

An Overview of Rotary Membership

John T. Blount
RI Director

For this International Assembly, I was given the assignment to first, deliver to you the past and present Rotary membership statistics; second, do this right after lunch, at 2:00 in the afternoon; and third, explain the variances in this information from region to region throughout the Rotary world.

I was thrilled and eager to accept this opportunity.

To be asked to speak to you about membership came as quite a shock, really: I was one of the 90 percent of Rotary that didn't care about membership growth after I joined. In those days, my club in Northern California, USA, had about 65 members, and to me that was just the right size.

I didn't even consider proposing a new member for four years — and only then because of an ulterior motive: I was an incoming president, and to produce a newsletter and other materials, my club needed a printer! So I finally proposed a new member, Jim Corey, owner of the Wine Press, a printing company.

Looking back, so many years ago, I can see that I had been so naive. Clubs don't just need new members; they need new ideas, new energy, new resources, new attitudes, and new opportunities. Membership growth is not exclusively about new people; it's about progress and vitality and morale.

Rotary's early leaders had a passion for growth. During our first decade, the annual membership of Rotary more than doubled almost every year. During our second decade, our increase of Rotarians averaged over 20 percent annually, and our global expansion was underway.

What was the reason behind this incredible early growth?

The concept was new and unique: an organization of select business leaders and professionals, committed to mutual cooperation, ethical values, and civic pride.

We quickly developed a corporate mentality for growth — the association sent people throughout the world to start clubs and even paid finder's fees to individuals to drive this growth. We provided instruction on starting new clubs and legislated rules on how they should operate.

Rotary rapidly grew because of action-oriented, tireless, committed workers like Ches Perry, Arch Klumph, Bru Brunnier, Paul Harris, and Jim Davidson of Calgary, Canada. Big Jim, as he was called, exemplifies the commitment of these men; he spent two and a half years traveling over 150,000 miles with his wife and young daughter from Europe to Asia at a cost of US\$250,000 of his own fortune — in 1928-31 — to start 23 new clubs in the most prominent cities in Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Mideast. *Quite simply, we grew because of a new and unique concept, an aggressive, well-organized corporate mentality, and the passion of our sales force of committed leaders.*

From decades three through five, 1925 to 1955, our annual growth averaged nearly 5 percent — that's 10,000 to 15,000 Rotarians each year, except for small losses two years during the Great Depression and two years during World War II.

During the 1950s, '60s, '70s, '80s, and early '90s, our average annual membership increase ranged from 1.5 percent to 4 percent, which means we grew from 12,000 to 40,000 Rotarians each year.

Why this ongoing, sustained growth?

On one hand, our success engendered more success. There was a sustained sense within the business, professional, and educational communities that Rotary was composed of trendsetters — resourceful, well-connected leaders capable of huge success in exchanging business, building communities, helping children, and establishing some world understanding.

To some extent, the condition of the world — industrialization with its lack of ethics, the world depression, World War II, and the superpower nuclear race — helped shape the growth of our programs and our focus, which was attractive to many capable people.

Rotary continued to grow because we had members with significant resources, and we were developing practical, visible methods to confront incredible societal challenges.

And then, almost suddenly, in 1997, Rotary's regular, rapid growth stopped. In the ensuing decade, we experienced six years where our membership numbers declined from one year to the next, the most we ever experienced in our history. Except for one year, our membership growth was measured in tenths of a percent, when it occurred at all.

Rotary leadership and staff addressed the concern in multiple ways: We placed more emphasis on membership development to districts and clubs through our training and our rhetoric. We began to keep more detailed data regarding our membership demographics. We began strategically analyzing our market position through surveys, focus groups, and data analysis. We developed corporate structures designed to promote and monitor membership levels.

Organizationally, through the Council on Legislation and decisions by the Board and RI committees, we redesigned and adapted some historical membership rules and traditions.

The last few years, our membership numbers have stabilized, even shown some mild growth. That brings us to today.

In survey after survey of Rotary club leaders, and of district and regional leaders throughout the world, membership is at or near the top of our strategic priorities. I know that this is true with you, too. I'm confident that you are focused on ensuring that the Rotary clubs in your district are vital and vibrant into the future.

