

◆ Section III ◆

Orientation of New Members

Membership and Lapsation are problems for nearly every Lodge in the Order. Officers and Members at every level of Elkdom have spent countless hours seeking cures. What may be needed most, though, is a healthy dose of prevention.

We need to do a better job of informing new Members about our aims, purposes and objectives. We need to show them “*What It Means To Be An Elk*” and do it early, while the appeal that first attracted them to our Order is still fresh. That’s what the Orientation Program is all about.

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A good Orientation Program:

- Exposes candidates to the camaraderie found at an Elks Lodge;
- Opens avenues to participation in Lodge activities; and
- Make them proud to become part of an organization with such an outstanding record of service to others.

The goal is to connect with each candidate on at least one of these points. The Member who develops friendships with other Elks will remain an Elk. The Member who uses the Lodge for helping others will remain an Elk. The Member who understands that his or her annual dues help support worthwhile charitable activities, even if not actively participating in these activities or taking advantage of Lodge facilities, will remain an Elk.

The candidate with whom we don’t connect, however, will undoubtedly wind up on the Lapsation rolls, which is why having a formal and consistent Orientation Program is so important.

Pre-initiation Meeting

A week before initiation, the Orientation Committee (*which is appointed by the ER at the first regular meeting after installation*) should invite all candidates to a dinner meeting at the Lodge. This evening should be exclusively for the candidates, not on a regular Lodge meeting night or in conjunction with another Lodge activity.

The invitation itself will make an impression. If you do it by letter, make sure you address the candidate by name and not as “Dear Candidate.” (*Using a simple mail-merge in a word-processing application, you can plug*

personalized information into a form letter.) Personal invitations will tell your candidates that in your Lodge, they’re going to be more than just numbers.

Whether by card or letter, the invitation should include the time, location and purpose of the meeting, as well as a self-addressed stamped postcard for the candidate’s reply. Also, consider inviting the candidate’s spouse to attend. The spouse is a potential member, and his or her support will likely be necessary if the candidate is to become and remain an active Elk. Finally, invite the candidate’s proposer and ask him or her to encourage the candidate to attend.

So, for the dinner and meeting, you should invite your candidates and their spouses, the candidates’ proposers, the Orientation Committee, and the Lodge Officers.

During the meeting, thoroughly orient the candidates to the charitable and philanthropic works of the Order, and make them feel welcome and have fun.

Be sure to seat the proposers with their candidates. They are the bridge between the candidates and the assembled Lodge Members. Also, try to seat a Lodge Officer or Orientation Committee Member at each table during dinner, and at the very least, have an Officer or Committee Member visit each table. Treat dinner as if it were your only chance to expose the candidate to that Lodge camaraderie we like to boast of. Let the Officers and Committee Members, and any other Members present, know that they must bend over backwards to welcome the candidates.

The meeting should begin after dinner and be conducted by the Chairperson of the Orientation Committee or a qualified Member designated by the Chairperson.

The Chairperson should introduce him or herself, the Orientation Committee Members, and then the Officers. Have the candidates to introduce themselves. Ask a few questions to get them going: Are you married? Do you have kids? Where do you live? What do you do for a living? Do you have any hobbies? Who is your proposer?

If time permits, ask the rest of the assembled Members to stand and give their names. (*Use your best judgment here. If 100 people attend the meeting, you may want to ask them to introduce themselves to the candidates after the program.*)

Once everyone is better acquainted, begin the video presentation.

Video Presentation: In 2000, the Grand Lodge

professionally produced an 6-minute 33-second video featuring the Hoop Shoot®, Drug Awareness, Veterans Service, State Major Projects, *The Elks Magazine*, Elks National Home, Elks National Foundation and other programs. The video, which is updated periodically, is intended to replace the old slide show presentation. Under Code 533200, it can be purchased from Grand Lodge for \$20.

Some Lodges have taken the video presentation a step further by producing videos of their community works. This is an excellent idea. Examples of the Lodge at work can only enhance the overview given in the Grand Lodge video.

Producing your own video or slide presentation isn't difficult. You should be able to find a Member or two who are comfortable behind a camera. Instruction on producing videos is available at local cable-access stations, as are the tools necessary to edit footage.

Speakers: Follow the video with short talks on the State Association, the organization of the local Lodge, the camaraderie and fellowship of an Elks Lodge, and any topics unique to your Lodge. Line up a speaker for each topic, and give them time to prepare an informative presentation, preferably no more than five minutes.

