

VFW Department of Nevada

Member Retention Strategy And Process

Bruce Hollinger
State Commander

Contact Information

Email: bruce.hollinger@comnett.net

Cell phone: 702-308-1696

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Introduction

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) is dying; it has been for many years.

What does this statement mean? It simply states the obvious fact that when the VFW has a long term trend of losing members every year, year after year, at some time in the future the organization will no longer be effective as a strong veterans advocate and leader in veterans' service

There are three very obvious reasons for this long-term decline in membership:

- Members die.
- Members do not renew their membership.
- New member recruitment is not sufficient to replace losses incurred through death and drop-outs.

The VFW has been losing more members "out the back" than gained through recruiting members. Even offsetting the loss with new members is not sufficient due to member deaths.

Nevada posts are losing the retention battle. To grow the organization, statistics show that the department needs to retain at least 75 percent of its annual members to maintain its size during an average year of recruiting new members. The generally recognized goal for non-profit service organizations is retention of 80 percent of its members to be able to grow membership. Nevada posts have averaged less than 70 percent retention over the past five years.

Volunteer and financial resources in the Department of Nevada are focused on recruiting, not retention. There is no department-wide equivalent commitment of resources to retaining current members. There is a very good reason for this: Recruiting can be promoted and executed at the department level, where retention has been a "grass roots" effort, in the post by post members. The department has historically only encouraged the posts' effort to retain its annual members.

Maybe it is time to change. As state commander, I solicit your ideas on how the department can help your post with retention, including volunteer and financial resources. But that is a separate topic from the purpose of this document.

What this document provides to you, the post leadership, is a strategy and a process that is proven to increase post retention of annual members, generate involvement of all your members, and therefore invigorate your post to become a more active post in VFW programs and the local community. Does it require a commitment by post leadership and active members to implement? Yes! Does it work? If you make it work!

This document is organized to provide a retention strategy and process first, followed by a list ways to find lost members, other ideas on how to improve member retention, and lastly by the fluffy stuff – some thoughts by others that you do not need to succeed with retention, but might interest those with the same bent of mind as I have.

Retention Strategy

“Love” them early and often

- **It’s too late to tell a member how much we value them if it’s renewal time**

If you have not had the member actively involved during the year he has been a member, he probably does not even remember why he joined (or renewed) in the first place. A non-active member has little reason to renew.

Poor maintenance of the members’ contact information will ensure that you will not be able to contact a good percent of your members to ask them to renew their membership. If you are in frequent contact with current members, it is much more likely he will report changes in his contact information during one of the contacts during the year.

- **When 9 or more “quality” contacts are made, you can expect greater than a 80% renewal rate**

If the post leadership is frequently contacting the member, the member must actively resist getting involved in the post and is probably a poor candidate for renewal any way. If he gets involved, he becomes a good candidate for renewal

Involved members strengthen your post in many ways: more active participants means more volunteers for the post to work the VFW programs, provide service to veterans, and participate in the local community.

A change in retention approach

- **From “Selling the value of the organization to them” to demonstrating “how much we value them”**

The human psyche appears to like being “needed” more than liking the value the organization provides to them. So, let’s take advantage of this and let them know their value during every contact we make with them.

- **Works for both retaining current members and recruiting new members**

Same humans, same psyches. Most potential members do not ask what benefits does the VFW provide. They want to know who and what we are. That is when we can emphasize their value to the VFW’s purpose, goals, and programs.

Retention Process

“Frequent member contact”

For new members

- **First Contact: Recruiter to follow-up with contact after application submitted**

The recruiter makes contact with the applicant within 48 hours after the application is completed. Contact is made by phone or email, phone preferred. The recruiter thanks him for his application, explains that his application has been delivered to the post quartermaster, and that someone will be contacting the applicant to verify his eligibility.

- **Second Contact: Quartermaster to inform applicant his membership is in work**

The quartermaster makes contact with the applicant within 72 hours of receiving the application from the recruiter. Contact is made by phone or email, phone preferred. The quartermaster thanks him for his application, explains why he is valuable to the post and VFW, and that someone will be contacting him to verify his eligibility.

- **Third Contact: Review committee to investigate eligibility through personal interaction**

The review committee member makes contact with the applicant within 48 hours of receiving the application from the quartermaster. Contact is made by a face-to-face meeting if possible, by phone to request, facsimile or email attachment otherwise. The committee member thanks him for his application, explains the requirements to belong to the VFW, checks the applicant's proof, tells the applicant he is eligible and on what basis, explains why he is valuable to the post and VFW, and that the post commander will contact him in the very near future after the members have approved his membership.

