading. Not all train shows are NMRA activities; most are put on by local groups or organizations with no NMRA connection. Even some national shows have no NMRA involvement. But these shows represent a major opportunity to meet and greet modelers and to invite them to participate in NMRA. The most important aspect for recruiting at any train show or swap meet is the presence of a dedicated, motivated recruiting team properly supported by effective tools. Most shows feature modular layouts to draw the public to the show. Contact every modeler in those groups. Recognize the work of current NMRA members. Encourage non-members to join. The recruiting team needs a well-established booth outfitted with positive recruiting materials. Team members should “make something” in the booth, sparking interest and opening conversations. These are chance encounters to be exploited.

**3. Public Service Events.** Some divisions have the opportunity to participate in public service events that may have many of the same overtones as a train show, but differ by the nature of the attendees or the cost. When a Division modular group sets up in a shopping mall at Christmas (perhaps even earning a bit of revenue), they interact with a much larger segment of the public. Many people who stop are not engaged in the hobby but may be some day. At Christmas, some visitors take their train out of the closet again or think about buying a train for the kids. Their visit is a chance to encourage them to take the next step, with NMRA guiding the way. Retirement communities are another way to engage individuals or groups to take up the hobby. It is not uncommon to find a retirement home resident who was an active model railroader until he moved to the home. He may still have some “stuff” and the desire, but need encouragement and others to help out.

**4. Open House/Layout Tour.** Whether formally-sponsored by the NMRA or offered by a member to friends and neighbors, layout visits are good recruiting opportunities. Visitors don’t take the time to come without a desire to see what has been done and how this hobby works. While they may not be active in the hobby, they could enjoy being involved. The layout visit is a great initial introduction that provides a chance to talk about the hobby, demonstrate the enjoyment available in it, and educate the visitor on the techniques used to create our small worlds. It may also clear away some of the mystique of the hobby. That initial visit may lead to an invitation to visit again, to participate in an operating session, or enjoy another NMRA activity.

**5. Prototype Tours.** On occasion, Divisions or local clinics arrange tours of local businesses or industries of interest to modelers. At the discretion of business owners, these tours normally carry limits in the number of participants, age, and physical abilities. Members should receive first priority but, whenever possible, including prospective members is a great way to bond them to the NMRA group and aid in recruiting them.

**6. Railfan Outings.** Liking railroads or being a modeler does not necessarily transfer to knowledge and ability to understand how to observe railroad equipment in operation. Those who watch trains often know the best places and times and often know of special events. Inviting a prospective member along on a railfan outing helps reinforce the love of trains, opens a new experience in the hobby, and strengthens the links to NMRA and the local group. When an invitation is extended, make sure the prospective member knows how to get to the sites, what to wear, and what photo equipment to bring. Help the prospective member get the most out of his visit. Afterwards, ask to see his photos and even ask him to prepare a short story for the newsletter.

## Tools for Recruiting

Information is the most important item in the recruiting and retention “Tool Box.” Here are the basics on membership benefits, time and cost expectations and some specialized tools for recruiting and retention.

**1. The Recruiter.** The single most important tool in recruiting is the well-educated, experienced, confident, dedicated individual recruiter. He does not have to be a Master Model Railroader to properly represent the hobby and the NMRA. He must be an active participant who enjoys the hobby’s pleasures, is able to talk *and* listen, and is willing to hear repeatedly the “when I was a kid” and “my Lionel train” stories. He needs to find ways to discuss the hopes, wants, needs, and desires of the people he talks with and provide a recruiting pitch when appropriate. Not every modeler is right for NMRA and NMRA is not right for every person who owns a train set. A good recruiter is clean cut, properly dressed, and easily recognized as a model railroader.