State Association: Explain the aims of the association, as well as its structure (officers, major committees, etc.); its history; the Major Project, including fundraising; and various activities, such as ritualistic contests, Veterans Service, Americanism, scholarships, service pins, bowling, golf, etc.

Local Lodge: Present an organizational chart of the local Lodge, including names of the Officers, their stations and duties, and explain the function of the various Committees. Also, inform candidates about:

- Available facilities, including building and club hours, meals served, golf, swimming, etc.;
- Social activities for Members as well as privileges extended to spouses and families;
- Charitable work of the Lodge and the means of raising the funds for it;
- Programs of the Lodge in progress and planned for the future;
- Mandatory services of the Order and their obligation to attend, and;
- Special local rules of the Lodge and club.

Fellowship: Emphasize that the Elks is a charitable and patriotic Order founded on good fellowship. Explain that the Lodge is for meeting old friends and making new ones, and that new members will benefit most from frequent attendance at social and charitable functions.

But again, we can talk about the camaraderie found at Elks Lodges, but it's far more important that this

fellowship be on display throughout the evening. The candidates will come away asking themselves: Did I have fun? Did I feel welcome? Did I meet new people? If the answer is "NO" to any of these, they'll throw whatever you told them about Lodge fellowship right out the window.

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The hand that you extend on this night is the candidates' link to greater involvement in the Lodge. Once extended, it's up to the candidates to grab it. But if you pull it away before they do, they'll likely end up on your lapsation rolls. So tell the candidates how much they mean to the Lodge. Welcome their involvement. Invite them to participate in Lodge functions and programs. Explain that the return they'll get on their membership will be in direct proportion to what they put in. But above all, remember that how the Members assembled that night treat them will carry much more weight than what the speaker says.

About Initiation Night: Close the meeting by reminding the candidates of the date of the initiation and asking them to be at the Lodge an hour before the meeting.

Explain that the initiation is entirely serious and that the candidates should dress fashionably. State the initiation fee and that if only partial payment has been made, the balance must be paid before initiation. Mention the annual dates of dues payment, and that since dues must always be paid in advance, that the proportionate amount of the half-year's dues must also be paid before initiation.

Tour the Facility: Adjourn the meeting with a tour the building. In the Lodge room, explain the stations and names and titles of the Officers who occupy them. In club, dining, game and other rooms, explain the rules for their use.

Pay close attention to time throughout the evening. Your chances of connecting with the candidates will be much better if you keep the program short and lively. We're not cramming for a final exam. We want to show them a good time, give them a good overview of the principles and objectives of the Order, and open avenues to greater involvement in the Lodge. The entire evening, from the dinner's first course to the end of the tour, should take no longer than two hours and 30 minutes.

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Preparing information packets for the candidates to take home may be helpful. Include background information

about the Lodge and Elks. You can obtain a copy of “What It Means to Be an Elk” from Grand Lodge. The “About the Order” section of the official home page of the BPO Elks, <http://www.elks.org/about>, is an excellent source of handouts. *(The home page also is a great place to send candidates with Internet access who wish to learn more about our organization.)* The candidates are more likely to retain information that they can read at their leisure than if you overwhelm them during the orientation. You’re also giving them material that they can easily share with their friends.

Finally, each of the orientation’s functions is compatible with the Stray Elk Program, so consider inviting selected Stray Elks to enjoy the evening as Lodge guests.

Initiation Night

Have the candidates report to the Secretary’s office about one hour before the meeting convenes so that there will be enough time to complete the “book work” on each candidate, collect the balance of the initiation fee and dues, and ensure that the Lodge has the candidate’s preferred mailing address on file.

The Orientation Chairperson should welcome the candidates and keep them together until the Lodge is ready to receive them for initiation. Discourage the candidates from drinking. In no case should the Lodge initiate a candidate who is intoxicated.

While waiting for initiation, the Chairperson should briefly explain once more the purposes and principles of the Order, review the qualifications for membership and explain how applications are processed (Interview, procedure of ballot, etc.). In addition, he or she should preview the initiation so that the candidates will know what to expect and therefore get the most out of the ritual; tell them how to respond to the questions they’ll be asked and that they should do so firmly and clearly; and reassure them that the ritual is entirely serious.

After the initiation, under Good of the Order, each New Member should be introduced by name, residence and occupation, and the Exalted Ruler should welcome the new Elks into the Lodge.

A well-prepared speaker, selected in advance by the Orientation Chairperson, should then talk briefly about an Elks program. Feature a different program at each initiation. The idea is to reinforce what the new Elks learned at Orientation as well as to remind all Members present of the good works we do.

