

Guide To Building Regional Clubs

by
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Regional clubs are a wonderful extra for the collector, but they're the lifeblood of the organized hobby. It's the clubs that organize all the large gatherings--swapfests, conventions, etc. It's the clubs that pull in most of the new people into the hobby (because they attract local people to their local activities). And, it's the clubs that forward, directly or indirectly, most collectors on to the national hobby organization, RMS.

Thus, it follows that the more regional clubs the hobby has, the healthier the organized hobby will be. More clubs mean more collectors, more advertising to the public, more activities, more exchanging information--a tighter, more efficient, more effective network altogether.

The tough part has always been building those regional clubs. They're fragile constructs, it turns out...and, in the past...and in the present...a number of potential clubs have never materialized...and more have eventually 'withered' on the vine. Thus, I offer my thoughts on the subject, for whatever they're worth:

Step 1. There must be a group of local collectors (say, within a hundred-mile radius) willing to get together on a regular basis for hobby reasons. How many is a 'group'? I imagine you could get a club off the ground and going with as little as 3-4 collectors, but they would have to be *really* active and *really* dedicated. Normally, I should think, we'd probably be looking at 10+ as a starting point.

Step 2. [*and this one's usually the killer*] Some of the local collectors have to be willing to be the officers who do the work required by a club--handling dues and membership, putting out a bulletin, scheduling and organizing meetings, refreshments, activities...

Step 3. Have regular meetings in order to provide local collectors with 1) an opportunity to obtain covers, 2) an opportunity to obtain and share information, 3) an opportunity to have input into the hobby, and 4) an opportunity to further the goals of the hobby through club publicity, group activities, etc....along with socializing with peers and just having a good time.

But, you can't have meetings if the local collectors don't show up...*and local collectors* *continued on p.3*

often don't show up...and that's also usually a critical factor in whether or not a club succeeds, because, no matter how many attractive activities, great refreshments, creative ideas, etc. the club officers may come up with...the single greatest drawing card for meetings is...*other collectors!*... People who come with new material, new information, new opportunities for trading, selling, and so on. There's nothing as deadly to club meetings as having the same stalwart 4-5 people show up over and over again when everyone else doesn't. Who's going to drive 40-70-100 miles for *that*, especially with gas prices continually soaring? Thus, there *has* to be some commitment on the part of those local collectors to support the club by showing up...but *how* you get that commitment is a question that clubs across the country have been trying to answer for years.

Exception - While having such meetings is the ideal and is certainly advantageous and recommended, it's not actually an absolute necessity. Sierra-Diablo, for example, is a regional club that stopped having meetings altogether a number of years ago and yet is still healthy and thriving. It should be noted, however, that that club offers an exceptional auction and a widely recognized bulletin. So, a club that has no meetings has to have *something* to offer! [*And, if truth be told, I've often gotten the impression that many to most collectors in any given area would just as soon not deal with meetings. Yes, I know! Why on earth would that be? Well, ask all the local club members who don't show up for meetings!...And, they'll invariably cite the problems I've noted above, plus the usual "prior commitments" and "no time"*].

Step 4. Once the club *is* formed, unless it's going to remain a small informal gathering of local collectors, it has to then develop those items which will draw in members from outside the local area, members who would not reasonably be expected to attend meetings. Those items are a good bulletin and a good auction (usually tied to the bulletin as a bulletin auction). Without those, there's no real reason why a collector, say, in Pennsylvania should bother joining a club in California.

It *used to be* that such collectors joined other clubs to have access to their rosters in order to make more contacts for trading, and it *used to be* that trading was the main way that most collectors obtained covers. Neither of those situations is true anymore. Collectors may now easily find peer contacts on the internet, and *buying* is now the primary way of obtaining covers for most collectors. So, what's that club in California got to offer that collector in Pennsylvania?...A good bulletin that offers useful collecting information and keeps the collector apprised of what's going on, hobby-wise, in that particular area, and a good auction that gives the collector the opportunity to find and obtain the material that he or she is out to collect.

Again, though, in order to do this, someone has to be willing to handle the auction; someone has to be willing to do the bulletins; someone has to be willing to see to the printing and the mailing...and so we're back to Step 2: Some of the local collectors have to be willing to do the work. It's hard to find those people...and it's hard to replace them when they eventually step down.

Step 5. Well, if you've managed to successfully negotiate the first four steps, the rest, really, is maintenance...but it's *important* maintenance! Your local collectors are going to gradually diminish in numbers over time (attrition, one way or another), so a club that's going to remain viable normally has to be constantly looking for new members, especially local members (normally) because they're the ones that typically do the work, as well as keeping the meetings going. So, clubs should be...

◆ Advertising their local meeting dates and places. This can include flyers, postings on various bulletin boards, and so forth, but I would think the best approach would be to run a blurb in the local newspaper or weekly advertising circular. Most newspapers have, for example, something

akin to a “Community Activities” section, column, or some such area, and, if all else fails, a small classified ad can be run from time to time.

