

ROTARY INTERNATIONAL FINAL FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS - 2008

Research Purpose and Objectives

To support the RI Strategic Plan's membership priority and goals, focus groups of non-Rotarians were conducted on two specific demographic groups:

- professional women 30+ years of age, and
- professional men 30 – 45 years of age.

In that Rotary International struggles with both of these demographic groups in terms of membership, the intent of this project was to gather information to better target these groups.

Groups were conducted in several of the cities where 2008-09 Presidential Membership Conferences were held: Sydney, Australia; Johannesburg, South Africa and Buenos Aires, Argentina. Both the selection and recruitment and group discussion phases were conducted by external non-Rotarian vendors. Six (6) groups were conducted at each site.

The following were the specific objectives of this research project.

- Interest in volunteering.
 - Definition of volunteering: What they consider to be volunteering.
 - The activities they would choose to do as a volunteer.
 - Why is getting involved appealing to them.
 - What specific volunteer organizations come to mind.
 - What groups would they choose to join.
 - What do they expect from volunteering.
 - What personal benefits do they expect from volunteering.
 - The amount of time they would consider expending with volunteer activities.
 - The awareness of Rotary International or a local Rotary club.
 - The perception of Rotary International or a local Rotary club.
 - Would they be interested in joining a group such as a local Rotary club.
 - Why would they or why would they not be interested in joining a local Rotary club.
 - How much time would they be willing to spend in being involved in a group such as a local Rotary club.
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Though there were discrepancies among the regions, overall results were quite similar.

General Findings

Keep in mind that the purpose of this project was to identify challenges and obstacles RI has with these two demographic groups. As competing interests continue to rise, it is always a healthy and beneficial exercise to test how the general public views and perceives an organization. As there are comments and observations that may be considered harsh and reflect a bit negatively towards RI, such comments should be viewed objectively and as an opportunity to implement change and demonstrate improvement.

Responses to Time and Volunteer Commitment

Most respondents indicated that their time was already stretched beyond acceptable limits and they do not have a lot of time to 'spare'. As would be expected, one's life stage (single, couples with children at home, couples with grown children or no children) impacted one's ability and interest in pursuing volunteer efforts. Though the work environment has become more flexible, work incorporates or consumes a greater deal of one's time.

In most cases individuals are inclined to volunteer, however they are very intent on maintaining enough 'personal' time, and they do not consider humanitarian efforts or volunteering as something for which they would give up their 'personal' time. Community based issues tend to carry stronger interest for volunteering. In defining volunteer involvement respondents noted a wide spectrum of activities; animal welfare, assisting the elderly either in an organized manner or via a friendship or personal association, helping friends, locally based projects, religious based organizations, youth sports activities, school activities, hunger, medical assistance, etc.

Specific to Australia there was a stronger desire expressed in striving for or striking a balance in one's personal life between professional responsibilities, family responsibilities, personal time and volunteer time. Also in Australia the issue of volunteer based organizations taking a volunteer's time for granted, requiring too much of a commitment or misusing a volunteer's time was mentioned.

It appears that volunteering tends to be more readily ingrained and embedded in the social structure in regions where needs and problems are more significant or the need spectrum is more diverse: as is the case in Argentina and South Africa.

Individual Responses: 'What do you think of when you think of volunteering?'

- 'Working for free'
- 'Expectation of empowerment'
- 'Passion'
- 'Teamwork'
- 'Giving of your own time'
- 'Helping people in the community'
- 'A shared experience'
- 'Fulfillment'
- 'Fun'
- 'Gain in skills'
- 'This is something for older people who have the time'
- 'There must be an interest and it must be convenient'

"Volunteering is something that people just should do. I think you've got to put back in what you get out."

Huge organizational structures

An issue that came up in all three regions was the mistrust or skepticism towards large organizational structures. Respondents noted that over the last few years large volunteer-based organizations have received bad publicity with respect to financial and project mismanagement. Respondents also noted that there is a tendency to view smaller organizations as more effective in getting things accomplished at the local level. It was stated that an organization's mission statement and financial transactions should be readily available and transparent to the public.

