

Sharing the Universe Video Series



“Growing Your Astronomy Club” is a series of three videos that offer ideas and advice gathered from research with amateur astronomy clubs across the United States. The solutions outlined here have been successfully implemented at astronomy clubs to address a variety of issues related to attracting and welcoming visitors, retaining members, and involving members as volunteers.

Watch the videos with your Board and club members. Then review these Tips to start transforming *your* club.

Tips for Part #2: Keep ‘em Coming Back



Sharing the Universe videos are produced by the Astronomical Society of the Pacific (ASP) from research conducted by the Institute for Learning Innovation, the ASP, and from astronomy clubs like yours. www.astrosociety.org

All *Sharing the Universe* Videos can be found at:
<http://www.astrosociety.org/SharingTheUniverse>



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Part #2: Keep 'em Coming Back

The top reasons why amateur astronomers join astronomy clubs:

- To belong to a community with shared interests and activities.
- To learn about astronomy.
- To learn to use a telescope and other equipment.

But research with astronomy clubs has shown that too often:

- New members are left on their own to find out what the club offers and any rules or procedures that need to be followed, such as controlling their headlights or interior car lighting at dark sky events, or using red flashlights
- A member asking for help is further confused by jargon or put off by a “you should know that” attitude.
- Monthly club meetings involve too much club business that most members find tedious.
- Presentations at meetings are at too high a level, such that most of the club members are lost.

When these occur too often, a member may decide that the club is not responsive enough to the needs of its members and he or she ends up not returning.

For your club to be a healthy, vibrant organization that gives your members years of enjoyment and learning, it has to meet the needs and interests of *all* your members.

Effective practices clubs use to better meet the needs of their members:

1. Create the position of *New Member Steward*.
2. Conduct meetings that members *want* to attend.
3. Provide a supportive learning environment for your members.

- ✓ Tips on Diversifying your Club
- ✓ How the Night Sky Network can help
- ✓ Action Plan



1. Create the position of *New Member Steward*

The New Member Steward helps new members know what to expect. You may give this person any title you like, such as Mentor, Guide, or Coach.



TIP: Procedures that might seem obvious to long-time members are not necessarily obvious to new members. Examples:

- What is your standard meeting agenda?
- What is the procedure for opening and closing your meeting room or using your observing site?
- How do members arrange for an observing session with other club members?
- Who does a member contact to make suggestions for meeting programs or other activities?
- How does the member get club discounts on magazine subscriptions?
- Is the member expected to help out in some way at events?

The New Member Steward is available to orient new members and answer their questions.

The Steward:

- Sends new members a welcome note, including where to get the information the new member might need.
- Orients them regarding club customs and culture, like converting to red lighting inside their car, any procedures regarding use of the club's observing site or meeting location, and any club projects the new member should be aware of.
- Keeps them informed of club events and invites them to join in throughout the first year.
- Makes sure they know about the various opportunities your club offers, including outreach and volunteer training.
- Tries not to overwhelm them with too much information.



Members feel more a part of the club if they are given an item that identifies them as a member.

Some items that clubs provide:

- A name badge that includes the member's name and the club name
- A hat with a club logo
- A membership card
- Many clubs offer club logo items for purchase, like mugs, flashlights, vests, jackets, or shirts



"We provide simple engraved plastic name badges for all our members. It sure helps the newbies ... well, it also helps those of us who can't remember everyone's name. A local awards and trophy shop makes them."

2. Conduct meetings that members *want* to attend

What does your monthly club meeting agenda look like?



TIP: More focus on astronomy, less focus on business & announcements



Meeting Agenda Time Allocation

How much of your monthly club meeting is spent on business and how much on astronomy? Is the invited speaker's start time frequently delayed because of an extended discussion of some aspect of club business?

At your monthly club meeting, do you try to conduct a business meeting complete with readings of minutes, reports from the treasurer and other committees, and discussion of numerous items? You might want to ask how many of your members are REALLY interested in that. You might discover that most of the members only tolerate the business portion and become annoyed when it extends beyond a few minutes and interferes with other astronomy-related items on the meeting program agenda.

Making all the members who attend your monthly meeting listen to minutiae like the wording for a flyer, detailed plans for a school astronomy event, or reports on membership dues can be excruciatingly boring for much of the membership.

As a practice, many clubs have found that having business meetings separate from general monthly meeting is more appreciated by the members as well as a more effective and efficient method of making decisions.

So how do clubs separate business from the monthly meeting?

Here are different ways clubs handle it:

1. If your club feels it must have business meetings that are for the general membership, consider not having them *every* month – only conduct them when your Board needs input from the members. And only include the one or two issues the Board needs feedback on. Clubs find this doesn't take more than 15 minutes.
2. Plan a more formal business meeting just once a year to handle elections, annual treasurer's report, awards ceremony, and any significant issues that need member input. Many clubs do this at the December members meeting. The rest of the year, business meetings are held separately from the monthly membership meetings and all members are invited to attend.
3. If you hold Board meetings, invite your members to participate. Discuss all business at the Board meeting. Most clubs find that other members only infrequently choose to attend. So

all members stay informed of decisions, post the minutes of the meeting on your website or attach them in a document to the Board meeting event on Night Sky Network.