**2. The Recruiting Display.** No individual can be an effective recruiter in a public forum if all he has is an empty table and a handful of NMRA tri-fold brochures. A good quality static display that draws people in, talks to the hobby, and introduces NMRA, is at the heart of good recruiting. Displays range from professionally-created “pop-up” units with electronic graphics and sound, to well-crafted demonstrations of scale using track, cars and figures. The region and/or division should fund a suitable display and its maintenance. Low cost flat screen monitors, laptop computers, digital photography, and many other assets make assembling a good display easier and affordable. Existing members who participate in professional or trade shows can provide insight about what works. An attention-getter is essential to good recruiting. And more people are willing to work if there is a really good display.

**3. Location, Location, Location.** No event with public participation should occur without the presence of NMRA recruiters. For NMRA-sponsored events, the sponsor is responsible for obtaining appropriate space for a recruiting booth. For non-NMRA events, the parent Division or Region must contact sponsors and arrange for space and facilities. A good location has a flow of attendees and allows time to stop and talk. The location must support the “Make” effort at the booth. Highly visible, quiet areas are best. It may be worth the expense to pay for a more desirable location.

**4. The Demonstration Hook.** A couple of old fat guys in funny vests standing before a display may encourage *some* people to stop but a person making trees, painting rocks, or assembling kits always draws a crowd. Anytime you demonstrate the hobby’s “how to” aspect, public interest increases. People enjoy seeing trains run, but they also enjoy seeing how we create our worlds. Seeing it done dispels the magic. If you can involve individuals in the “how to” and do a simple “make and take,” the “hook” factor increases again. Well thought-out “how to’s” are great for recruiting. And making different products is even better. This simplest form of live clinic is a great recruiting tool.

**5. Operating Display.** One of the surest ways to hook prospective members is a small operating layout where they can actually drive trains or perform operations. A 4' x 8' O scale or G scale layout for kids to operate is a great draw. It takes a dedicated effort to man, but is worth the effort. A HO Timesaver module is a certain attention magnet to any teen or adult with serious interest in the hobby. Timesaver also provides a viable answer to computer game youth looking for a challenging hands-on activity. Operating modules are a good investment for a Division.

**6. The “Take Away”** While a single contact at a show rarely results in a completed application (see “Rail Pass” below), it is important to complete two “take away” elements with each encounter. The first “take away” is a *brochure* that makes them want to learn more and tells them how to do so. The best materials encourage direct involvement in Division activities, stressing the local nature of the organization and the local assistance and fellowship available. They don’t need a fill-in-the-blanks membership application, but should contain contact information and/or a website address to help the individual complete the proc-

ess. Build interest, provide key information, encourage participation, and open the door for additional conversation and involvement.

The second “take away” is information for the recruiter to take away with the prospective member’s contact data so the recruiting team can follow up with invites to local events and include the prospect on newsletter distribution and other activity announcements. The easiest way to get information from someone is to offer them something in return. Copies of future newsletters or other information, discounts on future train show admissions, or answers to their questions are good incentives.

**7. Rail Pass.** NMRA adopted the Rail Pass trial membership program as a way to introduce new members to our organization and to give them an opportunity to experience what NMRA has to offer. A Rail Pass, for just under US\$10, provides an individual with full, non-voting membership in NMRA for six months. They are able to participate fully in all NMRA programs and exercise all benefits except holding elected office and voting. They even get a six month subscription to *Scale Rails*. At the end of six months, the individual is invited to full membership. Rail Pass is being used in some innovative ways:

**a. Instant Membership.** Some divisions have authorized local clinics or other NMRA groups to extend “instant membership” to good potential members by executing a Rail Pass in their name. In effect, the division offers a six month “scholarship” in anticipation that he will convert to full membership afterwards. The division makes a \$10 investment in a long-term relationship.

