

Recruiting and Retention Basics for the SCA

The SCA is an international organization dedicated to researching and re-creating the arts and skills of pre-17th-century Europe. As a 501(c)(3) non profit organization, one of the goals of the SCA is to educate the public about the arts and skills of medieval life.

The importance of recruitment and retention

In providing educational demos to the public we also create an opportunity to meet members of the community who are or may be interested in the skills and arts encompassed by the SCA. Utilizing these opportunities to recruit potential members is key to continuing as a robust and diverse organization.

Once a new member is recruited, the SCA and its members must provide a welcoming community and fulfilling experience if we hope to retain new members. Newcomers help to reinvigorate our Society by providing new insights and enthusiasm which in turn helps to keep the SCA interesting and fulfilling for long time members. Without newcomers, we are destined to pass the same offices around to the same groups of people and continue to tap the resources of our existing membership until they no longer find service, crafts, martial arts or the SCA to be a fulfilling hobby.

Some considerations for effective recruiting:

Demos give us the opportunity to display crafts, martial arts and other aspects of medieval life to the public. Usually, demos are requested by groups which are already interested in or focused on arts and skills which we practice and thus are 'target-rich' environments for us to find potential SCA members.

- **Know your audience:**
Consider the potential audience for each demonstration and work to tailor the demonstration to be attractive and useful to the audience.
- **Staff the demo with care:**
The SCA can appeal to a wide range of people and interests but each demo should be considered individually when considering which volunteers would be best to staff a demo. Like attracts like and people often seek out those who seem to have similar interests, knowing that they will be interesting in conversations or even a potential new friend.
 - A demo for a younger or school aged group is well served by volunteer staff more used to working with children. Teachers and those who regularly work with young people will be more effective in dealing with a school aged demo and will have an easier time answering questions because they are more likely to know what to expect.

- A demo for an older or senior group will be more effective when utilizing older SCA members who may share a connection of age or interest with the audience. Crafts and martial arts that would appeal to the audience can be selected to make both our educational value and recruiting opportunity more effective.
- Not everyone is right for every demo and that is ok. Find creative ways to use volunteers who might not be appropriate for the target demo audience. Those who might not be best to talk to a group may be willing to help set-up or tear down your demo or prep items you can use at the demo.
- **Be appropriate for the audience:**

School age demos aren't the right place for a demo that includes brewing or scantily clad belly dancing. Demos for seniors that focus entirely on high energy heavy weapons fighting are interesting to look at but probably won't get us any new recruits.

 - Consider what is appropriate for each demo audience and then consider what might be appealing to the audience. Work to tailor the demo to your audience so it will be educational, age appropriate and inviting.
 - Ask your volunteer staff to avoid inappropriate topics of conversation at demos. Religion and politics are hot-button topics so stick to medieval topics that are not easy to upset guests. Sex, drinking and general debauchery are never acceptable topics for discussion at a demo or with a newcomer. Even conversations between volunteer demo staff can be overheard by visitors, so be considerate of what you say and where you say it.
- **Have an attractive demo:**

An attractive, clean and organized space is more approachable for a visitor. Even a single-table demo can achieve this by using appropriate table coverings, attractive displays and well dressed volunteers. If providing a large multi-tent demonstration, work to cover up mundane items like coolers and portable tables. Ask volunteers to dress appropriately for their craft or in their court garb to provide a range of looks that are all still appropriate to the audience. Create a space you would be proud to hang-out in at an SCA event and visitors will be dazzled.
- **Be approachable:**

Greet visitors to your demo warmly and give them the reception you would want when approaching a new group that you think might be interesting. Talking to your friends and fellow SCAdians during the demo is, of course, allowed and even encouraged. However, make sure to stop and give interested visitors an opportunity to talk to demo volunteers.

 - Some basics of customer service can go a long way toward making a visitor feel welcome and comfortable to express their interests or ask their questions. Be friendly, polite and positive while you let your passion for the SCA shine.
 - Greet visitors.
 - Introduce yourself and your craft or display.
 - Ask visitors if they have any questions.
 - Answer visitor questions.
 - Suggest other crafts or displays at the demo which might also be of interest.
 - Invite visitors to sign the guestbook to get more information.

- Thank visitors for their time and invite them to come back later.
 - Speak plainly and take care not to use SCA-lingo that visitors won't understand. Visitors looking at a fighting demo don't need to know our whole award structure or have an in-depth knowledge of every craft up front. Give them time to become interested. They can always learn more later.
 - Be careful not to be pushy. If a visitor seems like they are no longer interested or uncomfortable, provide them an out to end the conversation. Be polite, smile and let a visitor walk away when they are done, even if you feel you have more to say.
- **Have a guestbook:**

A guestbook gives people an easy way to indicate their interest no matter how shy they may be. In the guestbook ask for information that will help you in approaching them later.

 - Ask for the visitor's name, contact information, city of residence, zip code, possible medieval interests and if they worked with any SCA volunteer in particular who really helped them.
- **Follow up with contact leads:**

Visitors who leave contact information are interested in some aspect of the SCA. Contact every visitor who leaves their contact information and when doing so consider what interests they listed in their guestbook entry.

