

Tips and Tonics for Healthier Radio Clubs

By D. E. "Dee" Logan, W1HEO

Successful radio clubs are a joy to experience. Easy to spot, they are usually populated by enthusiastic, gung-ho members who are involved with a full agenda of interesting things. They are generally at the center of most Amateur Radio activities in town.

Healthy radio clubs are vitally important to the future of Amateur Radio. It is the club that often provides the motivation and support for such fundamental activities as recruiting new hams, sponsoring radio classes and doing volunteer testing. Clubs are often the best organizers and financiers of expensive repeater systems, hamfests and emergency communication programs, as well.

What makes a radio club successful? What secrets enable them to keep adding members, providing interesting activities and offering interesting programs?



Active clubs are healthy clubs. In addition to building friendships and mentoring new hams, operating events are a good way to showcase Amateur Radio to the public and recruit new hams.

Many radio clubs have pondered these questions over the years. During my quarter-century of active ARRL-affiliated club participation (including years as an officer, director, newsletter editor and net manager), the answers have become increasingly clear. Here is my list of eight tips for a healthier radio club.

Have Fun!

Most of us enjoy Amateur Radio because it's fun. We use it to escape from work and stress, and as long as it fills that need, we return to it again and again. So the first sign of great radio club is that it is a fun place for hams to go. If it is fun, they will come, but if club meetings are long, boring and serious, seldom creating a chuckle among the members, the future is dark. If, however, the business meetings are kept short and to

the point with plenty of light-hearted and fun things on the program, and there is a warm welcome waiting, members (and visitors) will enjoy coming -- and they will return. While clubs must conduct some business during meetings, most of the lengthy planning and detail work can be done by its board and officers.

Give 'Em What They Want

Good clubs have good programs. The most popular programs will meet the needs and interests of the members, so it pays to stay in touch with them. How? By listening. Survey them, talk with them and solicit feedback. Ask members to list their favorite program topics and invite ideas for guest speakers and activities. Ask what they do not want. Have them evaluate and rate programs and speakers. Check other clubs in the area for the names of good speakers. Find out who in your own club has a skill, talent or specialized knowledge that would make a good program.

Publish a Good Newsletter

The old saying, "Verbal orders don't go; write it," applies to club meetings. Shortly after forming the Fairfield Amateur Radio Club in Connecticut, members found that a written reminder was necessary to assure maximum attendance. A radio club newsletter fills this need. It also allows a club to promote its next meeting program while reporting a variety of important club news such as plans for Field Day, fox hunts, committee meetings, nets, social events, hamfests and emergency drills. The club newsletter is also an informal history of the organization, and can include the minutes of meetings, as well as recognition of the volunteers who stepped up and made things happen.

The newsletter is often the only tangible thing a member receives for their dues, so the club should strive to make it the best quality possible. Finding a good editor who will accept the major responsibility for writing and producing it on time is a top priority, and can be difficult. Good editors make good newsletters, and good newsletters are found in good radio clubs. Even novice editors will find a wealth of help in popular software and reference books, so putting a newsletter together are fairly simple.

Tap the Talent

Radio clubs are cooperatives. Since they lack employees or paid staff, everything must be done by the members. These volunteers are the brains and brawn behind every club activity and are extremely important. The ability of a club to tackle a wide variety of programs and projects depends

upon having enough volunteers. If there is one sad theme heard again and again in most clubs, it is this: "We don't have enough volunteers. The same few people do all the work. Those who don't pitch in should be pitched out."

Radio clubs must tap their talent pool. A skills inventory is helpful in identifying those with special talent or training such as electronic engineers, lawyers, writers, mechanics and so on. New member applications can ask for such information, and a periodic update of skills is helpful.

Getting enough volunteers is not just a matter of shaming members into it. Many members will step forward when a need is announced, but others need to be asked. The club's volunteer corps will remain strong if it does a good job of recognizing them and making them stars of the organization. After all, no paycheck is given for their labors, but a classy thing to do is to hand out a sincere public "thank you" during a club meeting, followed by a written acknowledgment in the newsletter. This simple application of human motivation can work wonders. The flip side is that if a club takes its volunteers for granted and ignores recognition, this precious talent pool may soon dry up.

