

## Oakland Ski Club's Innovative Approach for Increasing Membership

By Bob Pennell, Oakland Ski Club



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Some clubs have been experiencing membership declines over the past several years. In contrast the Bay Area population has more than doubled over the last couple of decades. One would be tempted to attribute membership declines to the advent of ski leases and AirBnb. After years of struggling with posters in gyms, setting up booths at ski swaps, attempting to entice folks who come to events like Snow Bomb, and of course the traditional referrals of families and friends, none of these had done more than barely replace the members lost to attrition.

The answer? There is no one thing. Improve the web site. Done. No change. Put up signs near our lodge. Done. No change. Make improvements to our lodge. Much effort but still no change.

When riding the chairs and speaking to people about my club, the usual response from them was a blank stare, followed by the question: What's a ski club? While I've done my best to educate several dozen fellow lift riders, I came to the conclusion that the problem of dwindling membership lies more to the fact that skiers and snowboarders simply are unaware that ski clubs exist at all let alone the benefits that they convey.

Then two years ago, while recruiting at a ski sale, I ran into a member of a fly fishing club and he urged me to go look at the nearby street fair that day. He claimed that his club gained at least 6 new members each year from the fair. That street fair was the Solano Stroll in Berkeley/Albany. While the ski sale was attracting dozens of skiers, few were much interested in the club. The Solano Stroll by contrast had over 100,000 in attendance. I was too late for that day but the following year we set up a booth at the fair, and saw hundreds of people stop by (most of which had never heard of ski clubs). While very few signed up on the spot, over time our membership was boosted and we reached our goal of 25 new members by the end of this past season (a year ahead of schedule).

Now not all of those members came exclusively from our presence at the fair. The referrals from current members and their friends, visitors to our web site, and of course a great snow season all contributed to the boost in numbers. This summer and fall we attended 4 street fairs and our tireless membership chair has had her hands full with requests for information and many new applications. But it really is a numbers game. Dozens at ski swaps vs tens of thousands at street fairs. Is that all there is? Of course not. Knowing what makes your club special and being able to communicate that to others is vital. If there was one thing I was asked over and over by people I encountered it was: Why should I join? How does being a member benefit me? You need to be ready to answer those and other questions.

As it happened the Solano Stroll also had a policy of no brochures so as to cut down on litter and clean up. But since business cards were OK, we condensed the most basic facts about our club and the answers to the questions we had encountered over and over again and put them on the back of our cards. People loved them. They could tuck them away quickly and not easily lose them. They also liked that the most important things they wanted to know were right there. The serious ones checked out our website to get more information. The process, of course, is slow. Nothing is overnight.

We plan to be at the Solano Stroll again this September, and hope to see you there as well. Street fairs happen though out the summer and early fall all over the Bay Area. Most registrations are \$75 - \$150 and are best made at least 2 to 3 months ahead of time. Google your local street fairs for more information. If you have more questions on how to get started I'd be happy to share my experiences with you. For now I'm off to Mammoth with the club for some great skiing.

Think Snow!

(NOTE: look for a sample copy of Oakland's card on the BAC Website ([www.skibac.org](http://www.skibac.org)))