We have strategic decisions to make as an entire organization. But we also have subtle differences from region to region that affect our tactics. The question that I will address for the next few minutes is this: How do you affect membership in your particular region of the world? How do you fit into our global strategy, and what tactics will work for you? Your approach may be different from the person sitting on your left and on your right.

Some of the data we have may give you some insight into what your particular challenges will be next year in your region of the world.

The first chart shows the total membership gain or loss by region, and you can see how regions are grouped together for this illustration. Notice that our membership demographics are changing:

Age demographics will show you the need to adapt and concentrate your efforts on the next generations of business and professional leaders. It will also give you a glimpse of the health of Rotary in your region in the not-too-distant future.

Club longevity distribution may help you determine that clubs need to build better programs to retain members or better adapt to a more transient work force than we've known before.

Data showing working versus nonworking members indicate the long-term health of the clubs, as well as the allure for business networking for Rotary in your area.

Rotary club size data may give you some insight on how to manage extension and termination of clubs. We have been relying on new clubs to bolster our membership for several years now; this strategy may be failing us.

And, finally, gender shifts in your region may be a marker for all of the above, depending on your particular country or culture.

Remember, you have a very competent Rotary International staff and dedicated regional and international leaders to work with you in your efforts to secure the future for Rotary in the clubs in your district.

Detailed membership data is included in your membership materials distributed at the Membership Services booth and will continue to be sent to you regularly from our membership division.

So what happened to my Rotary club, which I mentioned several minutes ago? Twenty-five years later, we've grown — a lot. The membership now is 106. And 11 years ago, we started a breakfast club in our town, and its active membership is at 73 — so, 179 Rotarians now, in a town with a population of 7,500.

How did this happen? It didn't come from a membership drive. It didn't come from any super membership expert. It didn't even come because we wanted to add numbers. We grew because we came alive. Growth really was equated with opportunity, strength, influence, contribution. Not growing wasn't an option.

Today, not growing is not an option for Rotary anywhere in the world.

We have a unique model: leaders who appreciate each other, share similar values, feel a responsibility to serve others, and are diversely spread throughout the globe. We are one of a kind. And the world needs us.

World organizations like the Gates Foundation, the World Health Organization, Engineers Without Borders, and a long list of other government, nonprofit, and business groups are anxious to join with us in our future endeavors because they understand who we are, what we stand for, and what we do.

The famous American industrialist of the early 20th century, Andrew Carnegie, said, "Take away my people, and leave my factories, and soon grass will grow on my factories' floors. Take away my factories, and leave my people, and soon I will have new and better factories."

Rotary's service, Rotary's good work, Rotary's programs and projects *are our factories*. And without our people, grass will grow on our factories' floors. But with strong, bright, able Rotarians, our factories — our good works — will be vibrant and ongoing.

Not growing, not investing in our people is not an option for Rotary.

I was sitting with a friend in a restaurant at the top of the Hyatt Regency building in San Francisco, a room that slowly rotates 360 degrees. We were enjoying a drink at the end of a day, and as we looked out the windows we could see the depressing part of the city — the tops of buildings with mechanical objects and old abandoned industrial artifacts — set against the dingy, polluted sky looking east. As we continued our conversation we were startled by a spectacular view of sunset unfolding over the magnificent Golden Gate Bridge, looking out to a beautiful sea. All within a few minutes' time and a few degrees' turn of the room. We were caught up with the beauty of the scene, and all we did was rotate a few degrees. *A few degrees of change made all the difference.*

Some say that in the 21st century, Rotary's time is passed, our model is outdated, the world is too complex, people are too busy, and business and professionals with discretionary authority in their working life are hard to discern and even harder to attract.

I say the time for Rotary to flourish is now. I say the world is no more cold and uncaring than it's ever been, that business is no more dishonest than it was 100 years ago, and that leaders are no more difficult to find than they ever were.

I say that a few degrees of change in our *methods* will unveil a beautiful new vista for future generations of Rotarians.

Governors-elect, please consider your corner of the world and identify which of the Rotary habits in your region are old-fashioned, perhaps a bit dingy and outdated, and distinguish those traditions that are timeless. And then do what we've done since our infancy: *Run to seize the future and shape it, so that we have better communities and a better world.*