

Article by Tin Can Tourist member Rhonda Gelstein

In August I was invited to attend a convention geared toward event planners. The convention itself was fantastic, and the educational classes were, well, educational. One of the classes really helped solidify some of my thoughts about classic car clubs, declining membership, and how to bridge the generational gaps.

When we joined our first classic car club I was in my 30s. Neither my husband Mark nor I come from car families. We just liked them, and jumped in with both feet when we purchased our 1950 Packard, and then 1958 Nash Metropolitan. Around the same time we purchased a 1956 Benroy teardrop trailer, thus beginning our adventures with a vintage travel trailer club, Tin Can Tourists. That was 13 years ago, and while we're still active with both the classic car hobby and the classic trailer hobby, the differences between the two styles of organizations really highlights the differences in approach to gaining, and retaining membership.

The car clubs we belong to bemoan the fact that there is declining membership, lack of interest, etc. with the following excuses: "People buy the cars they wanted and couldn't have when they were teenagers", "Young people aren't interested in old cars like ours", "We just can't seem to get young people interested in our cars, they don't care about the old stuff."; and so on. A big amount of blame is placed on the internet. "They don't need to join clubs to get information anymore like we did." All of the car clubs we've been associated with have declining counts and an aging membership. National meets are shrinking, with fewer people attending.

Conversely, Tin Can Tourists, which is targeting the exact same demographic, is booming with membership skyrocketing. Events are being held all over the globe, with sell-out attendance and thousands of spectators attending to tour the trailers. The Facebook group has over 8,000 members, with more joining every day. So, what's the difference?

A class I took at the convention talked about dealing with volunteers from different generations, and how each generation approaches something in a different manner. Everything that was discussed directly applies to the car club culture, and the problem with gaining new, younger membership.

There are currently 4 generations in play; the Traditionalists, the Baby Boomers, the Gen Xers and the Gen Ys. The Traditionalist Generation was born between 1925 and 1945. As a group, their qualities tend to be: Team Players, Indirect Communication, Loyalty to the Organization, Respect Authority, Dedication and Sacrifice, Duty before Pleasure, Obedience, Respond well to directives, Leadership, Seniority and Age and Adherence to Rules. This is the war generation. They respect organizational charts, they like meetings and hierarchy. And, at this stage, they're reluctant to change. They don't see why things need to be done differently. For example, the local AACA club bemoans the fact that they can't gain new membership. But, they hold their meetings in the afternoon during week days, right when younger members are at work. They refuse to change their ways, and hold meetings at times more convenient to younger members. So, they are not going to gain new members.

Baby Boomers are an often-discussed generation, born between 1946 and 1964. As a group they tend to have the following qualities: Big Picture/Systems in Place, Not as hung up on Titles, Dislike Absolutes, Optimism, Team Orientation, Uncomfortable with Conflict, high on Personal Growth, Sensitive to Feedback, Health and Wellness oriented, and looking for personal gratification. They created new ways in their youth, but still have influences of the Traditional Generation at their core. They're big on committees, group decisions, and discussions.

Generation X is born between 1965 and 1980. Their traits tend toward: Positive Attitude, Impatience with Structure, Goal Oriented, Multi-Tasking, Thinking Globally, Self-Reliance, Flexible Hours, Informal Work environment, Technology Literate, Work/Life balance, Likes to stay busy and have freedom to complete a task their own way and will be impatient and will walk away from situations where they're told "this is the way we've always done it".

Generation X is really the generation that Car Clubs should be catering to. This is the generation actively getting into hobbies, traveling and spending money.

Looking at the car clubs we belong to, they consist almost entirely of Traditionalists and Baby Boomers with the exception of one club. That exception is the Micro and Mini Car Club. The clubs have structures of Board of Directors, Regional Directors, local clubs, etc. Each decision requires a multitude of steps to gain approval, or to have everyone put their stamp on it.

Tin Can Tourists, on the other hand, has a demographic that spans the generations,

even into Generation Y. It's actively embraced in droves, with attendees at a function ranging in age from 90 to 9.

