

# “Be My Guest” - A Program to Grow Your Club’s Membership

This guide is about growing your club’s membership, improving the experience for each member, and working as team to create a stronger club.

The topic of growing membership in Toastmasters seems analogous to diet and weight loss: There are so many options that we become confused, we don’t know where to start, and eventually we give up entirely. Neither topic needs to be complicated or confusing.

This guide offers a path to growth that’s worked since the beginning of Toastmasters. It presents a simple, actionable program your club can implement to consistently promote itself and grow. Further, the program will help your club work as a team and provide appealing, educational meetings that benefit everyone. If you’re interested in growing your club, this guide will help.

This guide covers 3 important membership topics:

1. Why it’s important to grow membership, and the importance of consistency.
2. How clubs grow. We’ll present a model and framework to help any club grow.
3. How your club can grow quickly. We’ll present an actionable program to engage your entire club in activities that’ll lead to membership growth.

Please take this journey and read this guide. Let’s first understand why membership is so important.

## Why Growing Membership Matters to You

Membership is as important as anything else in the Toastmasters club program. Strong membership results in a quality experience for each member in several ways:

- There are enough members attending meetings to fill roles, without having a member fill key roles each week, or feel guilty for absences.
- Meetings have more energy and variety, which keeps meetings interesting and provides more examples to learn from.
- The same members don’t need to serve in leadership roles each year.
- Each new member adds energy and variety, spreading it to all others.

Let’s go beyond the points above to show why it’s important to consistently take steps to build membership, and why it’s important to do so now.

## Gradual Decline: A Story That’s All-Too-Common

Consider the following situation: A club has strong membership (20+ members), but avoids to consistently conduct membership-building practices. The club’s officers and members feel the club has enough members, so why bother? Well, change is constant, and eventually changes in the members’ lives impact that club. For example, a member or two takes a new job and can no longer participate. Another member decides to start a family. Yet another member relocates, another has health issues, and another decides that she’s reached her goals for Toastmasters and would like to pursue other goals.

In a few months, that club lost 5-6 members. These situations are common, constant, and difficult to avoid. In company-sponsored clubs, changes can be even more sudden and dramatic. Each club is impacted by both the good and bad changes in its members' lives.

Beyond the numbers, the experience for each member also declines as the club's membership level declines. The impact is subtle at first, but then becomes obvious. Remaining members take on roles more often, absences impact meetings more significantly, the club loses variety, and leadership responsibilities are assumed by a smaller group. In sum, Toastmasters is a team sport, and having a strong team makes each member's experience better. But, when a member is removed from the team, the remaining members are impacted.

What would happen to the club above if its officers and members still didn't make efforts to grow membership? In time, it'd suffer additional losses, and both the club and each member's experience would decline further. Eventually, after enough time passed, the club would be unable to provide a quality experience. Running the club and conducting meetings would be burdensome. More members may leave. It even becomes more difficult to attract new members.

The above situation happens too often, and it can lead to a club unable to sustain itself. When any club fails to consistently perform the actions needed to remain strong, a downward spiral silently begins. That downward spiral continues until the club's officers and members take full ownership and proactively take steps to rebuild membership. Usually, the decline doesn't happen overnight, but is instead the result of many missed opportunities to act.

*"How does a project get to be one year late? One day at a time."  
- Fred Brooks, *The Mythical Man Month**

In retrospect, the club above shouldn't have rested on its strong position. Further, when it encountered the first wave of losses, it should've acted immediately to reverse the trend and replace the lost members. Instead, the club relied on good fortune and passive promotion, which eventually failed.

### How is Your Club Doing?

As an exercise, open a web browser and go to <http://mikeraffety.com/DCPhistory.cgi>. Enter your club number on the left side of the page near "Club number" and then hit the "Submit" button. The resulting page will show your club's membership and DCP history (extremely useful). Look at the "Year-end memb" column on the left. This color-coded column shows the membership of your club on June 30<sup>th</sup> of each year over the last 10-15 years. Has the club's membership been increasing or decreasing? Until we look at a multi-year report like this, it's difficult to see the trend and understand the issue.