At the same time, the club can *always* get free publicity simply by...

- ◆ Getting a local newspaper to run an article on a local collector’s collection or even the club, itself. And, as has been shown many times before, that’s a surprisingly easy thing to do. Newspapers are always looking for local ‘items of interest’ and ‘human interest stories’ to fill all that space that *has* to be filled.
- ◆ Having members appear on radio and TV stations, although I think the newspapers are a better avenue, simply because with newspaper articles the target audience has something to refer back to later, whereas with radio and TV spots it’s basically a one-time shot...if you missed it when it was on, you don’t have the opportunity to stumble across it later on.
- ◆ Setting up informational booths at fairs and such get-togethers.
- ◆ Setting up displays at local libraries, banks, and other business venues.
- ◆ Giving informational presentations to local groups (ex. Elks collection presentation to the Elks Club, Military collection presentation to the local VFW and American Legion).
- ◆ Staging collectibles fairs, swapfests, etc. and making certain they’re publicized.

Any of the above activities may well bring in new members directly, but they’re all guaranteed to publicize the club. Plus, such activities draw accumulations to the club. Non-collectors contact the club with bags, boxes, albums from grandpa. “Would you be interested in this?” “Could I sell this?” “I’d like to donate these.”

One more idea for bringing in new members to the club is for the club to participate in joint ventures with related local clubs. For example, Sierra-Diablo has been looking into the possibility of having ephemera collectors, post card collectors, casino fans, and the like take part in its swapfest. This could boost attendance and interest while always presenting the possibility of signing up new members just by ‘rubbing shoulders’ with these adjacent collectors.

Well, there are other aspects of maintenance besides keeping the membership at least stable. How about keeping the auctions going? Can’t have an auction without material to sell. Where’s that material going to come from?

- ◆ From club members. That’s not only normally the initial source, but the main source for most club auctions. However, that’s a source that may eventually run dry.
- ◆ From collections consigned or bought. This is always a great source, and the ideal would be to have a steady stream of these being fed into the club auction. Some clubs take such collections on consignment (charging a percentage for making up the lots and doing all the work), while other clubs prefer to buy the collection outright and then take 100% of the auction proceedings. Of course, occasionally, a club may even have such a collection donated to it by a member or the remaining spouse of that member.

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- ◆ From accumulations brought in from the outside--either discovered by members scouring the community or people dropping in with 'stuff from the attic'.

And then...there's the bulletin! You have to keep *that* going...but what are you going to fill those pages with? Well, as any editor will tell you, it's probably *not* going to be reader input! So, the editor has to be a lot more than a typist (*not that I, as an editor, would want to be just a typist*). It's the editor that frequently sits in front of the computer the night before the bulletin goes out for printing, wondering what he or she can use to fill all that blank space!

And where does the money come from to pay for the production of the bulletin and the resulting postage? For most clubs, the annual dues simply don't stretch that far, especially when postage rates continue to soar almost as fast as gasoline [*but of course, as we all know, increasing postage rates are to insure 'better service'!!! - Sorry, I had to release some tension from STANDING IN LINE FOR 25 MINUTES today at my local post office!*]. Anyhow, there has to be another source of income; hence, auctions; hence, drawings; hence, raffles; etc...and all of that translates into more work, which, in turn, necessitates more workers.

Boy! After all this, it's a wonder clubs have any workers! But they do...and they're all volunteers! Clubs live or die by those volunteers, God bless them all!

Another way to approach all this is to take a look at an already 'successful' club and see exactly what they're doing to keep everything together and continually running. After all, whatever they're doing is obviously working. So, let's use Long Beach Matchcover Club. I certainly would consider that club as successful--It's heading into it's 50th anniversary and it's the largest regional club in the hobby.

OK, we have to acknowledge that Long Beach MC has geography and demographics on its side right at the onset. Centered in the Los Angeles area, it has something like the second largest metropolitan area in the country to work with...That means a *huge* pool of potential members. But, even *that* wouldn't be a plus if it wasn't for all the other things that the club has done, and is doing, to cultivate the hobby.

- ⇒ It's a very pro-active club. It always has activities going: interactive, interesting regular meetings, an annual swapfest, holiday parties, local tours, and so forth.
- ⇒ It has a regular, informative bulletin
- ⇒ There are regular auctions, drawings, raffles, etc.
- ⇒ And, most of all, it has a core of very dedicated, active collectors/volunteers who have been 'taking care of business' for years and years, it seems.
- ⇒ Additionally, it provides a lot of little 'extras' that help make it stand out from many of the other clubs--covers designed and purchased by the club, souvenirs, tablets, all sorts of stuff. Personally, I think it's those little things that help keep the club 'persona' on the mind of the collector...perhaps creating something of a 'If I have to drop any club, I'll drop this one last' attitude. That would help any club!