I'm going to use my own experiences here. I am a Generation X member. I fit the standard Gen X profile very well. Frankly, the tried and true car club organizational structure makes someone like me crazy. An idea needs to go to the appropriate "committee". That committee then gives the idea to the Board of Directors. The BoD then discusses it, may make changes, and back and forth. At this point, I'm over it, and have moved on to something that I can accomplish without all the hassle. My generation wants the most bang for our buck. We don't need to jump through hoops with clubs to get information. It's at our fingertips via the Internet. We are networked via Social Media. We often work from home, or even from the road. When we go to events, I get online and can be working from wherever we are. My generation enjoys a level of flexibility that other generations did not have. However, many still work traditional jobs, have set hours and limited vacation time.

Where Tin Can Tourists succeeds, and the car clubs that we are familiar with have failed, is in how they reach out to the generations. TCT does not have an extensive hierarchy. Its organizational history is it was formed in the early 1900s, and eventually died out. One couple, Forrest and Jeri Bone, revived the club and have guided it through its growth. As it has grown, there are Regional Directors that help with the work. The club is now being handed over to their son, Terry and his wife Michelle. Terry has done a superb job making TCT "relevant". TCT is very Internet savvy, with a dynamic website, a huge social media presence (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Yahoo Groups) and has created a massive photograph and information database.

The Bone's understand that organizations are about people and the item, in this case vintage travel trailers, is the catalyst to bring people together but they stay for the social connections. Dues in the formal membership are nominal (\$25/year). You must be a member to attend formal TCT events. However, you do not need to be a member to belong to the Facebook or Yahoo groups. They recognize the value of people understanding the culture of the group, and then they will join.

If I want to host a TCT event, I don't need to jump through a lot of hoops. I make a proposal and if approved, the event is mine to run. They provide assistance with trophies and such, offer insurance coverage and advertise the event through their newsletter and social media channels. Because it's easy to do, the task of hosting an

event is not overwhelming, and people are quick to offer to host one once they see how much fun other people had at their events. There is no “we have always done it this way” attitude in the organization. They are constantly changing and adapting to new technology, and how people connect.

A large percentage of TCT members have classic cars as well, the common factor being a love of retro, vintage, well-made items when design was a highlight. So why are these people not flocking to car clubs, when the culture is much the same?

While at the convention, I spoke to someone who was representing a hotel chain. I mentioned that we belonged to the Packard Club and she lit right up. “We have a Packard”, she told me. It’s a late model Packard that her husband inherited. When I asked if they had joined the Packard club she said no, that it was only old people who didn’t want them because her husband has tattoos and the car has a modern drive train in it. What a shame. Because the Traditionalists in that club are hung up on originality, they’ve successfully turned their back on others who enjoy the car, love how well it was made, but have also personalized it as their own. Shouldn’t there be a place for all in a club?

One huge draw with TCT is that it is open to all types of travel trailers. It’s not brand-centric. While there are brand-centric clubs, such as the Airstream Club, they do not boast nearly the attendance figures that TCT does at functions. We currently own 4 vintage travel trailers. Each one is different from the next. One of the great things gained from going to a function is seeing the other trailers, talking to the owners, getting tips and tricks on maintenance, repair or even decorating them. Many times smaller groups such as an Avion owners group or Cree Coach group will gather at a TCT event and share a meal, etc. but all are fully participating in the main group’s activities otherwise.

Women enjoy the hobby as much as the men, and many single women attend the events and participate with full gusto. Sisters on the Fly is an organization similar to TCT that is a women’s only outdoor adventure group. I’m a proud member of SOTF. It is another organization that is growing by leaps and bounds.

So, what do car clubs need to do to reverse the trend, and see explosive growth like TCT or SOTF? First, I believe the time for marque specific events are coming to an end. People like variety, and variety draws more people. As a friend of mine said after the 2003 MOCNA International Meet that I hosted, “It’s kind of like attending a party

where all the women are wearing the same dress, just in different colors with different accessories. Its fun for a while, but eventually you realize it's just the same dress." When I go to a multi-marque event, I learn about other brands I may not have been familiar with or grow to appreciate my own car more.

Many classic car owners own more than one type of car. So, with marque specific events they may be forced to choose which event to attend, given time and money constraints, and the other events fall by the wayside. How much better would it be if they could bring more than one of their cars and communicate with others with similar vehicles in one place? There are many benefits to this. More people attending an event results in greater negotiating horsepower when booking venues. There is a bigger pool of volunteers to draw from. The show may be a joint show, but each separate club could hold a "club night" or have separate club-centric awards, etc. Plus, it's a perfect opportunity to showcase your club to people who do not belong to your club. Maybe the clubs take turns hosting a hospitality room, one club each day. Or, each club hosts an event, or tour, or provides an early registration gift. It makes the whole event much more attractive for attendees, and the clubs get far more value for their dollar and time.

