

# How the Sacramento Walking Sticks grew to become the largest Volkssport club in the U.S.

It has been requested that the Sacramento Walking Sticks (SWS) provide our "Growth Plan" to the avafuture Yahoo group. My name is Steve Hughart and this document states my personal opinions and is not an "official" statement of the SWS Board. I'm currently the Treasurer of SWS and I built and maintain our website: [www.SacramentoWalkingSticks.org](http://www.SacramentoWalkingSticks.org) I encourage you to take a look at the website and use anything you like to help your club grow. I want all AVA clubs to grow and thrive. When other clubs thrive, it makes it easier for "my" club to thrive. We can't sponsor every YRE or sanctioned event and the more there are, the better it is for all of us.

The "fundamentals" listed below are all doable by normal people, even volkssporters...;-) It's not rocket science nor does it need to be expensive. Your club can grow. We managed to grow from about 20 members in 2003 to well over 500 now. The change was not instant, and we learned as we went, adopting new strategies and tactics as time passed. And there's no set procedure that you follow, so you can adopt some of the principals now and wait on the others. Even though there's no set procedure or step-by-step process, I'd suggest that you consider section 1 first.

## 1. Change your mindset: Before growing your club, some attitudes may need adjusting.

- Decide to grow your club. Make the commitment to do the work necessary to make your club grow. Ask other members to do the same. Not making this decision and commitment is the biggest obstacle to growth.
- Understand that you will have to change the way you do business. Waiting for things to improve on their own will likely be your demise. "Because we've always done it that way" should no longer be the only reason not to make a change. The old guard mentality (we all have it to some degree or another) that refuses to make changes, waiting for the good-old-days to return on their own, is the second biggest obstacle to growth.
- The third biggest obstacle to growth is that we (any club, AVA, & state organizations) are unknown entities. Publicize anywhere you can and target the entire population. It's too early to try to focus on specific groups because virtually no one knows about volkssporting. See the Publicity section below.
- Think big. Think long-term.
- Understand that slow decline inevitably leads to the end of your club – it's just a matter of time. Waiting to grow until next year will only mean you have fewer people to do the work.
- Understand that growth won't happen overnight. There's no magic bullet that will produce explosive growth. Expect to grow slowly.
- Value volunteer hours over money, they're harder to come by.
- Make growth your first priority, money your second. Too much time is wasted on debating how money should be spent rather than increasing income through increased participation. Money is important, but if you grow, the membership dues and increased event income will start to solve most money issues.
- Don't wait for AVA, your state association, or any other entity to help your club grow. Do it now.

- Understand that your club provides a simple service: organized, non-competitive athletic events. Successful service providers follow some simple rules (see below).
- Get ready to take honest measurements of your membership and event participation so you can determine if your efforts are paying off. Try to find objective ways to evaluate your efforts. Don't rely on intuition. Keeping track of participation or membership numbers in a spreadsheet is more reliable than just saying "Well, I think we've had more/fewer people show up this year...."
- Don't take it personally when one of your ideas doesn't work. Be ready to move on. SWS has tried to implement a number of ideas that didn't work. Make failures a learning experience.
- Listen to ideas from other clubs, members, non-members, or anybody.
- Be willing to learn new things. If no one in your club knows how to do word processing or spreadsheets on a computer, learn. There are lots of places that give free or cheap introductions to computers and your local Community College is a great place to learn more about computers.
- Make sure that you have read the Constitutions and By-Laws of AVA, your state association (if applicable), and your club. Don't rely on the interpretation of others or their memories of what once may have been a rule. It doesn't take that long to do and, it may even cure your insomnia!
- Focus on growth.
- Lighten up and have fun.

2. Service Providers: Although the IVV, AVA, and your state organizations seem to try to make volkssporting complex, clubs really provide one simple service. Service providers (clubs) need to understand some simple things about providing service to the public (including members).

