



How We Grow (Part 3): Shifting Into Hyper-drive

[This is part 3 of a 3-part series of the authors' opinions on how the GWTA should approach our need for growth. This series is neither endorsed nor supported by GWTA leadership; the opinions are the author's alone.]

No matter how you look at it, our declining membership numbers are staggering.

From a peak high in 1998, our membership has steadily declined year after year, for about a 40% decline in 7 years. I don't know about you, but this scares the bejeevers out of me.

In previous parts of this series, I talked about how we need to take an honest look at how our Chapters are working before we start any recruiting efforts, and also about the need to keep trying all kinds of recruitment strategies. In this, the final article of the series, I will talk about how to shift our membership numbers into hyper-drive by starting new Chapters.

Yes, we still need to do a good job of recruiting and retaining members. I'm not arguing that point at all. However, even if you doubled the membership of the smallest half of our organization's Chapters (sorted by size), you'd only increase the organization by 20%. (In other words, half of our Chapters with the largest numbers represent 80% of our membership.)

Do I say these things to be Mr. Gloom-and-Doom? No, just the opposite. I think to solve big problems you need big ideas. And I have some big ideas about our growth potential, too. Just look at our several new Chapters in Arizona: from nothing a year or so ago, they are now among the top 20 Chapters in size.

First we need to understand that all Chapters have a life-cycle. We start Chapters, and they grow and flourish for a while. Sometimes they grow so much that they decide to split. (My buddy Russ Grimm calls this the "Divide and Conquer Strategy"; his home Chapter has split multiple times, starting 3-4 separate Chapters, most of which are still going strong.) Other times Chapters grow to a certain size, and then stay right in that zone for most of their life. And, sadly, some Chapters spring up quickly, but fade away. (At one time we had more than 250 Chapters, and now have fewer than 170.)

This is the main reason we need to constantly be starting new Chapters: because, inevitably, some Chapters will be dying all the time. To keep our numbers moving in a positive direction, we need to constantly be replacing Chapters that fade away. How many new Chapters do we need? I'd say we need at least one for every Chapter we lose, and another in every State (or Province) every year. Maybe even more than that. I'd be aiming for net positive growth.

Then we need to realize that some folks are just really good at spreading the GWTA message of friendship and camaraderie. Great! Make them our New Chapter Ambassadors. Give them some goals (such as, say, starting 1 or 2 new Chapters in every state every year), and then help them reach those goals with whatever they need. They might be designated as “State Staff” (or “Provincial Staff”, if in Canada), if they want, but they don’t have to be. In my opinion, it is everybody’s job to spread the good news about GWTA, including starting new Chapters. So find a good team, or start one, and help make magic happen.

OK, so what are the concrete steps to starting a Chapter? Some are obvious, such as finding a meeting location (probably best if supported by a motorcycle dealer), and then posting a variety of flyers here, there and everywhere. Hold an “Informational Meeting” to talk about what the GWTA is, the benefits of our program, and just share the good feelings we have about touring around on our bikes.

What may not be so obvious is that, really, what makes us different is the fun we have getting to know each other on a ride. So, plan a ride! In fact, that might be the core project of the “Informational Meeting”. Get ideas from folks who attend about good rides in the area, and then put on a ride in the next month. My friends Brendan & Lynn Godfrey of the Washington State Staff tell me that they’ve had good success advertising that there will be free hot dogs and burgers at the end of the ride. They then set up a can for donations, which usually more than covers their costs of the BBQ. And, they note, it is at the end of the ride that you can quickly figure out which people are there to check out the new club, and which are just there for the ride or the “free lunch”.

Nurturing new Chapters can take different skills than just starting one up. OK, so find good, nurturing folks, and let them help the new Chapter develop it’s own culture and character. Every Chapter will be different; do not try to make a “clone” of any other Chapter. Start off with figuring out how to have fun, entertaining meetings that people want to attend. Think of a good annual event to host. Show up as a group to other Chapters. Do the kinds of things that bind us together.

Of course, there is really LOTS more to starting new Chapters, much more than can be communicated by a single article. But if we buy into the theory that to get the overall GWTA membership number back up again we need to start lots of new Chapters, then we will have taken the first “Destination Friendship” steps to make that happen.

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