

Frank Talk II

**How to Improve Membership Retention
and Energize Your Rotary® Club**

by

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and

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CHAPTER 1

Getting Reacquainted

“Frank! You haven’t changed a bit. How are you?”

It was one month and five days since Sue had called me at my office, and now, as I walked up to the maitre d’s station at Ristorante Enzo, it was her voice that greeted me.

“Sue!” I said, turning to my right to track down the source of the greeting. The maitre d’ escorted me to the table where Bob and Duncan were seated. Sue was already heading toward me, and in an instant we were all exchanging handshakes and hugs.

For several minutes we each learned what had happened in one another’s lives since we had met that day on the train. Duncan was enjoying his retirement immensely. “When I visit friends still in the company where I spent my entire career, I feel like they are in a different world from the one I so enjoyed,” he told us. “Taking that early retirement package was the smartest decision I ever made in business. It is just not the same there any more, there’s so much more pressure. People are being

forced to do more—with fewer resources.” But he protested at my description of him being a man of leisure.

“Leisure!” he exclaimed, “I’m busier now than I ever was before.” He had enlisted in several volunteer organizations, still traveled extensively, and proudly told us he had taken up golf and scuba diving.

Sue told us that her business, which provides consulting services to travel agents, had gone through a rough time. “All the airlines suddenly stopped paying travel agent commissions,” she explained. “That was their major source of income, so thousands of agencies went out of business, or merged with larger agencies.” Bob asked her how travel agents could even survive today when their airline commissions have disappeared. “They charge fees for the services they provide—and of course, they do still earn commissions from tour and cruise operators. Actually, I was able to turn lemons into lemonade. It has been a great opportunity for my company to show my clients how they can make the changes not only to survive, but to prosper, in this new business environment.”

“You know what?” Bob interjected. “I don’t even think of travel agents as bricks-and-mortar businesses. Whenever I book a trip, I do everything online. I booked my entire honeymoon over the Internet—the flights, the hotel, the cruise—everything.”

“Honeymoon!” I exclaimed. “I didn’t know you have gotten married.”

“Yes,” Bob affirmed, with just a hint of a smile. “Sarah decided it was time to make an honest man of me, so we tied the knot in February—on Valentine’s Day, actually.”

“That is so romantic,” said Sue, her head slightly tilted, as if she were watching a movie.

I suddenly realized that we had been sitting together for several minutes, chatting away, and that Duncan had hardly said a word. “So what’s been going on in your life, Amigo?” I enquired.

“Well, Frank, life is good!” he declared. “You know, it took me quite a while to do anything about Rotary after our meeting on the train that day. Then I was on a trip to Australia, and the jet lag really hit me hard. I couldn’t sleep past about 3 a.m., so finally, at about six o’clock; I went downstairs, intending to take a walk. But it began pouring with rain, and as I hung around in the lobby, picking up some sightseeing brochures, I noticed a sign on the wall that showed the local Rotary club met in that very hotel on that very day for breakfast. So I decided to drop in.

“It was quite an experience. Even though I told them I was not a Rotarian, they welcomed me as if I were a long-time friend. I told them how I’d met you on the train, and the guy I sat next to invited me out on his boat for a day of fishing. Apparently, someone in the club sent my name through to the club in my hometown, because about a month after I got back, they called and invited me to attend a meeting. I joined the club about five weeks later and have really enjoyed being a Rotarian ever since.

“Oh, and let me add my own congratulations on your marriage, Bob,” Duncan added. “Did you two ever join Rotary?” He gestured at Bob and Sue.

Bob looked down at his place mat and began playing with the knife, twirling it around. “Yeh, I joined,” he replied, without a glimmer of enthusiasm. I noticed that the smile had also disappeared from the normally effervescent Sue.

“You sure don’t seem very excited about it,” observed Duncan. “I’ve seen people more enthusiastic about funerals.”

Sue managed a nervous little grin. As usual, she spoke first.

“Bob and I are in the same club,” she explained. “We haven’t really spoken to one another about this before we came here; it’s not as if we’ve compared notes. But I think both of us are feeling a little let down. Bob, why don’t you share what’s on your mind, and then I’ll bring up my issues.”

But before he could speak, the waitress appeared at our table. We suddenly realized we had all been so involved in conversation that none of us had even looked at the menu. While the server went to fill our drink orders, we examined the menus, and by the time she returned, we were able to tell her what we wanted for dinner. It was a good ten minutes before we were able to resume our discussion about Rotary.

“Okay, Bob. What’s the problem?” I asked.