 - If a visitor indicates that they live within the boundaries of another group, contact them to let them know they are welcome at your local events, meetings and classes but also let them know about opportunities that may be closer to them. Copy the Hospitaller of their local group when you send the email and make sure to explain why you are copying someone else and then introduce their local contact in your email.
- **Be welcoming:**

When interested visitors come to a demo, a meeting, a class, a local event or a revel, make sure to welcome them. Introduce yourself to new people and allow them to introduce themselves. Ask what their interests are and help to connect them with the people that might be helpful for them to learn more.
- **Thank your volunteers:**

Taking the time to personally thank your volunteers goes a long way toward finding willing volunteers for future demos. A verbal thank you, a brief note card or small token are a small price to pay for the donation of time and skill your SCA volunteers are providing for a demo. Happy and appreciated volunteers make for upbeat demos that are welcoming to visitors. If you are coordinating a demo and notice some of your volunteers making a great effort and being especially effective with visitors, make sure to thank them and provide public praise.

Some considerations for retaining new visitors and recruits:

Newcomers are often enthusiastic and excited about the SCA but meeting new people, developing a persona, learning history, developing a kit and finding places to fit in or excel can seem daunting. By providing good information, basic assistance, being welcoming and creating

opportunities to fit in and meet new people, we make the SCA a more inviting place for new members.

- **Provide opportunities for meetups:**

Publicize your upcoming events, meetings, classes and revels and send invitations to people who are new. Make sure your local website and calendar are up to date with information and provide addresses and/or directions to upcoming venues.

- **Be welcoming:**

When interested visitors come to a meeting, a class, a local event or a revel, make sure to welcome them. Introduce yourself to new people and allow them to introduce themselves. Ask what their interests are and help to connect them with the people that might be helpful for them to learn more.

- **Provide knowledge:**

New members of any group want to make a good impression and are afraid of making a mistake that might be embarrassing or make them look unknowledgeable. Present newcomer classes at events and hand out newcomer information packets to your new members. Provide your new members with knowledge about our group and customs and opportunities to learn more. Web resources and members of your local group may be of assistance so consider all the options for providing information.

- **Reassure and introduce:**

Make sure to let newcomers know that they aren't expected to dress perfectly or know everything about SCA culture. Introduce newcomers to people you know so they will have more friendly faces in the crowd at events, revels, meetings and classes.

- **Provide loaner clothing and equipment:**

The SCA can be a big investment for someone getting started and can put off potential members who are daunted by investing in a hobby on which they haven't made up their mind. Work with your local group to provide loaner garb or supplies for newcomers to use. Gold Key items give newcomers an opportunity to 'try before they buy'.

- Try to make your Gold Key clothing items attractive. Provide loaner items that are freshly cleaned, free from stains and tears, and that are at least a little attractive to wear. No one likes to be seen in ugly clothing and a poor looking outfit can make a newcomer feel out of place and uncomfortable. Help to make new members comfortable with their environment and appearance.

- **Assist with kit development:**

New members will need lots of things. Garb, feast gear, supplies for crafts, armour and more are easier to create and less daunting to develop with help. Find out what new members need and help to pair them up with people who might be able to help them, resources for more information, instructions or even vendors who provide things they want or need.

- Consider the budget of your newcomer. College students or anyone on a restricted income simply won't have the money to buy expensive fabrics and perfect replicas. Work with others to find creative solutions to assist with making a decent looking kit that won't break the bank. Suggest places to find inexpensive fabrics or kit. Yard sales, thrift stores and people who have a garage full of

SCA 'stuff' they have not used in years can all be useful in helping newcomers develop their kit.

- **Provide volunteer opportunities:**

Most new people will be excited and will want to help. Work with local officers and event staff to find out what jobs need to be done and then determine if these are jobs in which new members can participate.

- Ask new members for their interests and try to pair them up with the right volunteer service.
- Provide proper instructions for volunteer work and don't just have newcomers do the dishes after feast or sweep a hall. You can ask them to help set up or decorate a pavilion or hall or to join you in tasks like working gate and reservations. Teach newcomers your job and next time you need a volunteer you are more likely to have a willing and already trained person to help you.

- **Appreciate their efforts:**

New members can be enthusiastic when they take on an office, fill an event staff position or help with a project. Make sure to recognize their efforts and thank them for their help. Public praise, a note of thanks or a quiet word of approval can go a long way toward making a newcomer feel welcome and appreciated.

- **Correct missteps gently:**

Every newcomer is bound to bungle a title, wear a belt of the wrong color, head to the field wearing sunglasses, misunderstand a rule or instruction or do something else that might be considered 'off' in SCA culture. Remember that they are new and probably do not know that there is a problem.

- Ask them quietly if you can speak to them off to the side and let them know politely and gently what the issue might be. If online, send them a direct message rather than replying to an entire email list or online forum. Offer to help newcomers find a way to correct an issue or provide them with information they may not have. Let these newcomers know that everyone was once new and made these same missteps.
- No one likes to be corrected in public. Aggressive reprimands simply don't work in a group made up entirely of volunteers. Help watch out for newcomers rather than scaring or embarrassing them away.

- **Check in:**

Every so often, check in with newcomers you have met. Ask them how things are going, if they have found new interests, and if they have questions or need help.

Learn more

Check out this excellent five part series on recruiting and membership retention for the SCA by Sir Kyppyn Kirkcaldy

- Part 1: <http://youtu.be/64UzvDZB9DM>
- Part 2: <http://youtu.be/QgkixKEJObI>
- Part 3: <http://youtu.be/qyrCQ4ZllrA>
- Part 4: <http://youtu.be/UdKcGqyNwXk>

- Part 5: <http://youtu.be/gS5KdH1bKAk>