



You've Got *Guests*

By Craig Harrison, DTM

**How to turn nervous club visitors
into eager club members.**

Do you remember your first visit to a Toastmasters club and the nervousness you felt? Did it begin at the door – or even earlier, when you parked your car? Or did it start the week before, when you told someone you would visit her club?

Considering how nervous you were then, isn't it remarkable how confident you feel now? We've all come a long way!

Karina Lawrence is a native of Russia who lives in Oakland, California. When one of her business-school friends at San Francisco's Golden Gate University raved about Toastmasters, Karina decided to visit a local club. She felt nervous and apprehensive.

"Would I like them?" Lawrence remembers thinking. "Would they like me? Would they aggressively sell me on joining?" Then she arrived at the meeting – and her anxieties were put to rest. "People were so nice – to me and to each other – before, during and after the meeting," Lawrence recalls. "They cared and made it fun. People were professional, yet warm." Naturally, she joined the club!

Going From Fear to Fun

Guests visiting your club may feel the nervousness you long ago vanquished. The secret to allaying their anxieties? Turn their fear into fun. Your attentiveness toward guests comforts and nourishes them. When you prepare for their arrival, welcome them on entry, take the time to understand their needs and fears, you show them that you care. This thoughtful approach helps guests want to join your club.

Once the meeting starts and people are laughing, applauding and succeeding, your club sells itself. It's a wonderful example of the law of attraction.

Did you realize the guests who come through your club's doors represent your club's future? Aim to meet their needs and they'll serve your club well. Together you'll succeed.

Make Your Club Easy to Access

For some people, finding your club, or even information about its meeting time and location, poses an obstacle. Is your club listed accurately on the Toastmasters International website – with a current contact name and phone number, meeting day and time, and address? How about your own district's website? Are you listed with online community calendars of local newspapers? Are you using **MeetUp.com**, **Craigslist.org** or other websites and services to promote your club? Current information signals to guests that yours is a well-functioning club.

Literally as well as virtually, can your club be found? Is your banner displayed prominently? Do you display any signs? Some community clubs can be more difficult to find because they meet within companies, within business parks or in meeting rooms at banks, churches or shopping malls. Don't frustrate visitors and provide reasons for them to give up.

Enlist the help of security personnel, receptionists and concierges to route wayward guests to your meeting. Purchase signage from the Toastmasters online store to help direct guests to the right place.

Helpful Hints

Each club can designate a phone number for guests to call to get more information.

- Is yours a recording?
- If you record an outgoing message on behalf of your club, is your voice pleasant? Do you sound upbeat and friendly? Do you identify yourself clearly so strangers know they've reached a club representative?
- Do you clearly enunciate when and where your club meets?
- Do you encourage callers to record their name and phone number, slowly, so someone can call them back?
- Do you share your club's website clearly so people can find more information about when and where you meet?

Reassuring callers is as important as imparting the who, what, where, when, why and how of your club's meetings. Remember, people are nervous and likely uncertain of what Toastmasters is about. Your ability to paint a rosy picture makes visiting your club more inviting.

On Arrival - Badges, Banter and Buddies

When guests arrive it's important to welcome them with open arms. Officers in particular should be on the lookout for guests. As you approach them, wearing your badge and demonstrating interest, guests relax and open up.

"Is your club listed accurately on the Toastmasters International website – with a current contact name and phone number, meeting day and time, and address?"

Their doubts about Toastmasters start to disappear. It's a good idea to brief club members in advance about visitors you know are coming; that will make for a warmer welcome when they arrive.

Don't underestimate the importance of casual banter with guests before the meeting starts. Ask them how they heard about the club, whether they've attended a meeting before and what they are looking for. Congratulate them on their courage to visit.

Gently invite them to sign your guest register and to include a phone number or email for follow-up.

Introducing guests to others is both hospitable and helpful, since they might be nervous among people they don't know. Remember, they're in your house! You are the host; it's your duty to help guests feel welcome.

Accord visitors a seat of honor, and make sure a veteran sits next to them who can help make sense of the parade of participants, titles and roles. If you're a "buddy" seated next to a guest, help them sift through the various sheets of paper in front of them: the agenda, evaluation forms, voting slips and other items.

Alert guests that they will be asked to introduce themselves toward the beginning of the meeting, though they will be under no obligation to speak otherwise. Most clubs will offer guests two other opportunities to speak: during Table Topics and toward the end of the meeting, when they are asked to share their impressions of what they have seen.

If the guest has been invited by a club member, allow that person to introduce them. Praise both the guest and member – and offer some applause.

