

Proven PR Tips to Increase Your Chapter Membership

~ Jeff Harris
State Public Relations Officer

If you're a member of a struggling club with less than 20 active members, you probably believe that increasing membership in your club is difficult, if not nearly impossible. Less than one percent of the 750,000 motorcyclists registered in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are currently members of ABATE. This number is astounding considering the work our active members do on behalf of the motorcycling community!

The solution has nothing to do with luck, or living in a large metropolitan area, but everything to do with visitors.

Here are several proven Public Relations tips to help you increase your chapter membership:

- Before launching any new member campaign, you must improve the quality of your meetings. Open seats at the officer's table exhibits a lack of interest at the highest level. Visibly intoxicated members should be discouraged from participating in discussions. Try to limit meetings to one hour. Topics of discussion should not be allowed to wander endlessly. These discussions can be held after the meeting has adjourned, and added to the next meetings agenda.
- Apathy due to our passage of the helmet law amendment must be addressed. The bikers in the state of Louisiana recently lost their freedom of choice after enjoying five years of freedom! Stress this fact with those who feel our fight is over.
- Getting visitors to attend your chapter meeting is easy! We all know at least one biker who is not a member. Each current member needs to bring one of his or her riding buddies to the meeting. Impressing our guests enough so that they decide to join and come back...now that's the challenge!
- Instruct your Sergeant-at-Arms, or other Officer, to arrive 30 minutes before each meeting. He should be on the lookout for visitors and be prepared to greet the guest. Guests typically show up 15 to 20 minutes early. If no one is there, they might think the meeting was canceled.
- Your guest should be "partnered" with a member who will introduce the visitor to the group at the beginning of the meeting and be able to answer questions throughout the meeting as they arise.
- Educate the club members how important it is that everyone shakes hands and greets the guest before the meeting. We do not want our guests to feel unwelcome!
- Always offer participation in discussions as an "option" to guests.
- Ask the guest to provide a short comment toward the end of the meeting regarding what they thought about the meeting. This will give you a good indication whether they are a potential member. Tell your guest at the beginning of the meeting that these comments will be requested at the end, so they are not caught off-guard.

- Put your web site address on everything promotional that you do. Provide your Public Relations and Membership Officer's e-mail and phone number on your web site and encourage visitors to contact him or her with any questions.

What many people do not realize is that even the large clubs can run into trouble with membership. Usually, a decrease in membership is the result of poor leadership in the club and a decline in meeting quality. Make sure you have a good product before trying to get others to buy into it!

How to Get Media Coverage of your Events

~ Jeff Harris
State Public Relations Officer

If you follow these easy instructions, your chapter will be almost guaranteed to have media coverage of your event. Each chapter should use their own best judgment on when, or if, the press should be invited to cover an event. If you're not certain that good press will be the result of the media attending your event, it may be wise not to invite them.

The first thing you need to do is develop a targeted media list. Find out which newspapers, magazines, television programs, radio stations or websites will be interested in your event. Many of these media sources are already listed on our state web site. Local and regional paid-for and free newspapers often have community pages which list upcoming events - and then report on them afterwards. Don't forget to include your local motorcycle publications and national organizations; such as the AMA and MRF.

The second step is contacting the media outlets and asking them to print details or provide news reports of the event shortly before the big day. If they agree, you need to follow up with a press release containing all the details of the event and provide contact information. Most media will already have story ideas in mind, or are looking for a particular angle such as human interest, charitable causes or celebrity attendance. You may have an event that could be of special interest to local media due to an influx of tourism dollars to Pennsylvania. Be creative in thinking up ways to "hook" the media outlets into covering your event. Media notification should ideally begin several months in advance with a "save-the-date" phone call or post card. More details should be sent via event flyers and early press releases that detail the news angles for the event. At the very least, try to give the media outlets two weeks notice of an upcoming event.

Get on the phone and call the news desks at the local newspapers, television and radio stations you want to target and ask when their deadlines are. Find out if they prefer to receive information by fax or e-mail. Find out if there are special correspondents for community and charity news, and get their contact information. These are your contacts so get to know them! Invite them to your chapter meetings, send them Christmas cards, and keep them informed of events you are organizing throughout the year.

