



## Five ways Friends groups attract Millennials

Across the country, Friends of the Library groups of all sizes are reporting declining memberships. This is troubling in and of itself, and doubly so because the number of active members willing to take on vital volunteer responsibilities core to the operation is also dwindling.

At a high level, this trend is no mystery. In many communities, the Friends are losing older members faster than they can attract Millennials. Fortunately, there are a number of steps you can take to forge the intergenerational coalition that will reverse this decline.

### 1) Value Young Minds — Not Just Able Bodies

All too often, aging Friends lament that they have fewer and fewer able-bodied volunteers to tap for tried-and-true but labor-intensive activities. Book sales are the best case in point.

For decades, Baby Boomers have orchestrated countless successful used book sales across the country. While libraries are constantly evolving, the book sale model has not changed much. It is perfectly understandable that these aging Friends would want younger counterparts to shoulder the burden, figuratively and literally. Many also want to see continuity — for their pet projects to live on more or less as they left them.

Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your point of view, Millennials are disinclined to volunteer and be your muscle if they are not also given the opportunity to be influencers.

This non-hierarchical inclination can actually be of great benefit to you. There is nothing like fresh eyes to shake up a static fundraising model. (Social media promotions, in-kind ad spot donations, and online volunteer shift registration are just a few examples of Millennial-instigated changes that crop up with some regularity.)

If, on the other hand, the Friends stay true to a tradition- or seniority-

based culture, these Millennial movers and shakers will find a home at a less rigid charity organization.

### 2) Offer “Resume-Worthy” Opportunities

Not all volunteer opportunities are created equal. Some nonprofits offer leadership opportunities or other growth potential suitable for a young person’s resume. Others keep all their volunteers occupied with clerical tasks or manual labor assignments like the ones sketched out above.

In today’s increasingly competitive job market, which do you think will be more appealing to an up-and-coming professional?

Make sure that your Friends group is offering service opportunities that Millennial volunteers will find value added — i.e., valuable to them over and above their love of the library and devotion to the Friends. “Library Used Book Store Manager” and “Used Book Sale Co-Chair” will look sterling on the resume and, in practice, will also encompass many of the less savory tasks that you are perhaps most worried about.

Depending on how dynamic your Friends group is or aspires to be, you might consider drafting position descriptions and framing your call for active Millennial volunteers as a “job search” of sorts. Include expected hours commitment (a great help to time-strapped Millennials), and stress the networking and letters of recommendation potential. Post these descriptions on your website and social media, and more important still, be sure to share with library staff.

### 3) Avoid Presumptuous Asks

Compared to their parents, Millennials are less likely to donate beyond membership dues simply because it is asked, and far less likely to cut yearly donation checks to your cause “by rote.” Many are willing to give generously to library causes, but presumptuous or ill-worded asks can drive away Millennials from your organization entirely.

A conscientious Friends group can head this problem off at the pass with relative ease, by understanding differential motivations. According to the 2013 Millennial Donors Report, only 22 percent of young donors are willing to offer sustained financial support if they do not understand how those dollars tie directly to a nonprofit’s mission. They appreciate organizational transparency, and inspirational success stories. Furthermore, more so than their predecessors, you will find this generation receptive to donor incentives: matched gifts, prize drawings, and tokens of donor appreciation (shirts, pens, and the like).

Conversely, any pitch that can be construed to imply that a gift is expected will prove counterproductive.

This is particularly important for modestly-sized Friends groups. Historically, in smaller organizations, it is not uncommon for active Friends leaders to each donate a sizable amount to help make basic ends meet. Millennials will not only be disinclined, but perhaps disaffected enough to avoid base membership and volunteer opportunities!

### 4) Schedule Conscientiously

It is not uncommon for a Friends of the Library organization to be run by a Board made up entirely of retirees. Amongst those peers, it is easy to schedule meetings and programs on dates and at times that are convenient for those assembled — but not necessarily good for the intergenerational coalition they are looking to build.

If you are organizing a fundraiser event and wish to attract parent-age Millennials (and Gen Xers, for that matter), consider weekday evenings as an alternative to weekends. Parental weekends-only commitments are a nonstarter for many young families.

Similarly, if you wish to attract young people to your leadership roster, reconsider your board and committee meeting schedules. While retirees may prefer to hold such sessions on week-

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## Minnesota Association of Library Friends hosts 'Empowering Friends' workshops

Dr. Julie Todaro, immediate past president of the American Library Association, zigzagged 715 miles across Minnesota in October to keynote Minnesota Association of Library Friends (MALF) workshops in Rochester, Stillwater, and Cook. Todaro focused on her passion, the art and science of storytelling.

Her thesis was this: Storytelling is a highly effective way to convince public officials (at all levels of government) of the impact and continued relevance of libraries.

Dr. Todaro offered attendees a mix of adaptable frameworks to consider, along with helpful real-life examples. Attendees particularly appreciated Todaro's hierarchy of credible sources.

Ranked from most credible and best to use, to least credible and best used sparingly, these include:

- **Irrefutable Data:** Statistically significant, unquestionable data from a highly credible source.
- **Substantial Data:** "Point-in-time"

information or directionally accurate data (includes most surveys).

- **Expert Commentary:** Quotes from industry experts (leading community members, peers in appropriate fields) can be considered a summary or synthesis of information.
- **Anecdotal Data:** Although many consider anecdotal data only "example" or "endorsement" data, it can be data driven! What separates it from Substantial Data is that it includes *only* one or two data points or examples that support your case.
- **Quotes:** Comments from business people, parents, students, etc. can illustrate need and use, and be sprinkled in as powerful evidence.
- **Your Opinion:** From the perspective of the audience, your opinion is typically too biased to be considered supporting evidence.

Details on this information hierarchy, and other storytelling best practices covered by Dr. Todaro at MALF's



Dr. Julie Todaro at one of MALF's "Empowering Friends" workshops.

fall workshops, is available in a 23-page handout available through the MALF office. Email [info@mnlibraryfriends.org](mailto:info@mnlibraryfriends.org) if interested.

MALF extends a sincere thank you to the hosts of the three workshops: Reagen Thalacker and the SELCO staff in Rochester; Mary Ann Sandeen and the Friends of the Stillwater Public Library; and Crystal Phillips and the Friends of the Cook Library. Dr. Todaro reports enjoying her travels in Minnesota and the expressions of friendship offered at each session.

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day mornings, taking off work may be a luxury for those you aspire to attract.

Above all, make it clear that time commitments are valued in any quantity — indeed, that Millennials are welcome to give any combination of time and money which they can comfortably manage, without fear of pressure.

#### 5) Marshall Your Network

A pile of membership brochures in the library or pdf application on your web page will only get you so far. Asking these passive tactics to net you a robust, intergenerational membership is asking for a miracle.

Fundraising 101 teaches that "personal asks" from a familiar source are the most effective, and the axiom is equally true when marshal-

ling new Friends members.

Mixing metaphors, think outside the box — and outside your comfort zone. Chat with neighbors, co-workers, and members of your favorite congregation about the mission and needs of the Friends. Do not press for immediate commitments of any kind, if it does not seem appropriate, but be prepared to circle back to any prospect who voiced a tentative interest in the Friends of the Library.

If your network consists predominantly of older residents in the community, encourage them to reach out in turn to their children, grandchildren, and young neighbors. (If applicable to your group, stress the available "resume-worthy" opportunities we discussed above.)

Last but not least, consult library staff. Libraries, like restaurants, have "regulars," and librarians ordinarily have a pulse on which young people are particularly engaged with the library. Strong engagement with library services may crosswalk to strong engagement with the Friends.

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