4. Schedule the business meeting before or after your general meeting. You might find that not many members will attend and that your membership has confidence in the Board to make the necessary decisions.



TIP: Limit announcements at club meetings

How much time is spent giving announcements at club meetings? Successful clubs have found that limiting announcements to take up no more than five minutes of the meeting is a welcome change. Consider placing announcements in email notices, your newsletter, and/or on your website, where all members can see them, not just those who attended the meeting.



"I was so relieved when we set a time limit of one minute for anyone who wanted to make an announcement. We even have a timekeeper who uses a clicker to signal when they have to sit down."

MORE TIPS for holding club meetings that your members will look forward to attending

1. Take a look at *your* club meetings: What is the balance between business, announcements, and astronomy? Is the amount of time spent on each appreciated by your membership? Or is too much time spent on business and announcements and not enough on astronomy?
2. How are your meetings structured? Do you have meeting programs that include a lot of variety? See "**Ideas to Enhance Club Meetings**" for suggestions.
3. When you first invite a speaker to do a presentation to your club, ask the speaker to aim the level of the presentation to that of the "interested public." Too many technical talks might confuse many of your members. The talks should be accessible to most of your membership.
4. If your speaker is getting too technical, have a member whose job it is to interrupt the speaker and ask, "*Some of our members may be unfamiliar with the term <repeat the unfamiliar term or concept>, could you take a minute to explain what that is?*"
5. **Begin and end your meetings on time.**



Ideas to Enhance Club Meetings

These ideas come from astronomy clubs around the country:

1. Schedule an **annual dinner** with videos and socializing. Show **classic science fiction** movies.
2. Have a meeting where several members **set up “stations”** around your meeting room to share some aspect of astronomy or equipment in which they have an interest.
3. Consider having a **Kids Corner**. Some clubs have found that more members attend meetings if they can bring their children too. The Night Sky Network ToolKits* have a variety of activities to keep 6 – 12 year-olds interested. Astronomy-related movies, videos, NASA lithos, and astronomy applications for mobile phones and other electronic devices can also provide interest. *(Photo: Kids making Pocket Solar Systems. Credit: Alyssa Henderson, Kansas Astronomical Observers)*
4. Hold a **telescope workshop** once a year to tune up telescopes and (for those who may have received a scope over the holidays) introduce new telescope owners to their instruments.
5. Invite **local high school science fair winners** to come in and talk about their projects.
6. Hold a **swap meet** and invite other local clubs.
7. **Invite post-docs as speakers** – many colleges and universities offer a speaker's bureau for new post-docs to get used to talking to the public. These are usually younger people (under 35) and include quite a few women. (Post-docs: graduates who have recently earned their PhDs.)
8. Don't forget **your own members** often have a wealth of experiences and interests to share: historical perspectives, vacation trips that involve astronomy, research or projects they've done, skills they can share. So do members from other clubs.
9. Speakers can come from **your local college or university**, science center or museum, planetarium, even engineering and research firms.
10. Give a ticket to each person attending the meeting and have a **door prize drawing** at the end for a poster, book, red flashlight, or other such item.
11. Check the club calendars and newsletters of **nearby astronomy clubs** for speakers they have used. Contact the person who arranges the meeting program from another club to exchange ideas.
12. Hold an **annual awards** meeting to recognize all members who have contributed to the club.
13. Sell **raffle tickets** and have a drawing for special prizes, if allowed in your area.
14. Introduce one of your **Night Sky Network ToolKits*** by showing the Training Video and trying out a couple activities. You can download **astronomy activities and a variety of PowerPoints** with scripts: <http://nightsky.jpl.nasa.gov/download-search.cfm>
15. Use the PowerPoints with speaker recordings from **Night Sky Network Tele-Conferences**. These bring NASA scientists and others in as your meeting speaker – no stipend needed! See the list and download them here: <http://nightsky.jpl.nasa.gov/club/download-list.cfm?SearchString=tele-conference>
16. Show **Sharing the Universe videos** to discuss issues concerning doing outreach with the public or on ideas for growing your club: <http://www.astrosociety.org/SharingTheUniverse>



* Night Sky Network ToolKits: If your club is a member of the NASA Night Sky Network (NSN), contact your club's NSN Club Coordinators for more information. <http://NightSkyNetwork.org>

3. Provide a Supportive Environment for Learning

Is the club environment a safe place to ask the most elementary of questions? For less experienced members, it is essential that no question is treated as a “stupid question.” Respond to each question with a respectful answer. We all were beginners at one time. All of us went through a learning process – often with other members to help us. Become a welcoming, respectful mentor.