He seemed reluctant to talk, but gradually he opened up. “The truth is, Frank, I’m bored to tears

at most of my Rotary club meetings. First of all, most of the people there are at least twice my age. Secondly, I feel like an outsider. There are several cliques in the club; I actually went to sit at a seat one day—the only open chair in the room—and was told, ‘That’s reserved. We’ve always had the same eight guys sit together for 20 years.’ I had to have the restaurant set up a new table and sit at it by myself until some members arrived late and joined me.”

“Hmm. I bet I know the clique you are talking about,” Sue chirped in.

“But even the meetings...they’re so...booorring.” He pronounced the word as if it had an extra two syllables.

“In what way?” I enquired.

“Singing, for starters,” he volunteered. “Frank, I’m 34 years old. I live life in the fast lane. I drive a Porsche. I run the I.T. department where the average age is 27. Then I dash out to a Rotary meeting where a bunch of 70-year-olds delight in singing Wait ’till the sun shines, Nellie. A couple of months ago, I took a couple of friends whom I thought I had sold on the idea of joining Rotary. They’re both about my age; one’s a banker, the other a stockbroker. When the club started singing these songs from our grandfather’s era, I thought my guests’ eyes were going to pop out of their heads. I don’t sing, Frank. And if I did, for darned sure I wouldn’t let rip in public with renditions from the Greatest Hits of 1925.”

“Well, I can...”

“I’m not finished,” he interjected. “I don’t want to burst your bubble or be offensive. But you asked me to be honest about my feelings toward Rotary, and that’s what I’m being. Let’s talk about programs. Half the time—okay, perhaps that’s an exaggeration—one out of every three weeks, I would show up for Rotary and discover there was no program that day. You don’t realize; the work environment is different from the way it was when all those old retired guys were in business.”

“Hey, watch it! I’m an old retired guy, remember?” Duncan interrupted.

Bob laughed out loud and touched Duncan’s shoulder reassuringly. “I will never think of you as an old guy.” Duncan smiled appreciatively.

“But seriously,” Bob continued. “You just cannot imagine the pressure of the modern workplace. We don’t get two-hour lunches like they did in the past. I don’t even get lunch most of the time. They’ve laid off 20 percent of the people in my department and business is up 26 percent—so we’re under incredible pressure to do more work with fewer resources.

“Then, on the one day of the week when I sneak out of work and dash off to the Rotary club for lunch, I feel like an outsider. I don’t have fun, there’s almost nobody close to my age or with my interests, and often times, no speaker. I don’t need to pay dues for that.” He almost spat out the last word.

“I’m sorry,” Bob added, looking around the table. “I didn’t mean to dump on you all. I know

you are all Rotarians now, and I know Rotary does wonderful work, but my experience just hasn't been very positive. You asked me about my life in Rotary, and now you probably wish you had never brought it up."

"That's not true," I replied. "Look, although we only met once before, I feel as if we are friends. And friendships can only grow if each person is totally honest with one another. But before I address some of the issues you brought up, Bob, I'd like to ask the other two about their experiences in Rotary, okay?"

He nodded his agreement.

"Duncan, how long have you been a Rotarian, now?"

"Eleven months."

"And how would you describe that experience?"

"Well, I love my club," he began. "Of course, my circumstances are different. I don't have the pressures of work any longer—thank goodness. And my club meets in the evening, so it has a more relaxed atmosphere than some breakfast and lunch clubs I have attended. However, we always have a program. I cannot tell you how much I've learned from the speakers we've had at Rotary. Last week, the mayor spoke to us on the new park the city is planning. There have been times when I arrived and saw the topic of that night's speaker and thought, 'Oh, how dull is this going to be?' But then they give a presentation that's informative

and interesting. I don't think I could count five times when our program has not left me feeling more educated or entertained.

“And in our club, we're not allowed to sit in—what did you call them?...cliques. When we arrive at the meeting, each table is numbered. There are ten seats to a table, and so as you arrive, you put your hand into a covered box and pull out your number. That signifies the table at which you then sit. So every week, I fellowship with different members. It's been great.

“I think, to be honest, that the average age in our club is a little higher than 31,” he added. “But age is never an issue. We are one club. I'm as happy to chat with the new 25-year-old we just took in as with a septuagenarian. And I honestly believe every member feels the same way. You should see us when we work on a fund-raising campaign or a community service project, I could just as easily be teamed up with the retirement-age bank president as with the young teacher who joined recently.”