Another good way to "hook" some media coverage is by getting a big name celebrity to support your event. This is always a sure-fire way to attract the media. Contact any local celebrities, from sports stars to television stars to politicians, and ask them to join your event or, if they can't come along, to send a message of support. Ask if you can pass this message to the media, along with a photograph of the celebrity. (for example, Punxsutawney Phil...)

The third step is to provide a knowledgeable contact person for the event to assist the press (as required). Make the media's job simpler by providing easy access to the events organizers, participants and celebrities. If there are additional flyers, event brochures, or event schedules, you should assemble press kits for each media representative and present these upon their arrival. Finally, there will be media interested in your event who can't attend for any number of reasons. Be prepared to also send them a press release afterwards. The release should describe what happened, how many people came, and how much money was raised. If you do most of the work for the busy reporters, they will be grateful. Invite photographers and local TV channels to come and capture the event on camera. If the local paper doesn't send a photographer, get a good photographer to take

plenty of pictures then send just one or two of the best shots to news desks and picture desks as soon as possible after the event.

Photographs of your event are a must! Always use lively, colorful images to help get your story into the papers. Compose the picture so that it tells the story, and make sure it has people in it. Get an A.B.A.T.E. logo in the picture if you can, as well as any wording that explains the story (such as: event banners or posters). Pictures of one or two people often work better than a large group and get as close as you can. Informal shots can be more interesting than formal posed ones. Digital cameras are great as you can e-mail your photos to the newspapers directly. If you don't have access to a digital camera, make sure you can get your pictures processed and delivered the same day.

These four easy steps really are the basics, but once you've been through two or three events, you will develop the right media contacts and figure out a well-timed strategy. The key to success begins with targeting and notifying media early on, providing event access and contacts, and sending post-event press releases that provide detailed information about the events conclusion.

I will be happy to help your chapter and district PR officers to write the required press releases. Also, please send me copies of all the media coverage you receive. I try to monitor all of the Pennsylvania news outlets, but still tend to miss some excellent reports. Thank you for taking the time to read my column, I hope you find the information useful. Good luck promoting your event! Special thanks to Joe Chyr of Ridge Runners for inspiring this month's PR report.

Spread the Word – Publicity

*~ Jeff Harris
State Public Relations Officer*

2004 was a pretty good year for how motorcyclists were portrayed by the media here in Pennsylvania. Looking back on the past year I discovered something that surprised me. The vast majority of newspaper articles were pro-motorcycle! The newspaper reporters wrote good stories about Carlisle, Johnstown and Lehigh, they also wrote great articles about the generosity of bikers conducting fund-raisers for numerous charities. Many of the articles included good quotes from members of ABATE. Thank you all for spreading the word!

As your appointed State Public Relations Officer, I am responsible for ensuring that any negative press receives an appropriate response. Fortunately, the Press has made my job simpler by writing predominantly favorable stories. Whenever I read a well written, pro-motorcycle article, I take a few minutes to send a “thank you” e-mail to the journalist. These reporters need to know that we appreciate receiving good press, and encourage them to continue.

Accident reports are the one area where we are routinely receiving bad publicity. Many accident reports indicate excessive speed, alcohol and non-helmet use. How do we respond to these? I've contacted several reporters about accident reports that did not include any mention of helmet use. The response I got every time was “It wasn't in the police report”. I request these reporters to write follow-up stories to provide the public with more detailed information. Unfortunately, this seldom happens. When it comes to excessive speed and alcohol, there is no appropriate response. We need to police ourselves not to participate in risky or illegal behaviour. Let's save the racing for the drag strip, and don't ride drunk! If you're stupid enough to ride your motorcycle while drunk, please wear your helmet so that when you remove yourself from the gene-pool your death will not have a future effect on our freedom of choice! I know that's a harsh statement, but we've lost too many good people to alcohol related accidents.

In 2005 I would like to see even more good publicity for our organization. I only saw a few newspaper reports about ABATE related fundraisers last year. If your having a fundraiser for charity, your chapter PR officer needs to invite your local television, radio and newspapers to attend. Give the reporters at least two-to-four weeks notice of the event. This will give them time to schedule coverage. If you have your schedule of events for 2005 already completed, you can start contacting the news media now. Take some time this winter to spread the word and help ABATE of PA gain more good publicity.

