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Scott's Seven Simple Steps to Genealogy Society Success!

Almost everyone I know who is into genealogy belongs to at least one Genealogy Society. If you are a genealogy aficionado like me, then you might belong to 19, as I do. But no matter if it is one or twenty this article is aimed at you, the Board of your Society, and other members.

Some of the genealogy societies I belong to are doing an awesome job. Some I can say from my experience are doing not quite so awesome. Some I find downright frustrating. As a result of this and my twenty years in nonprofit fundraising and marketing I offer the following seven simple steps to Genealogy Society Success (at least from Scott's point of view). Take them or leave them, but I hope you at least read them.

1) Scrap the paper! I say this at least for your newsletter and even more mundane items as such as updates, annual dues, etc. As far as the newsletter goes, go electronic! Unless your authors are sending in their stories handwritten or typed on a typewriter, then they are already in computer form, so ditch the expense, time, inventory, etc. of paper newsletters. Postage has gone up, Saturday delivery is going the way of the Dodo bird, printing continues to be costly, and younger generation folks are attuned to the mantra of 'How many trees did that take to print?' Think of this ... the Christian Science Monitor doesn't print anymore. Newsweek doesn't print anymore. See a pattern here?

2) Redo your dues! First, I am going to suggest that you seriously, and I do mean seriously, consider raising your dues. I can actually think of only one Society that I belong to that I pay the dues and think 'gee, that seems high', but for what I get, they actually aren't and I continue to renew each year with them. Then there are the others that I truly wonder how they cover their operating costs and sock away some money for future needs. Several Societies I belong to still charge only \$10 to \$20 a year. Think about it. What do you pay less than a dollar or two a month for in this day and age? If you are worried about your current members being able to afford any increase, then I suggest that by all means you grandfather them in at the old rate. Just remember when you send their annual renewal remind them that you would appreciate if they would consider going up to, or closer to, the current rate. The second half to this equation is to be a bit more flexible in your dues. While I understand the reasoning for having a one-time-of-year-only renewal (although I would argue for at least quarterly dates if you cannot manage monthly renewal dates) at least offer new members the option of a first year pro-rata buy in from when they join. As an example, two years ago I wanted to join a particular Society. It happened to be in late October and they insisted I needed to pay the year's full dues and then renew right away

again on Jan 1st. What happened? Well, I did not join thinking I would just wait for January, then I forgot about them in January, and now I am skipping them all together.

3) Establish an online, electronic presence and start out cheap! There is no reason for any Society not to be online with their electronic footprint. A Facebook page is free! While I hear many folks belittle and condemn Facebook, think of this: Facebook has more than 1 billion users! That's right; I said more than 1 billion! Why are you not there where a whole lot more folks can find, access, participate, learn about you, and ultimately join you? Websites can also be developed with some very handy, fairly cheap resources such as WordPress and others. Personally, I would caution against a custom-built site to begin with as they can be expensive to launch, expensive to maintain, and then you are locked into a system that may well become obsolete or clunky quickly in the future. But get online!

4) Be interactive! One of the very worst things you can do is go online and then be moribund. Your actively does not have to be constant, but it should be consistent. Don't go online and then not post, answer inquiries, ask questions, etc. Also no matter what, stay away from the offerings of automated posting services. They might sound good, but it doesn't take long for folks to realize that posts go up on your site, but no human being ever reacts to them. Interactivity also lends itself to collaboration much more than seeing your members once a month, once a quarter, or annually. Connect, too, with similar sites, cross post good information you see, etc. Be sure not to shun electronic collaboration as it will ultimately strengthen your brand and your presence. Don't be afraid of webinars, video, etc. as effective, new ways to connect with your members and prospective members. And please remember to focus on what's important - your members or fans - no one, but you, care how many 'likes' you have, etc. Add value not drivels.

5) Ask your membership! I am amazed and distressed at how few Societies ever ask my opinion as a member. Granted they may do that in their meetings, but I am often half a world away from those physical meetings so I have no way of knowing. But far too few ever ask me what I think, what I'd like to see the Society do, what I can contribute beyond dues or my surnames. Ask about ideas for the future, how you are doing, what you can do better, what should we not do that we have been doing, etc. There are very few ways to build better 'buy in' than simply asking for input from the folks who are already sending you their hard-earned cash! With online services such as SurveyMonkey and others it is simple to create a good questionnaire or you can just post 'questions' on your Facebook page as a way to get started.

6) Listen up and respond! I am not saying that you have to implement all, or any, of the suggestions that you get from the membership, but they should be substantial food for thought as your Society prepares to undertake your annual planning cycle. You might just be pleasantly surprised at what the membership thinks. Or you might be shocked. Either way it is good and healthy to hear what the members think as you plan how you will be spending their dues each year. Then do not forget to respond! Let them know they were heard. This is true whether you decide to pursue any suggestions or not. You earn the 'chit' just by asking, but you double its value when you respond and say thanks for helping.

7) Fundraise beyond dues and start now! I am always surprised at how many organizations I have contacted and asked what they are fundraising for and am told 'nothing'. Now as a GOF (grizzled old fundraiser) I can tell you every organization I have ever been with always had more needs than money! I don't care if it is a shelf for the genealogy books at the library, a fund to

send an outstanding volunteer to the State convention, money to be able to send out some critical resource books to be digitally reproduced, or a pool of funds to do 'free' research for some of the folks in the community who cannot afford it. Maybe it is more substantial, but you should always have some options for additional support for items, projects, or needs of the organization, but cannot undertake within the means provided by dues. Then talk, talk, talk about them so folks know there are there. Also review these efforts each year. Ideas that are touted year in and year out soon lose their luster, begin to look like something that should simply be an ongoing effort of the Society, or worse, are seen as 'losers' since it they are constantly there. So at least tweak them each year by adding a feature or dropping some portion of the idea. Societies need to build good, solid fundraising relationships with their members beyond dues year in and year out. This will pay handsome dividends at the time when a big need hits, whether it is due to expansion, catastrophe, or new opportunity.

So there you are. Scott's Seven Simple Steps to Genealogy Society Success. I hope you dig in and do them all! Healthier and happier Genealogy Societies are in all our best interests!

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