Just like a frog in warming water doesn't understand the danger until it's too late, sometimes we fail to notice we're moving in the wrong direction and must act now. This guide will help your club strengthen membership no matter its position. If you understand why this topic is important, then let's get to work and act now.

*"The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time is now."  
- Chinese Proverb*

## How Clubs Grow & Gain Members

Before we introduce a specific method to build membership, let's first understand the fundamental steps involved in gaining a new member. By understanding these steps, you'll have a simple framework to apply in any club and any situation.

When we say "build membership" it can be difficult to grasp what that means and how we go about doing that. Further, there are many membership-building methods out there, so it's easy to become confused on which is best. Great leaders have taken the time to publish expansive lists of methods, for example "101 Ways to Build Membership." These lists are well-intentioned, but there's a consequence of offering so many options: We aren't sure which of the 101 to try, and we can become overwhelmed and not act at all.

Rather than tell you that Speechcraft is the solution, or that Meetup, your website, posting flyers, press releases, or any other method is best, let's first zoom out and understand why all membership-building methods can work and what they have in common.

### 3 Fundamental Steps in Building Membership

If we orbited Earth from space and looked down at a Toastmasters club, we'd see that almost all new members join that club through a 3-step process:

**Step 1: Visit a club meeting as a guest.** Somehow the individual visits the club. How the individual found out about the club, and what motivated the visit will vary (ex. website, flyer, word-of-mouth, boss' order, Speechcraft, special event, etc.). But what's important is the individual physically visits the club. Rarely does a club gain a new member without a visit.

**Step 2: Have a positive experience and see something of value.** At the meeting, the guest has a positive experience and sees something that can benefit him/her. Each guest can see something unique and beneficial. Some guests love the structure and formality, while others enjoy clubs with a casual style. Some guests want to improve their prepared presentations, while others focus on impromptu speaking. Some guests only care about leadership development, and some just enjoy being a part of a great community. Regardless, a guest who joins ultimately sees something of value.

**Step 3: Join the club and become a new member.** Finally, the guest actually joins the club. Sometimes the guest joins at the first meeting, and sometimes it's after 3 visits. Sometimes guests ask to join, and sometimes a club officer/member asks or invites them to join (highly recommended).

In sum, there's great variety in why guests visit a Toastmasters club, what value they see in the club, and how they actually join. But what's common is the fundamental steps: visit, discover value, and join. Membership-building methods such as Speechcraft, Meetup, social media, word-of-mouth promotion, press releases, club websites, and others all work because they support the general steps above. More specifically, these methods bring guests to meetings (Step 1), making Step 2 and Step 3 relevant.

To build membership in your club, let's consider each of the steps and how your club does at each.

### 3 Questions to Diagnose Membership-Building Challenges

The 3 fundamental steps above help us diagnose any membership-related issue our club might have. Before moving forward, please answer 3 important questions to understand how your club is doing and where attention might be needed:

**1. Does your club have at least 1 guest visit each meeting? At a minimum, is there at least 1 guest visiting every 2 meetings?**

- a. If you answered “Yes”, then your club is doing well in terms of promoting itself. People are finding your club, and your marketing/promotion efforts and channels (website, flyers, word-of-mouth, etc.) are effective. Excellent!
- b. If you answered “No”, then your club’s marketing/promotion efforts aren’t effective. People aren’t finding your club, and something different is needed.

Overall, marketing/promotion efforts can only do one thing, and that’s bring guests to your club meetings. If they aren’t effective, then it’s time to change.

**2. When guests visit your club, what percentage of them join within 1-2 visits?**

- a. If 60% (3/5) or more guests join, then your club’s meetings provide a great experience and offer something of value for the guest. Well done!
- b. If fewer than 60% (3/5) of guests join, then it’s time to examine the guest experience. Examine the club’s meeting quality, guest materials, and the follow-up with guests.