- Service providers are customer oriented because customers (credit walkers, free/fun walkers, and the infamous non-IVV participants) are the reason we do business and they are the ones who support the service with their money.
- The customer's perception is the reality. If the customer sees your club as a clique, then it is, regardless of what you might think. If the customer finds your club to be welcoming, than that is true too.
- Service providers are careful about making promises, even small ones. If you say you will do something, do it. And don't make unsubstantiated claims about your club, AVA, or IVV. You don't want to lose folks because their expectations were made unrealistic by your overblown claims.
- Service providers act honestly and ethically. This includes paying the club bills on time, reporting all credit walkers to AVA (including the folks who forget to check "Credit" on the YRE Registration Log when you know that they walked for credit), and making the club business as transparent as possible.

### 3. Publicity:

- Focus your publicity efforts in ways that will reach the largest number of people. Brochures and articles in state organization magazines are fine, but they typically only get to those folks who already know about volkssporting and printing and distributing paper is expensive. Focus on getting the word out to those who've never heard of your club. They're the ones who are most likely to become new members and new participants in the Incentive Program, not us grizzled veterans.
- Get someone to do email Walk Alerts.
- The Walk Alerts should list upcoming events that your club is doing and all the specifics (start times, locations, driving directions, etc.).
- Get as many email addresses as you can. SWS now has about 2,000 addresses, but it took years to build the list up.
- NEVER, never, never, never, sell your email addresses to any one, any business, or any political organization. Tell people this is your policy. People are wary of getting more spam. Use your list only for club purposes. Period. If you break the trust, you'll never get it back again – it isn't worth the money.
- Allow anyone to unsubscribe at any time – and actually take them off your list. There's nothing wrong with letting an un-subscriber know that they can re-subscribe at any time, however.
- Before you spend money on advertising, exhaust the free possibilities first.
- Be patient. Press releases mostly get thrown away the first x number of times you send them out. Be persistent and just keep issuing them. Sooner or later, the media will remember your club's name and start to take you seriously. It took SWS about 3 years to start getting regular listings in our largest local paper's calendar of events. Just remember that those, little neighborhood newspapers are usually hungry for content and we got listings in some of those right away.
- Build a list of newspapers, TV and radio stations, local magazines, and any other media outlet you can think of. Be sure to include their rules of submitting press releases in your list.
- Send as many as possible via email.
- Learn the mail-merge feature in your word processing program to speed up the creation of your snail-mail press releases.
- Keep your press releases simple. You can always explain the complex stuff when people show up to your walks and you have the time.
- If you have a website, always mention it in your press release.
- Always mention that non-members can always attend and that anyone can walk for free.
- If you mention the Incentive Program, keep it simple. Something like "A low-cost incentive program is also available" is enough. Keep it simple.

- Do NOT mention the v-word in your press release. It's too complex to explain in a simple press release and not everyone has positive associations with German words. If your club has volks-anything in its name, consider renaming your club. That's a tough one that SWS did not have to face.
- SWS has had success in limiting press releases to sanctioned/traditional/regular events only and not group walks that utilize YREs. It's just too much work to do a press release for every little group walk (we do 3 or 4 a week). Our website Calendar of Events lists all events.
- Attend as many Health Fairs (or related events) as possible. These are often free for vendors. Just make sure you have something for people to take. Be sure to have a sign-up sheet for your email Walk Alert list.
- Make sure your club has a logo and you have it in electronic form (a computer file). This can be expensive to have a professional, graphic artist to create, so you might consider working with a local school to get students to help.
- If you have no idea of what you want, give the artist creative license.
- If you have some ideas of what you want, let the artist know. Be as specific as possible. There's nothing worse than complaining that the product (which the artist has put many hours of work into) is not what you want because you wanted something else that you failed to communicate in the early stages of the process.
- Put your logo on any document that the public might see. It provides a professional image.
- If your club does not have a website, consider making one.
- Having someone maintain your website will be the biggest thing to consider since static websites attract few new walkers. IBM spent millions of dollars in the 60's and the 90's researching how much computer systems cost at various periods in the "life cycle" (plan, build, maintain, decommission). The maintenance phase turned out to be about 80% of the total cost of any of the systems studied — mainframes in the 60's to PC/server technology used by the Internet.  
3.10.2 Start simple and expand slowly. Professional computer programmers are very expensive (I was one) so you might consider the student angle again. When I took a Community College class on building websites, each student had to create a full blown, fictitious website as a class project. I'm pretty sure the instructor would have been open to hosting a contest among the students to create a website for a non-profit walking club. It would take some effort and planning to set this up as well as a cooperative instructor.