**b. Golden Spike Incentive.** During train shows and swap meets or open house events, a member of the recruiting team visits layouts and modular groups looking for efforts that qualify for the NMRA Golden Spike award. When one is spotted, the next question is “Are you a member of NMRA?” If the answer is yes, the Golden Spike application is completed and submitted. If the answer is no, after a short discussion about the quality of the modeler’s work and the Golden Spike award, the offer is made that a Golden Spike will be awarded if membership can be arranged. The Rail Pass is offered as the ticket to immediate gratification. If the response is positive, the Golden Spike application and Rail Pass are completed and submitted. If the answer is other than an absolute no, information is noted for a second visit, later in the show. This method is infectious: when one individual qualifies, they drag others in the group along, too. Be sure that non-NMRA clubs understand the value of NMRA liability and loss insurance.

**c. Birthday gift.** Sell the spouse a trial membership at very low cost by purchasing a Rail Pass for the prospective recruit. The price is right, only slightly more than a fancy birthday card. The six month impact is significant. And the recipient did not spend money on his own membership.

**8. Scholarships.** Some individuals, because of personal circumstance, are unable to afford membership for short times. If there is positive value to having that individual as a part of the local organization and NMRA, the Division or Region may consider a scholarship program. The policy must be reasonable and address actual need, not convenience, and have specific qualifiers spelled out in writing.

**9. Special Edition Newsletter.** Divisions that actively participate in “World’s Greatest Hobby” shows have used that organization’s materials as “giveaways.” While those materials support the hobby, they are not adequate for NMRA recruiting. A better giveaway is a special edition of the local Division or Region newsletter, concentrating on introducing the division, division activities, and contact points. It should stress major NMRA benefits and reasons to participate locally. It should be usable for an extended period if you provide website information or update inserts with current schedule and contact information.

**10. Name Tags.** Formal, permanent name tags offer a perception of a strong lasting organization. People assigned to recruiting responsibilities should have a good quality name tag that identifies them and the NMRA. All members of division-sponsored modular groups, division or regional officers, and clinic leaders should have a permanent badge. Clinic attendees should have at least a plastic-cased printed

badge. Visitors to clinics or other activities should receive temporary badges with their names so that others may identify them as guests.

**11, Community Vendor Discounts.** One enterprising local clinic recognized that members of the clinic were frequenting one of the local non-chain hardware stores for modeling and non-modeling supplies and equipment. The clinic leader approached the store owner and, based on the continuing patronage and volume of business from model railroaders, arranged that the modelers receive the same discount offered professional contractors, but only to members of the NMRA. An instant incentive program was born. There are other opportunities for similar good deals if local members are willing to take the initiative and make things happen.

**12. Newspaper and Other Media.** Most local newspapers include some kind of weekly community schedule that allows local groups to advertise events at no cost. Local groups or Divisions should use them to announce clinics and events. Include a website link so those interested may learn more.

Local cable TV broadcasters provide a public access channel where local groups may have display materials. The ultimate is the creation and production of a 30-minute weekly show addressing model railroad-ing. If you have the will, stamina, and ability to put together the proper technical crew, you can create a major tool. Otherwise, think on a smaller scale: prepare a few PowerPoint slides or a poster to advertise an event or activity. People really do watch public access TV and your announcements, free of charge except for your effort to create them, may be effective. Talk to your local public access TV provider for full details. If you don't know how to prepare the materials, ask your grandchildren and buy them an NMRA membership as payment.

## Follow Up Actions

**Sponsor Phone Call.** Once the individual has committed to apply for membership, it is appropriate for the sponsor, if assigned, to call the individual and offer to be the continuing point of contact. The local clinic or Division may assign a formal mentor, but the original sponsor should make that first call. Until a mentor is assigned, the sponsor should continue to aid and support the new member. One key task for the sponsor is to make sure that the new member's email address is sent to the webmaster, office manager, and secretary so they are included in electronic notifications.