At least 50% of guests should join. Remember that once a guest visits your club meeting, your club’s website, flyers, and other marketing/promotion are irrelevant. The experience the guest has in your meeting makes the difference. Consider conducting a [Moments of Truth](#) session and talk with your Area Director for additional suggestions.

**3. Do guests visit multiple times before joining your club? Do some guests visit more than once and not join at all?**

- a. If nearly all guests join within 1-2 visits, then your club does well at providing opportunities to join. Ideally, most guests will join on the first visit, indicating they’re excited to become a member, and that your club provided a clear opportunity to join. Some guests may want to visit other clubs or take their time, so some join on a 2<sup>nd</sup> visit.
- b. If guests frequently require 2-3+ visits before joining, or don’t join after 2+ visits, then your club might not provide good opportunities to join.

When a guest returns for a 2<sup>nd</sup> visit, that indicates strong interest. In these cases, we need to take the lead and explicitly invite them to join. It’s common to have anxiety when asking a guest to join, as it might feel like we’re pressuring the guest or risking rejection. Because of this anxiety, we often don’t ask, and that’s a loss for everyone. Rather than do something that feels unnatural, simply state to the guest “We invite you to become a member of Toastmasters and our club. If you’d like to do that, I can walk you through the application process.” This shows you’d like the guest to become a member, and it gives the guest free choice. Hard sells make everyone uncomfortable. The soft invitation is more likely to be delivered naturally and received well by the guest.

As a practice, invite each guest to join on his/her first visit. If the guest doesn’t respond affirmatively, then invite to visit again by stating “If you’d like to think about it further,

just come back and visit our next meeting on (next meeting date).” Follow up with a thank-you note and remind the guest to attend the next meeting. If the guest attends the next meeting, that’s a strong indicator the guest will join.

The 3 fundamental steps and 3 questions above give you a framework to build membership and identify issues in your club’s membership-building process. Whatever specific methods your club uses to grow membership, they can be effective as long as they follow the 3 steps.

### Narrowing Our Focus

At this point, we’ll narrow our focus to just one step in the overall process and provide an approach to build membership. While Steps 2 & 3 shouldn’t be taken for granted, Step 1 is critical to gaining members, and it’s often the most challenging. Therefore, we’ll focus on Step 1 and on finding ways to drive more guests into your club. This leads us to a key principle on membership building:

*Before an individual becomes a member, he/she first becomes a guest. Therefore, focus your energy on having more guests. Having more guests will lead to having more members.*

This might seem too simple, but it’s important to understand. Rather than focus on the end result (that is, new members), instead narrow the focus on ways to get more guests. There are countless ways to do that, and *you only need to find what works best for your club’s situation*. The best approach for your club will be the one that produces the most guests.

While websites, Speechcraft, Meetup, flyers, and other methods can produce guests, we’ll focus on a fundamental method that every member can employ: the personal invitation. In the following section, we’ll present an actionable program leveraging personal invitations to grow your club.

### “Be My Guest” – Personal Invitations

How do you feel when you receive a personal invitation from someone to attend an event? Even if you’re unable to attend, it often feels good to read “You’re invited” or “Please be our guest.” And, perhaps it feels good to invite others to a useful activity you’re hosting. Overall, personal invitations are powerful, and they can help your club connect with others who’ll find value in it.

### Why Personal Invitations?

You might be asking yourself, “Is this it? Is this the secret sauce that’ll grow membership? What about that new and shiny website or social media service?” Well, other than taking action, there isn’t a secret sauce to growing membership. That said, using personal invitations could be the best method for your club. There are a number of reasons for this claim:

**Personal invitations are a form of active promotion.** Imagine you’re promoting an upcoming party. To promote it, you create a website, pay good money for a Meetup.com account, post on Twitter and Facebook, and post flyers anywhere you can. Finally, the date of the party arrives. Will your family and closest friends attend? How many people show up at your party? It could be 0 or it could be 500. The problem is, you don’t know because it’s difficult to know how many people visited the websites or saw the flyers. Those forms of promotion were passive because they relied on others to find your event. In contrast, personally inviting others is an active form of promotion since you’re proactively contacting others and inviting them. You can be reasonably sure each invitation you sent was viewed by the

recipient. Passive promotion is easy, and it'd be great if that was sufficient. But when it isn't sufficient, then we need to use active forms.