After the talk, present each New Member with the Constitution and Laws of the Order, the By-Laws of the Subordinate Lodge, and the booklet “What It Means to Be an Elk.”

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Postinitiation

The end of the initiation ceremony is just the beginning for these new Members. The succeeding 10 to 12 weeks will be the key to retaining them. During this period, they’ll be evaluating the Lodge.

CAMARADERIE. Are they welcome there? Have they met new people and made friends? Are they having fun?

PARTICIPATION. Have they been invited to help out in Lodge charitable and philanthropic programs? Does the Lodge have social activities for both younger and older members? Does it have family activities?

PRIDE. Is the Lodge synonymous in the community with a major project? Are any of the Lodge’s charitable and philanthropic works recognized by the community? Is the community even aware that it has an Elks Lodge?

If the answer to any of these questions is “NO,” you might lose some or all of your new Members.

The solution to the question of pride is obvious: Start blowing your horn.

Use the Lodge bulletin to inform your members about your charitable programs and to invite their participation. *(Regarding the latter, always be positive. Don’t complain that the sky will fall if they don’t help. Instead, focus on the good work that you do and occasionally profile one of your volunteers. Volunteer workers, like flies, are more apt to respond to honey than vinegar).*

Send news releases to your local newspapers. The GL Public Relations Committee produces several excellent tools that can help get your publicity program off the ground. These include the Media Relations Handbook, Code 5107-1, available from the GL Shipping Department, and Seven Steps to Planning and Staging a Special Event and the ABC’s of Publicity, both free and available from the GL Public Relations Department.

Send news releases to *The Elks Magazine*. We’ve heard countless myths about the difficulty of getting material published in *The Elks Magazine*. The fact is the magazine will publish all Lodge news that meets their guidelines (available online at <http://www.elks.org/elksmag/fratguid.htm> or from the editorial department on request). Items must be timely (within four weeks of the event), no matter whether your Lodge has 100 members or 1,000, you raised \$100 or \$10,000, or you took one veteran to dinner or 40 to a ball game.

Questions of camaraderie and participation are a bit trickier. Offering a full slate of social activities appealing to all ages and being active in the community may not be enough. Inviting and encouraging new members to

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participate may not be enough either.

You probably know people who are completely at ease in a room full of strangers. They have no problem working the room, meeting people, making friends, exchanging small talk. Well, most of us aren't like that. Most of us don't like walking into unfamiliar territory without a guide. For the new Member, that guide has to be his or her proposer.

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The proposer must be responsible for nurturing the new member until he or she has been integrated into the Lodge. The proposer should offer to take the new member to a Lodge meeting or go with the new Member to social functions. The proposer also should volunteer with the new member to help out at a charitable function. Proposers must stay with new Members until they feel comfortable participating on their own, whether that takes three or six months or a year.

“Ask them to hold their New Member's hand from Orientation through integration.”

Consider making the Proposer-Member relationship a formal arrangement in your Lodge. Let your members know how much you appreciate their recruitment efforts, but tell them that just proposing people for membership is not enough. Ask them to hold their new Member's hand from Orientation through integration. You may even want to specify a time during which this arrangement is mandatory. If so, make it no less than three months and encourage proposers to continue holding their members' hands if integration has not occurred within that time.

Consider offering retention incentives. If you award the person who sponsors the most new members during the Lodge year, why not offer a second award to the proposer from the previous year who has the most members still in good standing.

Another possible solution is the “Red Badge Program.” The idea here is to give each new Member on the night of initiation a red plastic name tag, with all other members having badges of a color other than red. Instruct the new Members to wear their red badges to every meeting and Lodge function until they have attended the initiation of another new member. Encourage the older members to seek out the men and women wearing red badges, shake their hands and strike up a conversation. You may find that this program will not only increase participation and improve retention, but new Members will be reluctant to surrender their red badges when the time comes.

If we communicate our good works through the Lodge bulletin; if we toot our horns in the local newspapers, our bulletins and *The Elks Magazine*; if we ask proposers to serve as guides from orientation through integration; and if we ask members to look for the distinguishing mark of new members at all Lodge functions, then the decision whether to remain an Elk after those first 10 to 12 weeks will be a slam dunk.

Summary

Different Lodges demand different orientation programs, and each should be tailored to a Lodge's distinct characteristics. But the principles are the same: camaraderie, participation and pride. Keep these principles in your sites at all times, because if you can connect with the candidates on any of them, you'll never see their names on your lapsation lists.