As I listened to Duncan, I wondered how two clubs in the same organization—two clubs in neighboring communities—could be so different in their attitudes and culture. I turned to Sue. “That's the longest period of silence I've witnessed since I've known you. Where do you fall along this continuum?” I asked. I recalled the telephone call from here a few weeks ago when she had revealed her own frustrations with her Rotary club—the same one to which Bob belonged. I wondered if she would simply repeat his observations, or could there be yet more problems?

“Well, I don’t know quite how to put this,” she began. “I’m normally such a positive-thinking person. I can find the silver lining in every cloud. So I feel rather embarrassed now to think negatively. But to tell you the truth, I...I...” As I looked at Sue, I could see her eyes glistening. I realized that whatever was on her mind was quite an emotional burden. “I’m thinking of quitting Rotary.”

“Great!” I thought to myself. Two out of the three superb Rotarians I introduced to Rotary are leaving—less than three years after they joined. That’s a 66 percent loss ratio. If my business only retained 33 percent of our customers, we would go bankrupt. My mind snapped back to the conversation.

“Sue, let’s just talk. What is it that makes you feel so frustrated?” I asked.

She took a deep breath and began. “First of all, it’s the money. Some of the movers and shakers in our club kept complaining about the food at our weekly luncheons. They convinced the board that we would not be able to recruit top-class business leaders if we met at a family restaurant, and they pushed through a vote that moved our meetings to a hotel that’s considered the best in town. It is a lovely place—very elegant—but our meal prices have increased by 40 percent. When I told the board that this might scare away some of our members who live on fixed incomes, they told me, ‘Those old-timers have more money than you and me put together.’ Another board member said, ‘This is a professional organization. The prestige

of our new meeting place alone will make people want to join.’ Frankly, it’s not just the old people I am worried about—it’s me, too! I have a small consulting business. I’m just getting it started. They can say, ‘The company pays people’s dues.’ Well, guess what? I am the company! And I believe the purpose of Rotary is to serve, the purpose of Rotary is not for it to be a gourmet dining club.”

Sue took a sip of her Merlot and continued. “A few weeks after I joined the club, the secretary was transferred. Nobody else wanted the job, so the president asked if I would take it. I wanted to help, and thought it would teach me a lot about Rotary—which it did. So I agreed. Back on July 1st, our new board of directors took office, and a couple of months later, the president-elect had a heart attack. He was replaced by the then-vice president. But about a month later, her company transferred her to London. So the board asked if I would step in and become president elect.”

“That’s wonderful news, Sue,” said Duncan. “You see, they recognized true talent when they saw it.”

“Oh, you’re such a sweetheart,” she said, smiling at him. “But you see, that’s the problem. I’ve taken courses in leadership before, when I was in the airline industry. I only agreed to be president elect because I thought that by the time I became president, I would be able to lead the club to new heights. I don’t need this job. I don’t want it for me. I thought I could be a president who could really make a difference.”

“And why don’t you still believe you can?” I asked.

“Because they don’t want a leader, they want a caretaker,” she replied. “I’ve tried everything to motivate them. I’ve suggested new fund-raising ideas. I’ve proposed a membership development plan to bring in new blood. I realized that the same four people had served as the Four Avenues of Service directors for eight consecutive years—so I nominated a slate of different officers, people who could bring fresh ideas to the club. And do you know what the response was?”

It was a rhetorical question to which I don’t believe she expected an answer. But Duncan interrupted her with one anyway: “They vetoed your ideas,” he proffered.

“Yes! They have said, in one form or another, ‘We don’t want new ideas. We see new projects as work. We like things the way they are.’ Bob is right; they are a bunch of bores. They either never had the same Rotary ideals you sold us on, Frank, or they have long ago lost sight of them.

“So, as Bob said, I’ve begun to think, ‘Why am I wasting my time on this? Why am I spending my hard-earned money to go through these frustrations?’ But I feel guilty, because as mad as those stick-in-the-muds make me, there are some good people in the club. And the other reason is, I made a commitment. So if I quit, am I letting down the nice people? Am I letting Rotary down? As I see it, there are three options: stay and give in; stay and do it my way; or quit. What do you think I should do, guys?”

I realized that three sets of eyes had turned on me. I thought of my speech I had written for the district conference keynote the next night. Of how I had labored over exactly the right message that would at once inform and inspire the hundreds of Rotarians and guests at the opening banquet. But this was an infinitely more difficult assignment. These were real-world Rotarians with real-world problems, and they were looking to me not for motivational platitudes, but for real-world solutions.

Rotary needed the likes of Sue and Bob, and the conversation we were about to have would likely determine whether it kept them—or lost them forever.