**Personal invitations are an act of generosity.** Would you be offended if I invited you and your family to dinner next month? What if I invited you to our club's holiday party, or to our workshop on storytelling? Although the date might not work for your schedule, I doubt you'd be offended, and you might enjoy the invitation. When done properly, personal invitations are an act of generosity, of you inviting another to experience something of value. The invitation has no strings attached, and there's no pressure or expectation that you accept it. That's important, and that's where some invitations go wrong. I'm inviting you only to the event, not asking or expecting you to join my club, do business with me, etc.

**Personal invitations leverage an entire club's efforts.** Engaging each member in an active promotional activity is a great way to 10x your club's efforts. It's possible to have 5, 10, 20 guests in a meeting if the entire club gets involved. Remember, Toastmasters is a team sport, and when a team takes ownership of its challenges, then those challenges don't stand a chance.

*"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."*  
- Hellen Keller

Hopefully you see that personal invitations offer something effective and beneficial. When done correctly, using personal invitations is a great way to actively raise awareness of your club, bring others into your meetings, and potentially offer them something of personal value. Now let's explore how this method can be applied in your club.

### How Can Your Club Use Personal Invitations?

The October 2016 issue of the Toastmaster magazine contained a fantastic article titled ["A Roadmap for Club Growth"](#) that shared how a club tripled in size (from 10 to 30 members) in just 90 days, all within a small community of 9,000 people. That article is worth your time, and it inspired this guide. Referencing the article, this section provides more detail on how your club can implement a simple program to grow through personal invitations. We'll go beyond the article and add elements to engage your entire club and also provide more value in meetings.

### The "Be My Guest" Membership-Building Program

Below is the 5-step "Be My Guest" membership-building program your club can easily implement to attract more guests and gain more members. At a high level, the program encourages your club to plan each meeting to appeal to everyone (through an educational presentation), to consistently invite others to your meetings, and to work as a team that's collectively focused on growing membership.

For a quality club program, more members, and a better experience for every member, follow the 5 steps below:

1. **Create.** Your club meetings are the product your club promotes, and they're the vehicle delivering the Toastmasters education program to members. Create value and add appeal to upcoming meetings by showcasing interesting themes, topics, and presentations.

Consider what you're inviting others to attend, and consider what would excite current members and motivate them to attend. Answer the question, "What would attract and compel someone to visit our next meeting?" It could be something with educational or entertainment value. Remember, this aspect of program planning benefits everyone, so it's time and energy well spent. Don't miss an opportunity to create a valuable meeting with a special offering.

For each meeting, feature an educational presentation on a communication or leadership topic. Consider using a presentation from the [Better Speaker Series](#) or [Leadership Excellence Series](#) since those topics will be of interest to guests. Appendix B lists the modules/topics from these series. The modules have outlines and slides available, and they also count towards the Advanced Leader Bronze (ALB) and Advanced Communicator Silver (ACS) awards. By presenting these modules, you and your members can complete these requirements. It's also fine to go beyond these modules and present on other topics of interest.

At times, there's value in offering entertainment to attract guests. Entertaining meeting formats, presentations, and celebrations can attract guests looking for a fun experience. Use the [Club Programming Idea Cookbook](#) for ideas.