“In our club, things run well and we sometimes forgot that a lot of our members – maybe a third of the club – don’t know much about astronomy and unless they’d come to us and say, ‘Hey, we’d like to learn about astronomy,’ we’d forget. So we wanted to organize something for them.”

Consider starting Special Interest Groups (SIG) for members who would like to learn more about astronomy (or sharing astronomy with the public), the night sky, and/or operating a telescope – at the introductory level. Here are some ideas other clubs have used:

- Members can use the Night Sky Network Toolkits & Videos, Sharing the Universe Videos, and other Night Sky Network resources as the basis for each astronomy-learning SIG meeting. Your Outreach Coordinator or other experienced member might be interested in leading such a group in order to encourage more participation in your outreach events.
- Request two or three experienced members to help the new telescope owners learn about their telescopes.
- To avoid adding an extra trip in order to attend, consider holding SIG meetings just before (or after) the general meeting and/or at your observing nights.



Tips on Diversifying your Club

Many clubs are concerned by a shortage of younger adults and women among their membership. Clubs indicate that they would like to increase diversity in their club and reduce what many refer to as the “white-hair syndrome.”

Here are some things to be aware of:

Younger Adults (18-35):

- a) May be less confident and easily intimidated. Don’t try to impress them with your knowledge or array of equipment – instead get them talking about themselves and what interests them.
- b) Are more likely to depend on electronics and online sources for information and communication. Make sure your club has online resources for your calendar, paying dues, and communicating with other members.
- c) May have a reduced sense of privacy due to the culture of social media. They may be more candid than older members are accustomed to.
- d) Might be using electronic devices during meetings and events to share their experiences with friends.
- e) Could be potentially intimidated by a lack of other members their own age. Be sure to let them know they are welcome and ask them to invite their friends next time. Avoid being condescending or parental.

Women:

- a) Might be intimidated by a lack of other female members. Introduce them to other women in the club.
- b) Are likely to require a restroom at dark-sky observing sites – more likely than men might. Be sure facilities are available.
- c) Feel a sense of safety with the club – she can attend star parties and observe at remote sites with a group of people instead of by herself. As one woman said, *“It was kind of fun to tell my friends: I partied all night in the dark with a bunch of guys.”*
- d) When appropriate, be sure to welcome families to your events: Tell your members “Bring the whole family” to public astronomy events where other families might attend.



How the Night Sky Network can help



The NASA Night Sky Network provides a variety of resources specifically designed to meet the needs of astronomy clubs:

- **Recorded teleconferences with scientists** to use as “speakers” at your club meetings. Comes with a PowerPoint, a recorded talk, and a written transcript. Find them here (you will need to be a member of Night Sky Network and log in first): <http://nightsky.jpl.nasa.gov/club/download-list.cfm?SearchString=tele-conf>
- **Outreach Training Videos:** www.astrosociety.org/SharingTheUniverse
- **Online Astronomy Activities** that illustrate concepts in astronomy clearly – and include videos: <http://nightsky.jpl.nasa.gov/club/download-search.cfm> (for Night Sky Network members) or <http://nightsky.jpl.nasa.gov/download-search.cfm> (publicly accessible).
- **Outreach ToolKits:** Contact your club’s Night Sky Network Club Coordinator
- **For more on what the Night Sky Network offers,** watch these short videos: <http://nightsky.jpl.nasa.gov/about.cfm>

For assistance with setting up your astronomy club on the Night Sky Network, contact: nightskyinfo@astrosociety.org

Action Plan: Keep 'em Coming Back

Make your own plan for implementing practices to meet the interests and needs of club members.

Already Do ✓	Implement by mm/dd/yy	SUGGESTED PRACTICE
		Start and end club meetings on time
		Monthly meeting agenda focuses more on astronomy, less on announcements and business discussions
		Detailed business meetings are held separately from the monthly members meeting
		Ask invited speakers to talk at the level of the “interested public”
		Assign a member who asks invited speakers to explain technical terms
		Vary the monthly meeting programs – try something new
		Provide club members with a badge, hat, or other item that identifies them as a member of the club
		Create position of New Member Steward
		Members are aware of the importance of treating every question (and every member) with respect
		Organize Special Interest Groups for (make your own list): _____ _____
		Use Night Sky Network resources for:
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recorded teleconferences with scientists to use as “speakers” at your club meetings. You will need to be a member of Night Sky Network and log in first: http://nightsky.jpl.nasa.gov/club/download-list.cfm?SearchString=tele-conf
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outreach Training Videos to give members tips on sharing astronomy with the public: www.astrosociety.org/SharingTheUniverse
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online Astronomy Activities: http://nightsky.jpl.nasa.gov/download-search.cfm
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outreach ToolKits: Contact your club’s Night Sky Network Club Coordinator