A club can do a first-rate job of recognizing its volunteers by presenting awards and certificates at a special meeting or annual social function. The Cleveland Chapter of QCWA devotes one meeting a year to presenting awards and honoring those who serve. Another nice touch is to issue a news release to the local media listing those members who are being honored. How a club treats its volunteers influences the rest of members, and from those ranks can come even more honorees in the future.

Stay Active

Good clubs offer members a variety of activities. The club meeting is no substitute for fun things like Field Day, fox hunts, emergency drills, social nights, antenna parties and picnics. Active clubs give their members many opportunities to participate in interesting things.

Operating events, for example, allow many members to participate. Field Day is a classic opportunity for fun and public service at the same time, and special event stations can create enjoyable fellowship while promoting Amateur Radio. The Lake County (Ohio) Amateur Radio Club helped celebrate the county's anniversary by sponsoring a special event station that was open to the public, helping to promote Amateur Radio while providing its members with a fun time.

Staying active is a good growth tonic. If the main action in your club is drinking coffee, its future is doomed.

Use your Radio Communications

Having a club whose members possess personal radio communication capabilities is a great asset. Having an informal club net can promote fellowship among members while allowing discussion of club activities between regular meetings. Special features can be included, such as ARRL bulletins, a DX bulletin board, swap and shop, group trouble-shooting of technical problems or details on new equipment.

Promote Fellowship

Radio clubs do a wonderful service by helping individual hams meet others and promote mutual help. The tradition of Elmers helping newcomers is often the first opportunity that hams have to demonstrate fellowship.

Together, radio club members can do much more than any individual is able to do. Erecting antennas, helping with license exams, troubleshooting, enjoying social events, sponsoring hamfests, providing emergency communications and many more activities are why radio clubs remain popular.

Social events can include such things as an annual awards dinner, like Houston's Northwest Amateur Radio Association does, or informal gatherings such as the Indian Hills Radio Club of Wickliffe, Ohio, that holds a weekly informal "lunch bunch" gathering on Fridays at a local restaurant.

Above all, healthy radio clubs are warm, inviting groups that make visitors and newcomers feel welcome. A greeting, handshake, a round of introductions and getting people involved as quickly as possible are sure signs of a club whose future is bright.

Recruit New Members

Clubs must recruit new members to insure their survival. Members leave for various reasons, and without a plan to replace them, clubs will stagnate. Promotion is important. Keeping the club name before the public and other hams should be a continuing effort. Use news releases regularly to announce club meetings, Field Day, emergency drills, new officers and social events. Invite newly licensed hams to your club meetings. Have a membership drive to encourage your current members to recruit new ones. Mail your newsletter to area hams with a special invitation to a future meeting, and put it on the Internet or send it via e-mail. Encourage members to bring guests. Opportunities to promote membership are limited only by a club's imagination and resources.

In summary, there are numerous factors that determine the success and longevity of radio clubs. So use these tips for an examination of your club's health, and here's hoping it is in good shape.

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Radio Club Program Ideas

- **Have a guest speaker. Topics can include ARES, Skywarn, antennas, radio history etc.**
- **Show a video.**
- **Show a Power Point.**
- **Have an auction. Club members can bring items, with a portion of proceeds going to the club.**
- **Go on a field trip. Visit local radio or TV stations, electronics firms or police communications center.**
- **Radio trivia game. Ask questions relating to radio, with prizes for most correct answers.**
- **Show and Tell. Members bring items and describe them.**
- **Homebrew night. Members bring a radio construction project and describe it.**
- **QSL night. Cards are shown and stories told relating to the contacts.**
- **Technology updates. Details of new modes (digital, APRS) and circuits.**
- **Equipment reviews. Owners of new ham equipment describe and evaluate it.**