Ideas to Help Retain Members

~ Jeff Harris
State Public Relations Officer

At the January Board meeting, ABATE of PA's Board of Directors voted to set a goal of increasing our membership level to ten thousand members by the end of 2006. One major area of concern discussed was our organizations membership renewal rate. As much as 25% of some chapter's members are not rejoining ABATE when they're membership expires. Fortunately, the size of our organization has not suffered due to the increase in new members being signed up. To help us retain our existing members, and thereby assist in the real growth of our membership, I am dedicating this month's column to present "Idea's to help retain members".

- Reach out! Contact your members to remind them that their membership renewal is due. Some chapters mail postcards, other's send e-mails and make phone call's. Don't let them just walk away!
- Establish a telephone tree. Contact each member prior to upcoming meetings, rides and special events. Keep your new members informed. Take the initiative to contact them personally. The extra contact will help make them feel that you value their involvement. Maintain regular e-mail or telephone contact.
- Develop a welcome letter from the president for all new members
- Communicate our organizations successes to members regularly. Due to the passage of our helmet bill, many feel that we are in maintenance mode, and are no longer actively pursuing a legislative agenda.
- Send a special letter of thanks to first-time renewals. The first two years produce the most dropouts. Focus hard on the first renewal.
- At your chapter meetings, you should identify and recognize members with the most tenure. This helps send a message that people stay in our organization a long-time.
- Recognize new members and renewals in your chapter report to this newsletter and at your meetings.
- During events, your officers should try to spend extra time with new members. Establish a strong mentoring program. Ask the new members for their opinion on topics of discussion. Keep them involved!
- Look for any opportunity to recognize member's contribution and reward achievements. Ensure that all members are active to their level of comfort.
- Even though lobbying for legislation is serious business, try to keep your meetings fun! A non-threatening and friendly atmosphere is essential. Solve any conflicts promptly.
- Have educational sessions to bring new members up-to-speed.
- Have guest speakers at your meetings. (Local Representative/Senator; Bike shop owner; gold club sponsor; recipient of charity funds; etc.)
- Display names of the ten "Most Wanted" non-renewals at meetings.
- Send cards to members when appropriate (birthday, sympathy, etc.)
- Schedule interclub social activities/rides between neighboring chapters.
- Re-invite inactive members to your meetings/events.
- Establish a regular social hour before/after meetings. Take some time to get to know your new members. Invite spouses to attend. Supportive family members are important to active involvement.
- Have an annual chapter awards ceremony to reward achievements.

- Include networking tips in your chapter newsletter or new member literature. Networking is an important benefit of joining. Not only will you meet future riding buddies, you'll also meet some excellent mechanics and sources of bike parts!
- Use testimonials from members who aren't active but still feel membership is valuable. Ask those who are not active but continue to renew to contact other inactive members and convince them to also renew.
- Encourage input from your members regarding your chapter's community activities. Ask new members for their ideas — they may have some fresh, exciting thoughts, and asking for their input will show that you are interested in their opinions. Don't let activities and fundraisers become stale. Make sure that your chapter's activities are still relevant for your community and your members. Periodically try something new.
- Involve new members in activities immediately. Have them participate in an event as soon as they show an interest. Get them working on a goal so that they will feel needed and important. Ask them to co-chair a committee or coordinate a small activity in the early stages of their membership.
- Encourage them to grow into future officers
- Periodically ask long-term members what their interests are, as these will develop and change over time. Assign responsibilities based on their interests, and give them increasing responsibilities to challenge them and keep them motivated.
- If all else fails, use guilt - "If you quit our organization will fail"

Remember that the best time to retain members is BEFORE they show signs of dissatisfaction. Make sure members know you care about them. If they start missing meetings or are becoming less involved in activities, give them a call to find out why before it becomes a chronic situation.

I'd also like to thank those who helped make my first L&L workshop presentation a success. Thanks to Jayne and Charles for insight and encouragement in performing my role as your Public Relations officer. Special thanks to all attendee's who participated in our workshop discussions. I learned a lot from you all, and returned home from the L&L seminar feeling refreshed and motivated!