Function of Networking

There was some variance or discrepancy in how networking was perceived among these regions. Within Argentina, networking is primarily viewed as an activity within specific disciplines or professions (medical, legal architects, public notaries, etc.) and is used to share information and research. Networking was not mentioned as occurring between professions. Australians also tended to view

networking as a work function, with interactions occurring within a professional environment; conferences, trade shows, seminars, etc. For Australians networking is not considered a leisure time activity. In fact, some responses indicated that networking was considered a 'turn off' and assumed more of a selfish activity. In South Africa networking was mentioned and is readily accepted, taking place within normal, daily activities. Most noted they networked on a professional level. Respondents considered networking within the following contexts: schools, churches, conferences, sports activities, one-on-one relationship, etc. In South Africa, Rotary International was mentioned within the context of networking.

The notion that an association provides an opportunity to make friends was a much more inviting and agreeable position.

Awareness of Volunteer Based Organizations

Over the years a significant number of competitors and volunteer-based organizations have evolved, both locally and internationally. When asked about groups providing humanitarian and volunteer options the organizations mentioned were:

- Doctors Without Borders
- Salvation Army
- Red Cross
- Amnesty International
- Unicef
- Habitat for Humanity
- Oxfam
- GreenPeace
- World Vision
- Make A Wish
- St. Vincent's De Paul (Australia)

Many local concerns were also noted and included the following actions or focus: animal welfare, school feeding schemes, soup kitchens, housing projects, education and literacy, public health and HIV/AIDS, and street children.

Rotary International or local Rotary clubs were not readily mentioned in any of these regions.

Perception of Rotary

When asked by the facilitator about Rotary International most respondents did recall hearing about Rotary International, Rotary fundraising events or local Rotary clubs. There was a general positive impression that Rotary did good work. When asked about Rotary clubs the following functions were mentioned:

- fundraising to purchase hospital equipment
- community activities with youth
- shelter boxes with Burma
- provide scholarships
- exchange programs
- well set up
- they compete with Lions

Some indicated, 'they have that wheel.'

"With Rotary, they do a bit of this, a bit of that, you don't really know what drives them."

"It's a male bonding thing where businesses are advanced...but personally I don't connect with them..."

When asked about their perception of Rotary, the following words were used to characterize Rotary and Rotarians:

- business men
- elite
- secretive
- older
- wealthy
- largely based on former rules
- not 'sexy'
- not 'trendy'
- inflexible
- not sure that women are allowed into local clubs
- associated with Free Masons

Overall, there is a significant lack of knowledge on what Rotary actually does, what Rotary accomplishes within the community or internationally, or how one would become involved or engaged with Rotary's efforts. As Rotary has found in previous focus group efforts, there continues to be a connection with the Free Masons. Often times local media show pictures of Rotarians handing over checks rather than actual action-oriented projects. Today, individuals interested in volunteering are interested in action and accomplishments.

People have a difficult time obtaining information about Rotary. In several instances, individuals mentioned they were interested in the organization and had attempted to contact a club but there was no follow-up on the club's behalf, the club informed them that their classification was filled, or that they had attempted to locate a website but could not find one.

"When I contacted Rotary here in Johannesburg because I would like to be involved they said they were fine, they've got lawyers and accountants and this, this, this. So I said 'okay', I guess they don't need my help. So I moved to Rosettenville and I'm with....ministries."

It cannot be emphasized enough that the one significant point that must be acknowledged is there continues to be a strong perception that women are not allowed or welcome into Rotary.

Specific to South Africa there was an association of Rotary International and gambling due to a recent gambling scheme within the country.

The perception of elitist and wealthy plays differently by region. Though this may have a positive impact in certain parts of the world, this has a negative impact in other regions of the world. This issue needs to be carefully considered and addressed at a regional level.

It should be noted that though the majority of the focus group participants were unaware of what Rotary gets involved with or what Rotary stands for there were a few individuals within each region who were fairly knowledgeable of Rotary's accomplishments within specific programs; Youth Exchange, Scholarships, etc. Comments also mentioned that Rotary has 'a tremendous network with the ability to get things done and accomplished.'

Results from these focus groups have supported information received through a recent RI Presidential initiative of approaching the Chief Executive Officers of the top 200 companies within North America. Though historically there may have been a time when the leaders of the major corporations were involved in their local Rotary club, this is no longer the case in many regions of the Rotary world. The work lives of these organizational leaders have changed considerably within the last twenty (20) years. These institutions are much more global in nature and because of this evolution these individuals, as well as the executive and senior management staff, are highly mobile. In addition to a high level of travel, transferring from one part of the world to another is standard practice. It should also be noted

that the majority of large institutions support a number of humanitarian efforts, as well as possibly supporting their own foundations.

