

RASC Membership Development News



Welcome!

Welcome to the February issue of *RASC Membership Development News*! In this issue Sharmin Chowdbury and Denis Grey have developed a Q&A style article. This is an excellent piece focusing on membership development principles and programs. Thank you, Sharmin and Denis! If you would like to contribute content, please contact me at the RASC National Office at thompson@rasc.ca.

Inside This Issue

- 1 Welcome
- 2 Using "First Light" to Focus on New Members
- 3 National Office Update

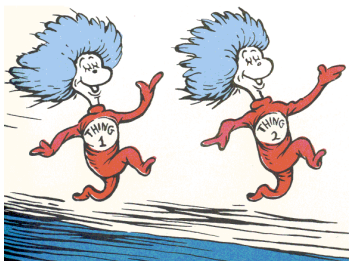
Using "First Light" to Focus on New Members By Sharmin Chowdbury & Denis Grey

One of the key goals of a membership retention strategy is translating "newcomers" and "somewhat interested" members into committed long-term members. Starting in 2009 the Toronto Centre has put a specific strategy together just for this purpose called their "First Light" program. Membership Development News interviewed uber-volunteer **Sharmin Chowdbury** of the Toronto Centre to find out more about their experience and the background behind their program.

MD News: How did the First Light program get started?

SC: It all started at a strategy-planning meeting in 2009. Paul Mortfield mentioned the necessity of holding an orientation program for newly joined members. Goal was to have an attendance-based icebreaker event for the new members to officially welcome them. Over the years, it has been noticed that some new members are shy to talk to strangers at the meetings or events. Some veteran members may be feeling the same way. Sometimes, both parties are waiting for or expecting the other party to initiate the first contact. Sometimes, the new members refrain from asking basic questions.

Dr. Suess explained it best. [There is a] very basic human need – the need to belong.



continued page 2

Using “First Light” to Focus on New Members

continued

So it takes a long time for new members to develop the sense of belonging. In the long run, some tend to remain aloof or worse – fall off the wagon. To make the integration process faster and "less painful" per se, an orientation program sounded like an excellent idea. Diane Shukla and I took on the idea, along with Paul, and since then we have organized 6 First Light get-together events starting in spring of 2010. Many other volunteers helped us carry out the program.

MD News: What makes these sessions work in your view?

SC: At First Light meetings, the new members feel comfortable to open up since the focus is on them. They easily converse, ask questions and get acquainted with other members. When they attend other Centre meetings and events, they have some familiar faces around them and feel more relaxed, they enjoy participating and they open up more - their sense of belonging increases and they enjoy the social aspect of joining the Society!

MD News: How often do you hold First Light sessions?

SC: Currently we hold First Light orientation programs twice a year, in spring and fall. We are prepared to hold an extra one or two in the same year, if at any point we'll have a large number of new registrations.

MD News: How do you decide who gets to participate?

SC: Our rule of thumb is to invite members who have joined the Centre within one year prior to the scheduled date of the get together. Although for the initial First Light program, we invited members who joined the Society within the past three years from date. For the current session, we invited new members from 2011, because technically the ongoing session is actually the fall 2012 session. We are planning to hold spring and fall 2013 sessions.

MD News: How long does the program last?

SC: Currently we hold the orientation over three evenings during the week, on a weekly schedule, for 2 hours per evening.

MD News: What kind of promotion do you use?

SC: We invite by sending e-mails to new members, also we announce the event at our meetings and on our Web site.

Using “First Light” to Focus on New Members

continued

MD News: Tell me about what happens at a First Light session.

Each FL get together consists of different topics and activities. We do not have any set syllabus for First Light. So far we have covered the following topics and activities:

- Introduction to club activities, events and facilities.
- Introduction of the council and how governance works.
- Observatory booking demonstration on the website.
- Brief introduction to the New Observers to Visual Astronomy (NOVA) program which we also offer at different times of the year.
- Show and tell of astronomy equipment and books
- Help with personally owned telescopes
- Display of different types of telescopes and binoculars
- Talk about how to plan and prepare for observing sessions.
- Astronomy on a budget
- Follow along demonstration of Stellarium planetarium software.
- Logging and sketching during observing.
- Introduction to astrophotography
- Tour of our facilities at the David Dunlap Observatory
- Observing (when weather permits)

Most importantly we open the floor for a general Q & A on anything and everything astronomy, our hobby and the National Society.

MD News: Whew! That sounds like an incredible amount to cover in three nights – how do you do it?

SC: Just to clarify, we cover most of the topics but not all of the above topics in one single 3-day program. Above topics have been covered in last 6 First Lights. We may introduce new topics in the future. In the e-mail invitation, we ask the invitee to submit topics and questions ahead of time. Also we invite attendees to complete evaluation forms. We utilize these inputs to understand which topic is popular and take that information into account when planning the next session.

MD News: What do you think makes the First Light program special?

SC: The most unique feature of First Light program is that we are very flexible. After the planned talks, the attendees have the choice to stay and chat with others, ask questions or just mingle.

Using "First Light" to Focus on New Members

continued

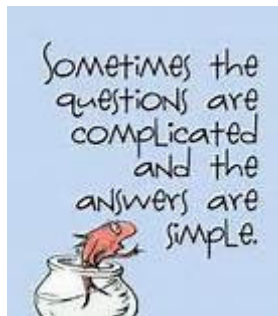
MD News: How many participants do you get?

SC: We had between 25 and 30 participants attending each get together which is almost 50% of our eligible new members. All participants appreciated First Light. They leave the program knowing a lot more about the club and astronomy and, most importantly, they've made some new friends. It really seems to give them an expanded comfort zone overall.

MD News: Do you have trouble getting volunteers to deliver the program?

SC: Not at all! First Light is fun, informative, educational, inviting and encouraging! Different volunteers at different times have joined us as speakers and mentors. Their participation made this program successful! All the participation, encouragement and appreciation feed back on themselves and help to build the program up. I'm looking forward to a lot more First Light sessions. ♦

NATIONAL OFFICE UPDATE



~ Dr. Seuss ~

- **4064 RASC members** as of 2013 JANUARY 31 – 3912 members 2012 JANUARY 31!!!
- **Observer's Calendars 2013 are now sold out!**
- **Limited quantities of 2013 Observer's Handbooks left!**
- **Check out this link from RASC Marketing Coordinator, Kate Fane, <http://www.capjournal.org/issues/index.php>**