#### 4. Events:

- Be welcoming. Don't ignore new people and don't wait for them to introduce themselves.
- Appear more organized than you actually are. This will not only help you actually get organized, but it will improve your chances of getting new members. No one wants to join a discombobulated club.
- Act as if your club is larger than it is. Prepare to handle the larger numbers. Chance favors the prepared, so get ready to grow now. This may mean investments in automation and/or training.

- Utilize the YREs in your area as much as possible. Just remember lots of small groups add up. If you hold a weekly group walk and only 3 people on average show up, that's over 150 in a year.
- Remember that you are a walking club. Put on as many events as you can. Walking should be a daily event in our lives, not just for weekends with huge groups.
- Don't push too hard on selling New Walker Packets. People don't want the hard sell – just remember the last time you bought a car at a dealership. When they see others eagerly getting their books stamped, they'll get the message – or not. Many regular free/fun walkers give donations at each walk they attend.
- Figure out ways that you can make the registration process quicker. Give up writing out a list of walkers, at least while they're standing in front of you. Make sure the Start Card is filled out properly and you'll have all the information you need to do the After Action Report and any other reporting you need to do. I can't tell you how many times I've waited in a registration line needlessly while some little old lady slowly wrote down names, checking credit/free/award boxes and the like. Remember: all that information is on a properly completed Start Card. It is a waste of time to redundantly record the data on a separate sheet of paper. Spend your time making sure the signature and date is there (it's not a legal signature without a date) so that the insurance lawyers are happy. The Start Card is a legal document that the club is supposed to retain for 7 years, so it's pretty important to get it right.

#### 5. Membership:

- Always ask new people if they want to join your club, but don't be pushy.
- Don't act all hurt if they say "no" just let them know they can join at any time with a smile on your face and move on. You've just sent the message that they are always welcome to become part of the group.
- Make it as easy as possible to join.
- If you have a website, post your membership form in PDF format at the very least. Include instructions.
- Have membership application forms at all of your events.
- Don't be picky about who joins your club. You cannot tell who will get involved when they first join the club. You never know when your next President, webmaster, trailmaster, or whatever will join because they probably don't know it either. It takes time for new members to figure out that they want to get involved and help the club, not just consume its service(s).
- Be ready to answer the question "Why should I join the club when I can always attend any of your events?" Try to add some incentives for joining (see our Membership and Special Program web pages) and it doesn't hurt to use the subtle guilt-trip of letting folks know that events are not free for the club to put on.
- Don't expect the Board of your club to bring every decision to the members. The reason you have a Board is to make minor and day-to-day decisions. I can't precisely define the line between what should be taken to the membership and what shouldn't, but I know when I've

crossed it. The club's stance on NEC motions is a good example of what the members should have a voice in. Whether or not you buy printer ink for the volunteer that prints out lots of stuff for the club on their home computer is a decision that the Board should make without consulting the entire membership. You will stifle club growth if you need to take everything to the membership which delays all action until the next membership meeting.

- Make sure your books are open to an audit by members. You want the finances to be transparent to members, but not open to the public for security reasons.

#### 6. Volunteers:

- Value volunteer time over money. It's usually harder to get someone to give up his/her time than it is their money.
- Streamline your operations so that you make the most efficient use of volunteer time as you possibly can. Look at everything you do and ask "Can we do this better or faster or with higher quality?" This may mean purchasing some office equipment or other automation tools to make your office or paperwork activities less time consuming.
- Understand that it is a relatively constant percentage of members that will actually volunteer. That means that the larger your overall membership gets, the more people you will find that will volunteer.
- Honor your volunteers. Recognition is a powerful motivator for many people. You don't have to spend money doing this either.
- Try to make volunteering fun. It's a whole lot easier to present yourself as a welcoming club if the folks at your start table are smiling and enjoying themselves. If they act like abused slaves, then you're sending the wrong message.