

Opportunity for Guidance: Welcoming New Members and Engaging Leaders September 2012

It's the start of the new League year. And, it is a very busy election season – a time when the League is most visible to the public and therefore a time when individuals are likely to encounter the League for the first time. The content of our voter education work will be impeccable, but will we be ready to “catch” these volunteers and future members/leaders? How do we make them feel “at home” in the League so that they come back?

Think back to when you first joined the League. Were you familiar with League lingo? Did you know everyone at the meeting? We all know that first impressions mean a lot. Creating positive initial experiences for new and potential members—and new and potential leaders—is crucial to the success of the League.



A new member's first experiences with the League can also determine whether they will stay a member. Leagues are encouraged to *intentionally focus* on the first impressions that they are creating this fall. Being welcoming should be a priority for every League before, during and at each event. Add ways to engage all individuals, especially non-members, to your event planning checklist.

Before the event:

- **Invite a friend.** Encourage each member of your League to invite a friend to the event! Suggest that you go together to the event and build a positive relationship and experience for them with the League.
- **Who else?** Think if there are other ways to involve a new member or potential new member. Ask them to help you plan some aspect of the event. If he/she isn't ready for a big task, ask them to take on something small. Or, have them partner with a seasoned leader. Working together can be fun and can be a learning experience for both people!
- **Be open to new ideas** when planning an event. One of the great things about new members or volunteers is that they bring fresh eyes to long-standing processes and new perspectives to the group. Telling someone “that's not how we do it” can be deflating. How can we leverage this new creativity?
- **Be thoughtful about language** when inviting individuals to an event or asking volunteers/members to help out. Remember that sometimes the League can be intimidating.

Remind people that they don't need to know anything about the issues to be part of a forum; the League's mission is to educate!

At the event:

- **Have greeters welcoming all participants** to an event. Make everyone feel welcome. Think back to your first League meeting. What made you feel welcome?
- **A sign-in sheet** is a great way to collect information from individuals so you can contact them in the future and welcome them to join the League.
- **Mingle!** League members or a designated ambassador team can mingle with non-members. This will show potential members that the League is a friendly group that loves to meet new people. Encourage long time members to introduce themselves and get to know the people who come to League events.
- **Check in on your new leaders** in a friendly, helpful, and nonjudgmental way. Have a seasoned leader ask the new leaders how they are doing and if they need any help.

After the event:

- **Say Thank You!** Remember all the members and leaders who helped make your League event a success! A simple thank you (e.g., e-card, phone call or acknowledgement in your newsletter) goes a long way to making people feel appreciated and excited to help out again.
- **Always Follow-Up** with individuals who signed the sign-in sheet. Ask someone to call or email everyone on the list, thanking them for attending and inviting them to join the League. Remember to do this in a timely manner - a potential member will feel more welcomed if an email comes a few days after the event, rather than a few weeks
- **Note for next time** the names of those who helped out with the event. Make a spreadsheet of who did what so that they can be called upon again.

Other things to remember:

- **Got a new member?** Great! Here's how to make them feel welcome:
 - **Cash the check!** Cash the check as soon as possible. It sounds obvious, but little things like this signal to people that their support is not needed or appreciated.
 - **Send a welcome packet.** Thank them for joining the League, send a small token (like a button, a pen, etc.), and let them know when the next meeting is. Let them know who to contact if they'd like to get involved with an upcoming event or work on a specific topic. It doesn't (and shouldn't) be too much information.
- **Orient new members and train new leaders.** Teaching new members and leaders about the League in a fun and welcoming way will help your League create informed, confident leaders from the beginning. Hold an orientation meeting for new members every six months. Give them a brief history of the League, explain how the League functions, and how they can help. Hold trainings for new League leaders about topics that are interesting and will help them one day lead the League, such as a training session on event planning, on running a candidates forum, etc. Don't have the resources for a full-fledged orientation or training? Meet over lunch with interested individuals. Connect new members with a Leaguer who will stay in touch with them during the year and new leaders with a mentor to help teach them the ropes in an area of interest to them.

Resources are available!

- *The Welcoming League* (webinar recording), presented by Marcia Merrins, available at <http://lwv.adobeconnect.com/p16559472/>.
- *The Welcoming League* chapter in the binder.