If the applicant is not eligible, the review committee member returns his application and payment means, and thanks him for his interest, but explains why the VFW must follow its congressional charter to accept only eligible members.

In many posts, the role of the review committee member may be the commander and quartermaster who perform the review committee's function.

If proof of eligibility is submitted with the application, then this step is not necessary and the quartermaster announces that the post commander will contact him shortly during the quartermaster's contact with the applicant.

- **Fourth Contact: Commander to personally invite the eligible applicant to first regular meeting after approval by the members**

The commander makes contact with the applicant within 48 hours of the members' approval of the applicant to invite the new member to the next regular meeting. Contact is made by phone or email, phone preferred. The commander thanks him for his membership, explains that the members have approved his membership in the post, explains why is valuable to the post and VFW, and that someone will contact him shortly before the next meeting to ensure that he remembers to attend the meeting.

- **Fifth Contact: Adjutant to mail or hand deliver post information packet to the new member**

The adjutant makes contact with the recently approved new member within 48 hours to provide him with a post information packet that should contain a list of officers and their contact information, copies of the latest newsletter and post by-laws, and any other information that would make the new member feel welcome in the post. Contact is made by email or regular mail (in the form of a letter). The adjutant thanks him for his membership, explains why he is valuable to the post and VFW, and that he expects to meet him at the next regular meeting.

- **Sixth Contact: Commander to administer the oath of obligation and introduce him to the members**

At the first opportunity (which should be the first regular meeting after the member's approval by the post members), the commander gives the new member the oath of obligation and presents him with his VFW pin, and introduces him to the members assembled for the meeting.

Note: The commander assigns a mentor to the new member and ensures that the assigned mentor meets the new member at the meeting. The mentor must be knowledgeable about the post and the VFW, be a regular meeting attendee, and willing to assume the responsibility of a mentor.

- **Seventh and Higher Contacts: Mentor to contact the new member at least monthly; get new member to meetings; get him or her involved with the post programs, committee work, social aspects**

The mentor makes contact with the new member at least monthly, and always shortly before the next meeting. The mentor thanks him for his membership, encourages him to get involved in the post functions, and makes sure that the new member is not having any difficulties that the mentor or if necessary, the post can aid.

The mentor is responsible to the quartermaster to ensure the new member's contact information stays current and valid.

- **Intensive contact process for 6 to 12 month time period**

The "Frequent Contact" process is a very intensive process of integrating new members into the post. Over the six to twelve month timeline, the mentor and post officers should already know if the member is a highly probable renewal from how he reacts to the frequent contacts and interacts with the post through his attendance or lack of same at post meetings and other functions.

If the member is fully integrated as an active member of the post during this time, then it would be time to turn his name over to the Life Membership Chairman. The member should be receptive to the idea of "going life" to save money over his long membership span expectations.

- **If the post executes the process successfully, it has involved new members and integrated them into the routine post activities.**

These active members should willingly renew or convert to life membership.

For inactive annual members who renew

- **First Contact: Quartermaster to inform member who renews through the post to expect his new membership card**

The quartermaster makes contact with the renewed annual member within 72 hours of receiving the renewal request from the recruiter. Or, if the member renewed online, within 72 hours of noticing the member had renewed. Contact is made by phone or email, phone preferred. The quartermaster thanks him for his renewal, explains why he is valuable to the post and VFW, and when and where the next regular meeting is scheduled.

- **Second Contact: Adjutant to deliver a post information packet if member has not been active for over four months**

The adjutant makes contact with the recently approved new member within 48 hours of notification by the quartermaster that the member has renewed to provide him with a post information packet that should contain a list of officers and their contact information, copies of the latest newsletter and post by-laws, and any other information that would make the new member feel welcome in the post. Contact is made by email, regular mail, or in person. The adjutant thanks him for his membership, explains why he is valuable to the post and VFW, and that he expects to meet him at the next regular meeting.

- **Third Contact: Commander to personally invite the renewed member to the next meeting**

The commander makes contact with the renewed member within 48 hours of notification by the quartermaster that the member has renewed. The commander thanks him for his membership, explains why is valuable to the post and VFW, and that someone will contact him shortly before the next meeting to ensure that he remembers to attend the meeting.

Note: The commander assigns a mentor to the renewed member and ensures that the assigned mentor meets the renewed member at the meeting. The mentor must be knowledgeable about the post and the VFW, be a regular meeting attendee, and willing to assume the responsibility of a mentor.

- **Fourth Contact: Commander to introduce the renewed member at the meeting**

At the first opportunity (which should be the first regular meeting after the member's renewal, the commander introduces him to the members assembled for the meeting.