Second – car clubs need to get on the social media bandwagon. Make websites dynamic. Offer webinars for tech tips, how-tos, or live stream from events. Do you have an active database for research? Are members allowed to post their own photos, link to their blogs, etc? TCT sells banner ads on their website for \$100 a year. A bargain! Their daily site hit counts are astronomical, and it's the best advertising value that I'm aware of. I've been advertising with them for years. If you want to engage younger members, let them take control of these areas and fly with it. DO NOT MICROMANAGE. That is the fastest way to lose younger members. Trust someone and let them go. Let them take ownership of the task. If, after a certain amount of time, nothing has happened, then by all means step in. But, when people become invested, they stay involved. Does your club have a Twitter account? Instagram? Skype? YouTube? That's where the people are.

Third – how are you reaching potential members? Advertising in print is not the only answer. You may gain a few members that way, but where is the bang for your buck? What is that publication's readership demographic? Today's Gen Xers and Ys are internet based. They are looking at websites on their smart phones or iPads. Is your website mobile friendly? A club is better off investing on building the technical infrastructure. Look at where your club is showcasing itself, and then look around at

the attendees. If your club is looking to gain members by having a booth at an event like Hershey, what is the attendee demographic? Are the majority of the people in their 30's, 40's and 50's or is the majority of people in their 60's, 70's, and 80's? Who is manning the booth? People gravitate to others like themselves. If your booth is manned with older members, that's generally who will be attracted.

Fourth – make it easy for people to participate. If someone wants to host an event, give him or her general guidelines and support and then let them run with it. Don't make it difficult. Events build community. A sense of community is what makes people stay. Also, if you're targeting a younger membership, remember they may still have children in school so their vacation time is restricted to the summer months. Likewise, when organizing your event, make sure there are activities for a variety of age ranges.

Fifth – it's time to let go of the membership requirement for accessing information. Some clubs greedily hoard information for its "members only". The world is at a person's fingertips. I can go to YouTube and find how-to videos on almost anything I need to do. There is no need to belong to a club to find out how to fix my carburetor or find a parts supplier. I do believe clubs need to maintain the membership requirement to attend events. I feel strongly that events should be insured, and an insurance company is going to require membership.

Sixth – getting back to multi-marque events, I recommend hiring a person to chair the events with club input and feedback. Putting on a successful meet is hard work. When they are not well run, people will not attend another one. Negotiating with a hotel, or event venue, can be an overwhelming task for someone not familiar with the process. If a single point person is in charge, they can handle those things no matter what part of the country the event is held in. Then, the local clubs can help with adding the local flavor. This will keep events at a high level of quality and consistency and free up volunteers from continually needing to create an event from scratch. There are a lot of different ways to approach paying an event coordinator, it doesn't all need to be done "cash up front".

I truly enjoy the classic car hobby. We have made dear friends through the various car clubs we have belonged to. I have a deep appreciation for the culture, the history and the people behind the various marques. How else would I have met the original designers of the car, or the people who brought a part of it to life? I believe there is no reason that car clubs should die away. There is currently a massive surge in appreciation for all things "retro". Clothing, furniture, cars, travel trailers, and a simpler

way of life all have a huge upward trend among Gen X and Y as they look back when things were made to last, and not be disposable like today's items. With a hard look at the way things are run, and some changes in perspective, there is no reason why the car clubs we enjoy cannot grab this swing and start growing once again.

Returning to the convention I attended; venues desperately want our car clubs there. I spoke to hotels and locations all over the country that would be amazing locations to hold car shows. They're willing to work with the clubs, even help provide funds to put on the event if the counts are high enough. The desire is there, and they're willing to help with media contacts, transportation needs and more. It's just a matter of connecting all the pieces.

Thanks for reading my unsolicited advice. I don't want to see classic car clubs die a slow death, as there's really no reason for it to happen. It will take a willingness to try things a new way and listen to new points of view. But in the end, it could increase interest and bring wonderful new members to the hobby.

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