RI Statements

Also tested within these groups were RI's presentation of its Mission Statement, an explanation of its Membership Requirements, and Benefits of Membership. The following feedback was received.

Mission of Rotary International

The mission of Rotary International, a worldwide association of Rotary clubs, is to provide service to others, to promote high ethical standards, and to advance world understanding, goodwill, and peace through its fellowship of business, professional, and community leaders, known as Rotarians.

Though the mission statement was perceived to be noble and honorable, it was also perceived to be somewhat generic, non-descriptive and lofty. There were concerns expressed around the terms 'community leader', 'ethical', and 'service to others'. The statement, '*business, professional and community leaders*', was interpreted as exclusionary and implying positions that are beyond the average business manager or professional – assuming more of an elitist position. In Argentina, particularly among women, there was an appreciation for and an acknowledgement that professionals are those who can accomplish and get things done. There was a mixed reaction to and hesitancy with 'ethical.'

General comments included:

- Sounds Christian-based
- They need a new mission statement
- It sounds elitist
- Does not sound like it is for charitable purposes

It raises the question for many participants around what is meant by service to others, high ethical standards, understanding of what, goodwill to whom and peace for whom?

While the promotion of high ethical standards sounds good it does beg the question of whose ethics are being promoted?

"Just because you've got money it doesn't make you ethical."

"It bothers me when they talk about ethics, because ethics is personal."

"What are the ethical standards?"

"There is no one set of ethics, if there were, it would be an imposition."

The formal objective is understood. However, the propositions tend to be vague, overly general and lacking relevant content.

Though concerns were expressed with the statement '*business, professional and community leaders*', once again, there was an understanding and an appreciation for targeting professionals as people who have the ability, knowledge and skills to get projects organized and accomplished.

It should be noted that many of Rotary's messages are targeted to and for Rotarians. However, these messages must also be relevant and 'speak to' the non-Rotarian, prospective member sector. This is a

primary means of communicating what Rotary International 'stands for' and what it hopes to accomplish through its local Rotary clubs. And, as noted within these group discussions, an organization's mission statement is something that is often times looked at and considered when a person is making a decision to further explore or get involved in an organization.

Thus, statements must be relevant, clear and purposeful to the reader.

Benefits of Membership

The benefits of being a Rotarian include serving the community, networking and friendship, international involvement, and promoting ethics and leadership skills.

The benefit statement was also interpreted as being somewhat generic with the following questions and concerns being expressed.

How do Rotarians serve the community?

Networking and friendship is something that can be achieved easily outside of a Rotary Club, so it is unclear how this is a benefit of being a Rotarian.

How are ethics and leadership skills promoted, and what ethics and leadership skills are being promoted?

The benefits do not outweigh the perception of an elitist group. Benefits are neither attractive nor inviting.

"You don't need to join Rotary to help your community."

Membership Requirements

Rotary clubs meet weekly and members of local Rotary clubs are expected to attend at least 50% of the meetings. If a member is traveling to another part of the world they are allowed to attend the meetings of other clubs to make up for their absence. Also, club members are expected to participate in either local, and if interested, international volunteer projects.

Without exception the time requirement was considered to be the most critical. Whereas the perception of Rotary continues to face a significant challenge with respect to women being allowed to join clubs, time was a significant hurdle around requirements. After some discussion there was a basic understanding that the time requirement ensured and encouraged dedication and commitment, and was needed to get projects organized and accomplished. However, the majority of respondents were suspicious and hesitant they could make this type of commitment.

"No that scares me off, that's like a second job."

"Too structured for me; I don't want the commitment that I have to attend fifty percent of meetings. That would stop me."

"It's a big commitment, I shy away when I hear those words."

"I couldn't keep up. I don't have that much time."

Most participants did not feel they could meet this requirement or that it was a reasonable expectation in a contemporary world. That is, why members would be required to meet face-to-face weekly in a world of conference calls and internet-based meeting technology.

“Rotary needs to move into the twentieth century a bit and accept that when you recruit volunteers you ask them to commit but you can’t lock people in.”