**New Member Letter/Package.** The Region Policy Manual has guidance on New Member Packages but it is worth a short review here. The Office Manager assembles a package with a disc containing the PNR Bylaws; the latest *Switchlist* or a Special Edition newsletter; a Directory of PNR Officers and Committee Chairpersons; the website address; and other information of interest to a new member. Some regions and divisions are widespread; include a contact list of other NMRA members that live near the new member. Include a welcome letter from the PNR President and one from the Division Superintendent. Print and sign the two letters but burn the other information to a CD. Send this packet shortly after the NMRA publishes the list of new members that includes the new individual.

**Mentor Assignment.** While it is most likely that the sponsor and the new member have many things in common, consider assigning a mentor with scale and/or era in common with the new member. Mentors are responsible to inform the new member of NMRA-sponsored events and, if the new member wants to attend, to accompany them or find them an escort. The mentor introduces the new member to other NMRA members at those events and assists as required. The mentor answers questions on NMRA benefits and how to take advantage of them, finds volunteer or help opportunities available locally, and helps resolve NMRA-related problems. The mentor also provides feedback to the Office Manager and Division Superintendent on how the member assimilates into the organization.

**Invitations to Events.** In order to fully engage a new member into the local clinic, group or Division as quickly, completely and smoothly as possible, it is important that they be invited encouraged to attend NMRA functions and activities. The mentor has immediate responsibility, but the Division membership chair or Superintendent should follow up invitations and notifications with a phone call to determine if the new member will attend and if they need assistance. Get the newcomer involved, be sure communication works, and the individual consider himself part of the group as quickly as possible.

**Newsletter Introduction.** The Region Office Manager and the Division Superintendent should make sure that each new member is announced and introduced in the appropriate newsletter as soon as possible after they join. Include at least his name, home city, Division, and scale. Welcoming new members to the NMRA makes them feel valuable to the organization.

**Initial Involvement.** Consider the three questions in the introduction. Develop new member's personal involvement at soon as possible. Get the newbie to help set up or clean up after a clinic, join a sponsored modular group, or agree to help with some event. Develop involvement and provide the support necessary to assure his success. Do not let the new member overextend or get in over his head.

**Achievement Program Involvement.** The NMRA Achievement Program can be a strong retention and recruiting tool. Get members involved without major effort on their part. Translate any opportunity to observe the layout or modeling work of an individual into a potential AP intervention. Members who have existing, quality layouts may be just a few small efforts away from AP certificates in Electrical and/or Scenery. The individual who has been building structures or cars may have Merit Awards or even an AP certificate in the making. With initial recognition, he experiences another benefit of NMRA and sees a door open to better modeling and further challenges. AP is not limited to modelers who have been doing things forever.

**New Member Feedback.** New members shift immediately from recruiting prospects to retention targets. Obtain good feedback from the new member and, if corrective action is indicated, make it prompt and complete. The local clinic chair, membership chair, Superintendent, and event chair, as appropriate, must take the time to get feedback from members, especially those in their first years of membership. An informal note from the Superintendent requesting feedback at the four month and eight month points is good. It lets the member know that somebody cares and gives them the opportunity to comment. The eight month message is a gentle reminder to renew his membership. Treat every communication from a member seriously. What may appear to be a very minor complaint can fester into revolt if ignored or treated as a meaningless nuisance.

## Tips and Helpful Hints

**Initial Encounter.** While every NMRA member should be alert to recruiting and developing new member opportunities, most members will not, and should not, launch into recruiting every modeler they meet. Make initial conversations about developing mutual interests and sharing common activities. Make it a time to let the prospects talk about themselves, what they want from the hobby, and what they are doing in the hobby. Letting the prospects do the talking makes opportunities to show the NMRA's advantages. Take the time to learn them first so you can make an effective approach.

**Hobby Shop Encounter.** Hobby shop owners like experienced modelers hanging around their shops. Sure, they like us to buy things, but they also like the free technical service for their customers. If you answer a customer's questions and straighten them out, they will buy the products they need, be satisfied with the store, and become a return customer. Besides meeting new modelers, there is the opportunity to straighten out those struggling in the early stages of the hobby. It's a great place to link up with more ex-

perienced modelers new to the area and looking to connect with other modelers. The hobby shop is fertile ground for recruiting.