2. **Collect.** Each week, collect names of others to personally invite to your club's next meeting.
  - a. For community clubs: Ask each member to collect at least 2 business cards or email addresses each week. Business cards are everywhere. If there are nearby businesses, invite the entire organization and call it a special meeting to recognize that company. If there's an educational institution in the area, invite the faculty, staff, and students; consider inviting by department to make it more focused. There are many possibilities, and the main idea is to identify other individuals and organizations to invite.
  - b. For closed, company-sponsored clubs: Ask each member to identify 2 teammates or colleagues that haven't been recently invited to a meeting. Also, consider inviting entire teams/groups to visit a meeting; the team leaders or managers would be good recipients of the invitation. Make it a goal to invite every team and individual in your organization over a 6-month period (or whatever period makes sense). Create a rotation of teams to invite over the period. Have each meeting focus on a team/group of individuals, making them feel special.

Identify every new hire, intern, or recently promoted individual in your organization. Those are great candidates to invite, and meetings can be planned just to recognize and honor those groups.
  - c. If you're wondering who the best candidates are to invite, consider that Toastmasters and your club helps individuals build important skills. While anyone can benefit from Toastmasters, if you'd like to find the best candidates, answer the question "Who's looking to improve themselves, move up, and get ahead?" This could be students, interns, new-hires, those looking to advance quickly, those wanting to get into management, those just promoted, new managers, small-business owners, sales professionals, retail associates, individuals working to learn English, and many more. It's difficult to rule out anyone, but the best matches are those wanting to move up.
  - d. Don't forget to invite people you already know. They deserve an invitation.

3. **Contact.** Send personal invitations to the individuals and email addresses collected in Step 2.
  - a. Your club can decide if each member will send invitations, or if a group of officers will send. Each option has benefits. When a member has an existing relationship with the recipient, it makes sense for that member to send the invitation. If some are uncomfortable with sending invitations, perhaps someone else can help.
  - b. Make each invitation personal. Only 1 email address per invitation. We don't encourage spam or anything that could be interpreted as spam.
  - c. If desired, use a template provided in this guide as a starting point (see Appendix A). Your club should customize the template and then share it with all members. Give it your authentic voice. It's difficult to provide a general template that's also useful, so these templates are primarily intended to get started and encourage action.
  - d. Remember that the invitations are only to the meeting. Joining and membership are separate discussions for later if an individual is interested in learning more. One step at a time. Invitations should have no strings attached.
  
4. **Count.** At each meeting, take 2 minutes to summarize and recognize the activity since the previous meeting.
  - a. Ask members for the number of invitations sent since the last meeting. Write that number on the board or somewhere visible. Recognize anyone who invited another.
  - b. Encourage each member to always have a count greater than 0. As a group, commit to never having a meeting where 0 is on the board. If 0 is on the board, then it means the club hasn't made contact with anyone, that it's being passive with promotion and leaving growth to chance. Anything is better than a 0.
  - c. It might be tempting to skip this step. Beware that if this step is skipped, then the program will fail. There's a universal reason for this: *You get more of what you focus on. You get more of what you recognize.* This explains why so few currently invite others; there's no recognition or focus on the activity. As soon as this step is skipped, the club will stop the program and stop inviting others.
  
5. **Continue.** Stick with this program for the long term. This program needs consistency. There may be times where no one invites others, there'll be meetings without guests even when several invitations were sent out, and there'll be guests who don't join. That's life. That's the universe testing you. The payback isn't on a predictable schedule. When you persist through the impulse to scrap the program, then you pass the test. At that point, results will show. By consistently doing the right things, eventually good fortune will find you and your club.

Why does this program work and benefit your club? There are 3 key reasons:

1. **Program Planning** - The program encourages your club to plan upcoming meetings and include an educational element in each meeting. Your club will create value in each meeting to benefit both guests and members. As a result, both guests and members will want to attend.



2. **Consistent and Active Promotion** - The program encourages your club to reach out and invite others on a consistent basis. Your club will use active promotion to find others rather than rely on others to find your club.
3. **Teamwork** - The program encourages your club to work as a team, in planning meetings, delivering educational presentations, and in inviting others. When all members get involved in both club quality and promotion, then your club dramatically improves in these areas. Remember, Toastmasters is a team sport.