Sensitivity to Guests

When guests visit your club, be aware that they don't know how a club meeting works. Each member, upon being introduced for a meeting role, should describe to guests how that role works and how it fits into the meeting. For instance, the Topicsmaster and timer should each explain their roles during the impromptu portion of the meeting, before initiating the Table Topics session. In addition, don't call on guests to participate in Table Topics until they've seen several responses. That way, guests will be more familiar with, and thus confident in, responding to a topic when asked.

Mind Your Manners

One of the quickest ways to offend guests and scare them away is when members tell inappropriate jokes or use offensive language. I've visited clubs where I got the impression everyone in the club shared certain political beliefs; this made me feel less than welcome. No club should be so politicized that people of any political leaning or religious belief (including non-believers) might feel self-conscious or out of place. Toastmasters should be open to all who are respectful, polite and supportive. The only loyalty oath required is the Toastmasters Promise!

Be a uniter, not a divider. Make your club inviting to all.

Provide Materials

Many new clubs provide visitors with a sample *Toastmaster* magazine, brochures, information on the history of their club, a newcomer's orientation sheet and other documents that help guests understand club and district missions, meeting processes, club roles, educational programs and even the district hierarchy. These tangible

A Cordial Contact

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Your club can benefit greatly by designating an experienced member to be the “first contact” for guest inquires. Bill Young serves in that role for Lakeview Club in Oakland, California. He shares his insights on how to help guests enjoy the Toastmasters experience.

The *Toastmaster*: Bill, as the contact for club visitors, what are your goals when someone calls to inquire about Toastmasters?

Bill Young: I introduce myself and ask a few initial questions:

- What do you know about Toastmasters?
- What would you like to know about Toastmasters?
- What are your objectives for calling? What is motivating your interest in us?
- Have you ever been to a meeting before? If so, what were your impressions?

What about your style on the phone?

I chat with them. Sometimes callers are nervous talking to a stranger. I try to relax them.

What else do you ascertain during this initial call?

After giving them our meeting address, time and frequency, I ask if I can send them directions to our meeting room. If so, I collect their email address. Otherwise, I ask for their phone number so we can follow up.

I also make sure I have their full name and can pronounce it. In turn, I share with them particular information about our club – not just where and when it meets, but also the dress code, parking information and a bit about the demographic makeup of our members.

Do callers have pre-conceived notions of what will occur at a meeting?

Some do. I let them know they're under no pressure to speak at the meeting. They can simply observe.

Then what do you do?

Once a guest has attended a meeting or two, or even joined, I'll suggest we meet over coffee to orient them to the club, its members and what's available to them. I'll provide them with some materials, such as the booklet *A Toastmaster Wears Many Hats*, to familiarize them with roles and responsibilities. I also suggest they watch the DVD *Welcome to Toastmasters!*

Why do you serve in this role?

It is gratifying. You never know when people call if they'll even show up to a meeting. Those who attend, and join, benefit greatly from the experience. It's fun to see them grow.

materials may add to the guest experience and provide visitors a resource during and after the meeting.

Request Feedback


Before the meeting ends, it's important to ask guests for feedback. Giving them the option to reply, the club president can let visitors know how important feedback is for all Toastmasters. You can learn a lot about the guest's experience by their responses. Some are dazzled by meetings, others just dizzy. For some, it can be dull or drab; others experience meetings as dynamic. If they have questions, you can answer them during the meeting or thereafter. Invite them to return to the next meeting, or – if they seem ready – invite them to join.

Toward the end of the meeting, as your club confirms next week's assignments, you can ask guests if they'd like to return to the next meeting and fulfill a modest role such as delivering a closing or opening thought or joke, or serving as timer. Either way, you are subtly setting an expectation that they will return.

Both publicly and privately, thank your guests for coming. Encourage other officers and members to chat with them, thank them for coming and invite them to return. And of course, invite them to join!

A follow-up phone call from a club leader after the meeting is often a nice touch and vital to making guests feel welcome. During this call you can allay any new or lingering fears they may be harboring. Some members even meet for coffee or tea with a guest after their first meeting to seal the deal.

Realistically, not every guest will or should join your club. Through no fault of your own, some guests aren't ready, or prefer a club meeting in a different location, at a different time of day or with a different feel, culture or blend of members. Sometimes timing, cost or other issues are at play. Don't force it. It's all about fit!

The good news: When you are inviting and hospitable, put on a good show, and listen and share, chances are good that a significant number of guests will want to join your club. Simply put, these guests represent the future of your group. So remove the guessing from guest visits – welcome these people graciously and soon you'll be voting them into your club! 

Craig Harrison, DTM, is a professional speaker and member of Lakeview Club in Oakland, California. In July 1992, he was a guest of Lakeview Club – and he has returned weekly ever since. For more information about Craig, visit **SpeakAndLeadWithConfidence.com**.