***Clinic Guests & Visitors.*** The Region has a policy preventing permanent guests or visitors at activities. That said, it is appropriate for activities to include visitors as guests and to welcome them without immediate pressure to “join or leave.” There are a number of ways to make the welcome open and genuine and provide incentive for new prospects to join. One Division uses the Rail Pass as a tool, awarding trial NMRA memberships to appropriate prospects. Other groups use an Apprenticeship period in a modular group as an incentive. Make visitors welcome while working them toward their final membership decision.

***Train Shows, Swap Meets and Recruiting Booth.*** Recruiting is not a passive activity. Building a better booth may help, but it does not result in new members or even leads on new members. The most effective recruiting stations are manned by people who are up and about, talking with attendees, or actually working on simple modeling projects. An opening statement like, “Good morning. Are you enjoying the show?” or “Good morning. Are you finding what you’re looking for?” helps. The latter requires a show map and a reconnaissance tour before the show opens or before the recruiter takes over the booth. The very fact that you appear to care about an attendee in the midst of an impersonal show makes a difference. After the icebreaker, the conversation may turn to the individual’s interests in model railroading to build a base for the discussion about what NMRA offers him. The actual “ask” should only come after the conversation is well established. Be sure the prospective member has materials to refer to after they leave and that the recruiter has a way to contact the individual for follow-up. Not every exchange with a prospective member results in a completed application. Recruiting is the most personal kind of sales and rejection is a part of the effort.

***Train Show Layout Operators.*** While modular group members may not be official recruiters, they are a vital asset. Layout operators are the “face” of the hobby and make the first impression on attendees. A smiling, outgoing, helpful operator showing pride in his work and interest in attendees is a positive asset to recruiting.

Assign one or more “people persons” to the outside of the layout to serve as security and point of contact. Identify them with special vests or badges. Their job is especially important when problems occur and members are busy working to correct it. Let them answer questions so those fixing the problem remain uninterrupted.

Mixing up operations to include continuous running and switching provides for varied levels of interest. Operate at least part of the layout prototypically for demonstration purposes (and to earn AP credits). When there’s a problem with the public, let an assigned “cooler head” smooth the visitor’s ruffles. To keep fingers off the layout, a wider barrier, signs, security, and frequent reminders over the P. A. system work wonders.

Inviting attendees to operate their own equipment on the layout or providing trial runs for new purchases is an excellent recruiting tool. It takes trust to permit unknown and untested equipment on the layout but, with proper preparations, it can be handled safely. One option is to set aside an electrically isolated section of track with a separate power supply. Once equipment is proven reliable, broader access may be allowed. Another nice touch is a certificate saying the attendee served as an “Engineer” on the railroad. In exchange for the certificate, the layout group collects contact data so “we can stay in touch.” Of course, that information goes to the membership group after the show.

***Train Show Problem Solver Booth.*** A sure fire way to generate interest is to fix someone’s broken train. Set up a booth with experienced modelers helping attendees. Often the answer is to remove rug fibers and add lubricant. But adjusting coupler height, straightening drive rods, reconnecting rods to drivers, and cleaning wheels look like magic to the uninitiated but are simple to experienced “fixers.” When the owner

gets a piece of equipment repaired at no cost, you have the perfect opportunity to discuss the importance of NMRA membership. Let the fix it booth collect contact information for those given assistance so contact can be maintained and for follow up, if necessary. It's all recruiting.

**Guests at Meets and Conventions.** There is an ongoing effort to open attendance at meets and conventions to non-member guests and visitors so those with real interest may gain insight about NMRA through participation. Visitors are still subject to registration fees and normally a small non-member tariff (i.e., Rail Pass). The visitor participates in all the activities of the event with the rights and privileges of members. Have a point of contact to help visitors understand the event and how to get maximum benefit. Give visitors a distinctive badge so members can "meet and greet," include them in conversations and activities, and help them as much as possible. You have a prospective member to work on for days.