- **Fifth through Ninth or more Contactes: Mentor to contact the renewed member at least monthly; get renewed member to meetings; get him or her involved with the post programs, committee work, social aspects**

The mentor contacts the renewed member at least monthly, shortly before the next meeting. The mentor thanks him for his membership, encourages him to get involved in the post functions, and makes sure that the new member is not having any difficulties that the mentor or if necessary, the post can aid.

The mentor is responsible to the quartermaster to ensure the renewed member's contact information stays current and valid.

- **Intensive contact process, with the expected same results as for new members**

For inactive annual and life members

The first step in this process is to contact all inactive members, both annual and life. There are tools available to assist the post in finding “lost” members. See the later section related to “people” searches.

- **First Contact: Post member to contact inactive member**

Post member makes contact with the inactive member. Contact is made by phone, email, or personal contact, phone preferred. The member thanks him for his membership, explains why he is valuable to the post and VFW, verifies the contact information, and when and where the next regular meeting is scheduled.

- **Second Contact: Adjutant to deliver a post information packet if member has not been active for over four months**

The adjutant makes contact with the inactive member within 48 hours of notification by the post member that the inactive member has been contacted to deliver a post information packet that should contain a list of officers and their contact information, copies of the latest newsletter and post by-laws, and any other information that would make the inactive member feel welcome in the post. Contact is made by email, regular mail, or in person. The adjutant thanks him for his membership, explains why he is valuable to the post and VFW, and that he expects to meet him at the next regular meeting.

- **Third Contact: Commander to personally invite the recently contacted inactive member to the next meeting**

The commander makes contact with the inactive member within 48 hours of notification by the post member that the inactive member has contacted. The commander thanks him for his membership, explains why is valuable to the post and VFW, and that someone will contact him shortly before the next meeting to ensure that he remembers to attend the meeting.

Note: The commander assigns a mentor to the inactive member and ensures that the assigned mentor meets the inactive member at the meeting. The mentor must be knowledgeable about the post and the VFW, be a regular meeting attendee, and willing to assume the responsibility of a mentor.

- **Fourth Contact: Commander to introduce the inactive member at the meeting**

At the first opportunity, the commander introduces him to the members assembled for the meeting.

- **Fifth through Ninth or more Contacts: Mentor to contact the inactive member at least monthly; get inactive member to meetings; get him or her involved with the post programs, committee work, social aspects**

The mentor contacts the inactive member at least monthly, shortly before the next meeting. The mentor thanks him for his membership, encourages him to get involved in the post functions, and makes sure that the new member is not having any difficulties that the mentor or if necessary, the post can aid.

The mentor is responsible to the quartermaster to ensure the inactive member’s contact information stays current and valid.

- **Intensive contact process, with the expected same results as for new members**

Finding Your Lost Members

First and Most Important Item to get Inactive Annual and Life Members Active in the Post: Maintain an accurate member database

Without this, the process to get inactive members to become active and many of the retention ideas on the next page will not yield as much value.

How to find “lost” members

1. Ask the department to request from VFW Headquarters contact information on all department members
 - a. Less than 20% will have an email address; less than 30% will have a phone number.
 - b. If the member updated his mailing address with Headquarters when he last moved, you will be in luck with at least one valid contact field.
 - c. In other words, do not expect the contact information from VFW Headquarters to be the solution to everyone of your lost members
2. Use free people search web pages
 - a. AnyWho: <http://www.anywho.com/>
 - b. Ultimate White Pages <http://www.theultimates.com/white/>
 - c. ZabaSearch <http://www.zabasearch.com/>
 - d. Like with the VFW Headquarters contact information, these search engines will not produce great results. For instance, if the member has no land line phone, you will not find an address or phone number for him in most free search engines. Cell phones are not usually in the databases.
3. Use a paid people search web page
 - a. Intelius People Search <http://www.intelius.com/>
 - b. Intellius charges \$1.95 for each people search report (address, phone)
 - c. Intellius charges \$4.95 for each email search report
 - d. Intellius sells a 24 hour unlimited people search (address, phone) pass for \$19.95.
 - e. The 24 hour pass is by far the best value. The site assigns a password that should be good from multiple computers, but one at a time. But you could break up the work into time periods, log on then at the end of your time, log off and turn the access over to another post member or another post within the state.
 - f. The department has offered to pay the cost of the 24 hour pass, but only if it is efficiently used for the whole 24 hours. So, more likely, the department could manage the coordination of this service if enough posts were interested. This offer has been made by the state membership chairman for the last two years, but no one has ever taken advantage of the offer.