## Conclusion

By this point, you understand why consistent membership-building is important, both to your club's health and your experience as a member. Additionally, I hope you understand the fundamental steps involved with gaining a new member. As simple as the process sounds, it provides a useful framework and analysis tool. Most clubs struggle in having a sufficient number of guests. While tips were included for the other two steps, the focus has been on increasing the number of guests.

This guide asserts that the best way to increase the number of guests isn't through passive promotion methods/channels such as websites, flyers, or social media. Those methods have a place in your club's overall promotional program, but it's difficult to rely only on them. Instead, this guide encourages the practice of consistently using simple, personal invitations to increase guests, knowing that some will see the value and will join. A simple 5-step program was introduced, along with invitation templates to get started. And now that's all that remains: getting started.

In any endeavor, the most resistance occurs in the beginning. It'll also be true for implementing this program. That first invitation will be a new experience, and there'll be reluctance and resistance. There'll also be reluctance and resistance in meetings to ask members for the counts on how many invitations were sent out. Again, that's natural. Please, for the well-being of your club and its members, push through this resistance. Once the initial reluctance and resistance are overcome, it's easier to maintain momentum. Like other endeavors, membership building is about taking action, and starting is the hardest part.

If your club creates valuable meetings, consistently invites others, and works as a team, there's no doubt your club will strengthen itself over time.

Thank you for taking the journey and reading this guide. I hope this guide has been helpful in some way. If you have questions about the ideas in this guide, please get in touch with me.

All the best to you and your club.

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## Appendix A: Invitation Email Templates

The email templates below are intended to help you and fellow members get started in inviting others. Please customize them and make them your own. Keep the emails short and use them only to invite others to the meeting. One step at a time. Details on membership are best discussed at the meeting, when the individual has taken the first step and shown interest.

### Starter Template for Community Club

Subject: Please Be My Guest

Body:

(recipient's name),

My name is (sender's name), and I found your business card at your location in (city).

Although we haven't met, I thought I'd go out on a limb and invite you to our Toastmasters club's meeting on (date and time). This meeting features a presentation on (special topic), and it provides opportunities to strengthen communication and leadership skills. We'd enjoy meeting you, and you'll find value in the meeting.

Our meeting information is just below:

(date & time of club meeting)

(meeting location, address, and link to location in Google Maps)

<http://www.toastmasters.org/>

All the best.

(sender's name, email, and phone #)

## Starter Template for Company-Sponsored Club

Subject: Please Be My Guest

Body:

(recipient's name),

My name is (sender's name), and I work in (department/team name).

Although we haven't met, I thought I'd reach out and invite you to our Toastmasters club's meeting on (date and time). This meeting features a presentation on (special topic), and it provides opportunities to strengthen communication and leadership skills. Your teammates are also welcome to attend.

Our information is just below:

(date, time, and location of club meeting)

<http://www.toastmasters.org/>

All the best.

(sender's name and business signature)

## Appendix B: Resources for Creating Educational Value

Below are the modules from the Better Speaker Series and Leadership Excellence Series. These modules are great candidates for the educational presentations your club will add. Outlines and PowerPoint slides are created for each, and each series is freely available in digital format. There are 21 modules available; enough for 21 meetings. However, these aren't the only options to create value, and members are encouraged to develop their own educational speeches on topics of interest (ex. humor, storytelling, using PowerPoint, etc.). An additional source of education for members can be found in the [Successful Club Series](#), although this series focuses on Toastmasters topics.

### Modules from the [Better Speaker Series](#)

- Beginning Your Speech
- Concluding Your Speech
- Controlling Your Fear
- Impromptu Speaking
- Selecting Your Topic
- Know Your Audience
- Organizing Your Speech
- Creating an Introduction
- Preparation and Practice
- Using Body Language

### Modules from the [Leadership Excellence Series](#)

- The Visionary Leader
- Developing A Mission
- Values and Leadership
- Goal Setting and Planning
- Delegate to Empower
- Building A Team
- Giving Effective Feedback
- The Leader as a Coach
- Motivating People
- Service and Leadership
- Resolving Conflict