## The Plan

In order to take best advantage of the knowledge and tools available for retention and recruiting, a more formal plan needs to be developed and implemented. It should focus on the Division level. Regions and the National provide assistance but retention and recruiting begins at the local level.

**1. Establish and assign specific responsibility.** The Division Superintendent retains responsibility for the success of all programs in the Division. But most Superintendents do not have time to be in charge of everything. Recruiting and retention responsibilities must be assigned to an individual willing and able to complete the job properly. Perhaps the Assistant Superintendent could be tasked as Membership Program Chair.

**2. Establish a goal.** The Division Superintendent, working with the Division Board of Directors, must establish a firm goal for membership improvement over the course of a business year. The goal may be a percentage increase or the number of new members. *Whichever. A numeric goal should be established.*

**3. Create a Membership Program Committee.** Membership responsibilities demand the efforts of more than one person. The Membership Chair should lead a committee of individuals with skills and determination to make the program effective. The committee need be only large enough to get the job done but: *there must be a formal committee and it must be dedicated to the assigned task.*

**3. Establish a schedule.** For recruiting to be effective, the Division must establish a schedule of events and activities that will exploit for recruiting. List every clinic, swap meet, open house, train show, meet, convention, or whatever. From this list, develop a priority list and assign assets. *List in priority every event to be covered.*

**4. Determine asset requirements.** Once the level of activity is identified, the Membership Chair determines what materials and people are needed. The Chair requests needed materials (or the funding for them) from the Superintendent. The Chair, the Superintendent, the Officers and the Board *find members to attend activities and events as recruiting agents.*

**5. Arrange space or time at activities.** Once the Membership committee knows which events are on the schedule, it must make sure that space, time, materials and staff are arranged for each activity. The Committee pays any fees, arranges for booth space, negotiates the booth's location, and provides necessary materials, including appropriate displays and items required for "hands on" demonstrations. The Committee and Chairman verify arrangements as dates approach and *make sure that the attending team has all information necessary.*

**6. Establish metrics and reporting requirements.** Every recruiting event must include simple metrics to determine if the activity was worth the time and effort expended and to identify the results. Track the number of people who attended the event, how many contacts were made at the booth, how many modu-

lar layouts were visited, the number of Rail Pass and full memberships obtained, the number of prospects and their email address, the number of hours manned and number of people working the booth. Collect comments by the team on the materials effectiveness, support provided, and overall impression of the activity. *Activity reports and feedback are essential.*

**7. Analysis and formal reports.** Periodically (quarterly?) collect a report of activities and analyze it. If there are lessons to be learned, they must be captured first and results compared with goals. The program only improves if results are collected, considered, and used to make things work better. *Results and lessons learned should be transmitted to Region and published to the membership.*

**8. Celebrate success.** Recruiting is competitive, however, those who bring in new members should be recognized. *Introduce new members in the Division newsletter along with those who recruited them.*

**9. Effective retention is better recruiting.** When the Division saves a member from quitting, it is easier to meet membership goals. While bringing new blood in, do not forget those already here. Here are some steps to aid retention:

- a. Include an article on membership benefits in every edition of the newsletter.
- b. Involve members in programs and fellowship activities.
- c. Make every member responsible for something.
- d. Recognize anniversaries, AP achievements, bring and brag success, clinic presentations, and activity participation.
- e. Emphasize the fun doing things brings.
- f. Use existing members as mentors and sponsors for potential and new members.
- g. Demonstrate that we all value the membership and participation of every member.

**10. Keep the program active and energetic** Recruiting and retention are not one year efforts but continue forever. They should improve and become more effective over time. They should never be taken for granted. A revised Plan is required each year. *Membership organizations like NMRA only exist if there are members.*