

Service clubs update to woo young members

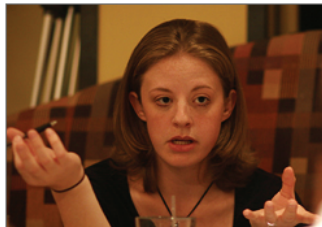
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From left, Alexis Larkin, Will Hawkins, Dhiren Ponnambalam and Jennifer Beyermeeet with other members of the Kiwanis Club of DC Metro Young Professionals in Arlington, Va.



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Emily Casto meets with the Kiwanis Club of DC Metro Young Professionals.

By **Haya El Nasser**, USA TODAY

Century-old service club organizations that didn't allow women to join until 20 years ago are being forced to modernize and adjust to today's busy lifestyles to reverse membership declines.

The nation's three largest — Lions Clubs International, Rotary International and Kiwanis International — are reducing requirements for meeting attendance from once a week to every other week or once a month.

They're creating cyberclubs that conduct business strictly on the Internet and family clubs to involve parents and children. Pancake breakfasts and spaghetti dinners are being replaced by early-morning meetings at Starbucks and happy-hour gatherings at local pubs to adjust to young professionals' hectic work schedules.

"We're trying to make it fit in to their lifestyles," says Rob Parker, chief executive of Kiwanis. "We're making it more flexible and more available."

The Indianapolis-based group founded in 1915 hit its peak U.S. membership in 1992 when it had almost 325,000 members. The number has been declining up to 5% a year since until last year when membership rebounded slightly and hit more than 260,000.

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"We are reinventing ourselves," Parker says. "We have faced the brutal facts."

Founded in the early 1900s by businessmen who wanted to create a social and professional network, the groups eventually expanded to focus on humanitarian causes and now work to fight hunger, disease and homelessness worldwide. The Lions work to eradicate blindness. Kiwanis' motto is "Serving the Children of the World." Among Rotary humanitarian activities is helping stamp out polio.

Younger people, however, are not joining at the same pace as previous generations.

"We have seen a slow decline in membership, but this year we're turning the corner," says Dane LaJoye, spokesman for Lions Clubs, which has about 400,000 members in the USA, down from a high of more than 570,000 in 1978.

"Survey after survey that we've conducted have indicated that people still want to volunteer like we did in the '50s and '60s but people want to volunteer with their families and their kids," LaJoye says. "People want to volunteer, but they want to get their hands dirty. They want to build houses and playgrounds."

The Lions has chartered dozens of new family clubs. Women are the fastest-growing segment of its membership, making up about 22% of members worldwide.

Rotary International had a peak U.S. membership of 421,953 in 1993. It has been below 400,000 since 1999.

"Everybody is so time-crunched that we just passed a change in attendance requirements," says Donna McDonald, manager of the membership development division. "We're certainly taking people's lifestyles and personal and professional commitments into play."

Rotary now allows 50% attendance of weekly club meetings. It launched an e-club pilot project that allows members to meet online. Another pilot program is testing clubs that schedule business meetings less frequently.

Emily Casto, 27, joined the Kiwanis Club of DC Metro Young Professionals after she moved to Washington from Charleston, W.Va., 2½ years ago. The club has 50 members, most in their 20s and 30s. It has a monthly business meeting that lasts no longer than 45 minutes and organizes four or five service projects a month via an interactive calendar on its website. The club doesn't take attendance and doesn't require members to participate in a set number of projects. It uses meetup.com and a Google group to organize itself.

"Many of the traditional Kiwanis clubs meet weekly and have a lot of lunchtime meetings," says Casto, who works in the government affairs department of the Grocery Manufacturers Association. "That's not something available to us, to take two hours out of your day once a week. We can't take that precious time away from people who have work, home life. Some of them are in grad school or law school."

Getting away from rigid rules set almost 100 years ago has been the goal. Kiwanis is shifting some of its emphasis to leadership development — a focus more likely to appeal to young people than retirees.

"There are encouraging signs," Parker says. "One is that the next generation is very community oriented and very savvy." This is also the first generation in which many are required to do community service as part of their middle school or high school education.

"They learn that it's not all about them," Parker says. "They care more about the environment, equality. ... They're much more global in their thinking. They know about AIDS in Africa and what's happening in Sudan."

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