...most of our respondents believed that their time was stretched beyond acceptable levels already.

Though testing the presentation and perception of RI’s mission statement, membership requirements and membership benefits was not the intent with this research project, several interesting questions or concerns surfaced and were challenged with this process. These observations provide some useful feedback and information which RI should continue to explore. Are RI’s messages or explanations too lengthy, too wordy, too cumbersome, too lofty and too generic? Are RI’s messages outdated? Should RI consider revising and updating such statements so that they are better targeted and more easily understood by the general, non-Rotarian public? Messages and communications for the general public need to be concise, direct and specific. Lengthy, cumbersome messages are confusing and they may have a tendency to reinforce an image of secretive, elitist and mysterious.

Conclusion

Overall findings present challenges to RI in the following categories:

- Public Awareness
- Public Image
- Volunteering & Networking
- Time Commitment
- RI Messages

Public Awareness & Public Image

There is an incredible lack of information as to who Rotary is, what Rotary gets involved with, and what Rotary accomplishes – at both the community and international levels. Initially people are much more interested in what can be accomplished within their community. This fact has been supported by internal RI surveys that have been conducted of terminated members – people tend to join for what can be accomplished within their local communities. Interest in international involvement becomes important several years after initial membership.

The perception of Rotary by these two groups was somewhat outdated, focused on businessmen, secretive, elusive, elitist, etc. These findings have not changed from focus groups that have been conducted in previous years. This perception tends to be supported and sustained by the fact that people do not know what Rotary does or what Rotary has accomplished. The view that this is a men’s organization, with women not being involved or allowed to participate, is still pervasive.

As much as the organization has been stressing to clubs and individual Rotarians the importance of recruitment - asking qualified prospective members to join – the fact that people are not aware of Rotary’s many successes and accomplishments both at the community and international levels, as well as having a somewhat negative perception of Rotary, impacts a club’s ability to recruit new members.

Aside from the perception of RI and having nothing to do with RI, in some regions larger organizations have mishandled funds and projects. Thus, larger organizations are viewed with skepticism. Respondents indicated that financial transparency, in addition to a clear understanding of the

organization's mission, structure and accomplishments, are paramount to their interest and involvement.

Volunteering & Networking

Overall individuals are inclined to volunteer, but there is significant competition and numerous options to which people can get connected and involved. Either through personal associations, local concerns or larger organizations such as Rotary International – most individuals believe in and support the act of volunteering. However, individuals want a very clear understanding about the organization's (or club's) mission (what they do), their projects and accomplishments, the commitment they are seeking from volunteers, and flexibility. There were differences among the regions tested surrounding networking – some viewed it as a professional function within the work environment or profession, some viewed it as a function that occurs in everyday activities. This research does not indicate that networking is a primary impetus or need for belonging to an organization. However, providing an opportunity for friendship does have a positive connotation.

Time Commitment

Time pressures and commitments are critical to all of these groups. It cannot be stressed enough that as soon as individuals heard there was a time commitment of *once a week, or even twice a month* – the automatic response was they could not fit such a commitment into their lives. Comments indicated that people are more inclined to seek a balanced life with respect to professional responsibilities, family responsibilities, and adequate time for friends and personal enjoyment. They are not inclined to forgo personal time for volunteer activities. They are looking for options and flexibility as to how a volunteer opportunity would best fit into their personal lives.

RI Messages

RI's overall messages were perceived to be somewhat outdated, lengthy, generic, and lofty. They were not readily viewed by respondents as inclusive, and did not necessarily encourage an individual to seek more information and pursue involvement. Messages need to be clear, concise, and specific.

Statements claiming the organization promotes ethical behavior was viewed somewhat skeptically in two regions;

While the promotion of high ethical standards sounds good it does beg the question of whose ethics are being promoted?

The use of the word 'leader' promoted some strong discussion. It appeared there was uncertainty and hesitation as to the organization's definition of the word 'leader' (mayor of a town, head of a legislative body, lead counsel, etc.). Though working in professional and executive capacities, when individuals heard the word 'leader' it was at times perceived as somewhat exclusionary and elitist.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered to respond to challenges identified in these focus group findings.