A Potpourri of Retention Ideas

1. Develop a retention plan, with financial and member resources identified.
2. Develop a membership campaign that creates teams to compete to retain annual members and provide some reward for the winning team.
3. Acknowledge renewals (in newsletter, web site, meetings, etc.).
4. Send a special “Thanks” to first-time renewals. Consider expanding it to all renewals.
5. Give an incentive to members who renew by a certain date – like a gift, reduced annual dues, or raffle for a life membership.
6. If you give a reduced-dues incentive to attract new members, credit the incentive to their *second* year of membership.
7. Encourage *new* members, by providing incentives, to recruit someone else for membership. During the recruitment process they will be reminded of why *they* joined!
8. Prior to sending the first renewal notice, send a personal note from the Commander telling members that he/she looks forward to their involvement with the post again next year.
9. Develop a phone script to use for the phone calls; include the question "what can we do to encourage you to renew?"
10. Conduct a phone/letter campaign to recapture prior members who have been non-members for the past year or two.
11. Establish an “Involvement Committee” whose sole job is to get members to participate.
12. Try to find small jobs for people to fill to get them started in the leadership process.
13. Find ways to get members involved in projects, committees, and advisory groups.
14. Have several family/spouse-related activities each year.
15. Sponsor a public information program on public access television stations. Current members establish a sense of pride and will remember that at renewal time.
16. Develop a plan for ongoing communication to members
17. Along with a “welcome” letter, send new members a “Thank You” note.
18. Send a “member profile” form to new members to gain information.
19. Make sponsors responsible for new member orientations. Don’t give “credit” for sponsorship until an orientation is done.
20. Send a “How Are We Doing?” form to first-year members and respond to any negative comments. Be sure to call those who don’t respond at all.
21. Acknowledge changes of address; don’t just change them in your database. Have a card that says: “Thanks for notifying us of the change. Here’s your new listing as it now appears on our records.”
22. Develop surveys to measure member satisfaction and to solicit both positive and negative inputs, but make it so members can easily respond.
23. Highlight the survey results in the post newsletter, web site, or barring either of those, by letter to all members.
24. Do a survey of inactive members. Have the officers review the results for corrective actions, say thanks to the participants, and tell them what your plan is to remedy identified problems.
25. Survey non-renewals. When doing so, always ask “May we contact you about reinstating your membership?” Be sure to code the forms so you know who sends them back.
26. As a leader in the post, be a reason to renew. To many members, the leaders personify the organization and should be of the caliber that make members want to renew.

Other Retention Information to Ponder

Three Reasons Why Retention is More Important than Recruitment

There are three reasons why retention is more important than recruitment for your post:

1. If you get retention right, you will have built the basis for recruitment. High retention rates are the signal that you have happy, satisfied members. And happy, satisfied members tend to share the post story with others, automatically creating a grassroots recruitment campaign.
2. The old saying, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" is certainly true for posts. It's true not only because it takes less effort to keep a member than find a new member, but because it is less expensive to retain a member than recruit a new member.
3. Most importantly, if you have a low retention rate, it is a signal that you have serious underlying problems in your post. Recruitment of members is primarily a function of great marketing. But member retention is a function of both marketing, and more importantly, a great membership experience. If you can't keep your members, then you are wasting money recruiting them until you fix the problems with the experience.

The bottom line is that recruitment is important for your post. But retention must be your first priority. Get retention right - then move on to recruitment.

A New Member is the Most Likely Member Not to Renew

Almost every organization has its lowest renewal rate among new members. That's why we call the first year of membership the conversion year.

Over the years, there have been many attempts at increasing renewals for these first year members. But there is a one solution that is better than most others. It is called engagement – encouraging and initiating interaction between the member and the organization.

This interaction can be as simple as a phone call. Interaction can also be in the form of member transactions. In a data analytics study conducted for one organization, it was determined that:

- One to three year members who are local members are 17% more likely to renew than those who were members at large.
- Members who attended a meeting in the past year were 19 percent more likely to renew than those who did not attend a meeting.
- Members who attended a meeting at any time in the past were 7% more likely to renew than those who never attended a meeting.
- Members who attended four or more meetings were 30 percent more likely to renew than members who never attended a meeting.

Successful Retention Strategies for Post Officers

- Be in frequent contact with your members—and not just by e-mail.
- Recognize your members at meetings—for example, thank them for years of continuous membership and Not just at the major milestones like 10, 25, and 50 years.
- Network at your meetings. Socialize with your entire membership—not just fellow officers or canteen patrons.
- Talk to them! Get out there and visit with your members. Find out what they like, dislike, and what emerging issues are affecting them.
- Offer surveys to get their opinions on at least an annual basis.
- If you can't figure out why some members are not participating—contact them! Reach out to them and ask them to get involved.
- Make sure members know where to turn if they have a question or a problem of any kind.