Top 10 Public Relations Mistakes

The goal of public relations is to portray A.B.A.T.E. of PA in the best possible manner. This can range from establishing our organization as the premiere source for motorcycle rights issues in Pennsylvania, to responding to an editorial calling for mandatory helmet laws.

Unlike advertising, our goal is not to pay for space in the media but to persuade the media to take an interest in what we are doing and to take action by writing or reporting on our organizations activities. Below are some of the common errors to watch out for when handling public relations.

1. **Poor timing.** Timing is very important and too often the individuals handling public relations do not get a head start on their tasks. You need to consider lead time for television, newspapers, and other media.
2. **Poor choice of language.** Buzzwords do not impress editors who have little time to read all the press releases that flow across their desks. Get to the point in plain and simple language.
3. **Poorly written press releases.** Errors, omissions, poorly worded sentences, lengthy copy, and poor structure are all mistakes that may land your press release in the trash. You need to grab the reader, get to the point quickly, and follow up with information about the event. Keep it concise and include all pertinent details.
4. **Poor follow-up.** If you are trying to reach out and be heard, be prepared when someone calls with follow-up questions.
5. **Assuming journalists are your friends.** Journalism is a very different business from public relations. While each professional is trying to tell a story, we are trying to position A.B.A.T.E. of PA in the best possible light, while the journalist is trying to tell a story regardless of who looks good. Somewhere between the spin and truth, lies a common goal. That common ground is the straight good story in which our side is reflected accurately and the public is served by a truthful story that clarifies the issue.

6. **Press releases for the sake of it.** If you send out press releases every time there is some minor development, when something really important occurs, editors will already be in the habit of throwing your releases in the trash.
7. **Doing public relations in a vacuum.** Reading the newsletter and our state website will keep you abreast of what is going on in A.B.A.T.E. of PA.
8. **No plan.** You cannot do public relations by winging it. It is hard to know what to do next if you have no plan of action. You need to determine where, when, and how you are going to proceed. You also need to be flexible and have backup plans should all else fail. Don't be afraid to ask for help.
9. **False allegations aren't damaging.** According to the "four credible hit theory of belief formation," if a credible source makes an allegation about you four times, without a reasonable explanation from you, the public tends to believe it. Therefore, whenever members of the medical community publish calls for mandatory helmet laws, we must respond vigorously.
10. **The media has to agree with you.** The overwhelming requirement of most journalists is to tell a story in an interesting way. Make sure you know what your message is and actively seek out opportunities to get it across. Don't just think of news items. Think of programs on radio and television, feature items in newspapers and magazines. These can provide far more opportunities to position our organization.

Every mistake is different, but each mistake contains lessons that can be applied to future situations. What was learned can be put into place to avoid the same problems recurring. In fact, if the mistake isn't too large or costly, it could prevent even more serious problems down the road.

Where Were You?

Last month there were forty five ABATE Chapter meetings, eight District meetings, and one State board meeting. All of the meeting locations, dates and times can be found on the state website and in the chapter reports in the newsletter. All of the meetings are open to the public. Did you attend your chapter meeting? When was the last time you made it to one of your chapter meetings? Do you even know who your chapter officers are?

Attendance at meetings is not mandatory, nor is it required of our members. We appreciate each and every member regardless of their level of participation. The problem is that YOU are not receiving the full benefits of being a member by not attending your chapter meeting.

Each chapter's monthly meeting provides our members with an opportunity to learn about current legislative issues, upcoming rides and parties. More importantly, the meeting is a place where you can voice your opinion on every aspect of our organization. If you have an idea for a fundraiser, a ride or a new piece of legislation that you would like to see made into law, the chapter meeting is the launching pad for those ideas.

Chapter Presidents and District Representatives attend state board meetings two and six times a year, respectively. At the state board meetings the concerns of our members are discussed and voted on. If you want your voice heard – this is where the rubber meets the road.

ABATE of PA is an all volunteer, grass-roots member driven organization. You are the driving force behind our every move. Nominations for officers are in full swing across the state. Is this the year that you step up to the plate and take on the challenge of helping to run your chapter? If not now – when?

Don't forget about the other chapters in your surrounding counties. Take a ride out and sit in on another chapters meeting. It's a great way to get to know the people who are involved in our state's motorcycle rights organization.