

Retention...It Needs to be Personal!

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Back in the day when I was an "annual renewal" member, I didn't really make my AFA renewal a priority. I often threw away the reminders because I wasn't sure what I got for my membership. Of course I received the magazine, but frankly I hardly ever read it. Even today, I don't have time to read the magazine. Maybe it's because I'm still active duty and generally know what's going on in the Air Force. Perhaps once I retire and no longer have the daily fire hose of Air Force issues I will have more desire to read the magazine. After about 10-12 years of sporadic membership renewals at ever-increasing dues, I opted for a lifetime membership.

So how do we get those annual memberships to renew? That is the million dollar question, right? We can get new members to join from a variety of sources, but if we don't 'set the hook' within the first few months of them joining, we lose the catch. We have to figure out how to set that hook to make them want to continue their membership. They must see AFA as more than just a magazine every month.

I view retention as 95% on the shoulders of the local chapter. Most members won't have any interaction with National unless they attend a convention. So that leaves the local chapter to reel me in and make me want to be an active member and STAY a member. Sure, there is an element of personal responsibility and self-motivation. I wanted to be involved and I sought out the chapter leadership, but, in my case, no one contacted me to tell me what the chapter does, what opportunities there were to get involved, or to ask me to help with anything. If not for my own initiative, I would be one of those hundreds of members sitting on my couch happy to read Air Force Magazine!

We often complain about the STP syndrome (same ten people), but do we make a concerted effort to reach out? My guess is not enough. We rely on technology too much...just send an e-mail to everyone and wait for someone to respond. I don't know about you, but I delete a whole bunch of e-mails that I don't think are relevant to me. And after 15-20 from the STP, I stop reading the titles and just delete!

We also need to strike a balance between the work/volunteer aspect of AFA and having fun. Every event our chapter holds revolves around some sort of work. We never get together just to mingle and enjoy each other's company. That's another reason to just delete the e-mail...kind of like telemarketing phone calls. I can usually recognize a telemarketer by the phone number and I either don't answer the phone or immediately hang up. I know they are going to ask for money--I know the AFA e-mail is going to ask me to help with some event and I just don't have time. We can change that mind-set by changing our communication methods.

Retention needs to be personal. Those STP need to reach out to a handful of folks and take them under their wing until they are in the boat. Then our STP has grown to maybe 30 and the process continues. Yes, it's hard to do when many of us have full time jobs and AFA is third or fourth after family and church. But if we really believe in the organization, we need to set aside a couple hours a week to make our chapter successful. If we succeed as a chapter, National will in turn succeed. But if we fail as a chapter, as we see far too often, then National suffers. The Air Force also suffers because there isn't a professional organization in that area advocating for the programs and people that need help.