- Club PR. Club placement of advertising, public service announcements and action oriented project articles at the local community level. Local clubs must be encouraged to place public service announcements, and well constructed articles identifying specific projects and notices in their local mediums. Clubs are the primary link in getting their existence and message out to the community public.
- Action & Accomplishments. Announcements and advertising must demonstrate project actions and accomplishment as people are interested in how they can become actively involved in improving their community.

- PR Tools. Rotary develops and provides 'how to', 'tip sheets' and instructional tools for clubs and districts to use. These need to be more readily communicated, accessed and made available for clubs and districts.
- Targeted advertising. Specifically focus advertising and announcements on women and younger people. The perception that women are not able to join a local Rotary club must be overcome.
- Constant communication. There are a multitude of options for people to get involved with and volunteer their time so Rotary must continuously keep their message in front of the general public.
- RI Messages. Create messages that are concise, clear and specific as to Rotary's mission, what Rotary and local Rotary clubs accomplish at the community level. As messages are often targeted to Rotarians, these messages must also be relevant and 'speak to' the non-Rotarian, prospective member group. Messages must be frequently tested to a variety of non-Rotarian demographic groups to ensure clarity and purpose.
- Friendship and Family. Friendship and family should be more readily emphasized as a benefit of getting involved in a local Rotary club.
- Attendance Requirements. Encourage and ensure that club communication to prospective members promotes the 50% attendance policy rather than 100% attendance. Though an admirable accomplishment and achievement in the past, 100% attendance is not possible with current professional and personal commitments and responsibilities. Additionally, 50% attendance is stipulated within the RI Constitutional documents.
- New Mediums. Incorporate new technologies and mediums in delivering and promoting RI's message. The General Secretary is currently investigating communication opportunities for RI with various social networking sites: *You Tube, FaceBook, LinkedIn, Orkut, Bebo, Hi5, etc.* These sites will continue to gain in access and momentum. New technologies are also being employed for e-learning and communication purposes.
- COL Legislation. Develop and submit legislation to the 2010 COL that could impact challenges expressed above; meeting frequency options, e-clubs, alternate memberships, etc.
- Membership Opportunities. Provide realistic and relevant opportunities for membership for the prospective member target markets identified within the RI Strategic Plan: younger professionals within the 'X' and 'Y' generations, baby boom generations, women professionals, etc. Specific challenges were noted with respect to time and commitment and these must be considered within the scope of membership.
- Identify how to best approach and attract these target groups.

Once again, the purpose of this project was to identify challenges and obstacles RI has with two demographic groups. As competing interests continue to rise, it is always a useful and beneficial exercise to test how the general public views and perceives an organization. Any harsh or negative observations and comments should be considered an opportunity to improve our communications, message and possibly policy.

Any of these final focus group reports can be obtained from the Membership Development Division.

Some additional information that should be considered within the scope of this report's findings includes trends surrounding volunteer opportunities, humanitarian efforts of larger organizations and professional networking.

There are a multitude of options for individuals to get involved in community and international humanitarian service, volunteer efforts or personal and professional networking. In searching volunteer opportunities within the United States on the internet under '*Volunteer Match*', for Chicago, IL seven hundred eighty nine (789) options were generated, St. Louis, MO generated three hundred seventy four (374) options, San Diego, CA generated four hundred eighty eight (488) options, and Boston, MA generated nine hundred thirty three (933) options.

Humanitarian service or philanthropy has become the norm, rather than the exception, for most multi-national, large corporations. Volunteering, support, and assistance are well accepted and expected from these organizations. To name just a few examples,

- Home Depot supports *Kaboo* in building community playgrounds;
- Dove supports 'building self-esteem for teen girls';
- Target supports a multitude of philanthropic organizations to include *Red Cross, Salvation Army, United Negro College Fund, Kids In Need*; as well as supporting local schools;
- Disney supports *Make A Wish, Red Cross*;
- Starbucks Corp. supports an international youth foundation and autism; and
- Johnson & Johnson supports *Save The Children, Operation Smile*, and the *R. W. Johnson Foundation*.

Most professions have several viable associations that offer continuing education and networking benefits. In addition, on-line social networking sites such as LinkedIn are becoming more popular as a means of keeping in touch with former professional colleagues.

In summary, more and more opportunities are becoming available for people to contribute time and money to their specific causes and for people to get connected to individuals with similar professional and personal interests.