

**THE GLIDING FEDERATION OF AUSTRALIA INC.**

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GFA approach to the issue of declining membership (a report to the IGC March 2007)

The Gliding Federation of Australia (GFA), like the majority of gliding nations, has been suffering from a slow membership decline over the past 25 years, down from 4,500 in 1980 to 2,440 at present. The GFA has been actively researching the causes of this decline and putting in place actions to try and reverse the trend. The purpose of this paper is to simply explain our approach to addressing this problem in the hope that all nations can share their experiences.

The GFA Board recognises the severity of the problem, in particular the serious implications of a smaller membership base - reduced income and a smaller volunteer base to draw upon. Our ability to influence airspace, funding, legislation requires a large membership.

Gliding in Australia operates primarily through 85 clubs across 5 regions/states. Each region has appointed Regional Development Officers (RDO's) who together make up the Marketing & Development committee. They in turn have started to build a network of Club Development Officers (CDO's) (ultimately one per club).

Structural actions to date include:

- 2001 - appointment of a part time development officer
- 2002 - formation of a marketing & development (m&d) committee
- 2004 - the marketing & development chair becomes a member of the GFA executive; m&d has equal standing and prominence to the existing departments of Airworthiness, Operations and Sport.

Research findings

- GFA clubs already attract many potential members through air experience flights, around 8,500 per annum, so there appears to be no problem in attracting people to the sport.
- Clubs have not been converting enough of these visitors to become flying members. Approximately 600 new members each year
- We lose as many people each year as we recruit.
- Approximately 92% of new members leave within 1 year
- The majority of Clubs have a strong emphasis on basic training. This same focus does not follow through to the needs of the post solo pilot for ongoing development and encouragement.
- 60% of new members are aged over 40 years. A good junior intake but the largest group have survived marriage, children and career and now have the time and/or money to take up the sport.

Our Focus on development

The GFA clubs are quite good at attracting people to the sport. They are poor at converting them to actual members and quite poor at looking after existing members adequately to ensure they stay as members.

It is more effective to improve satisfaction and retain member than it is to find new members and train them. This has led us to apply more effort and focus on membership retention. If half of our new members stay for two years instead of one year, then our membership will grow again. And there is no

point in attracting new members if they do not receive the level of service expected and leave after a short time.

The role of the clubs

The GFA now recognises that programs to retain and grow membership numbers ultimately fail or succeed at the individual club level and this is where our efforts are concentrated while still maintaining carefully targeted and cost effective marketing campaigns. There are many elements to improving retention and most are within each clubs capability and do not require much financial or infrastructure commitment, but they do require fundamental and permanent change in the way we do our business. Fortunately we have a number of clubs that have achieved significant membership growth, and these clubs provide an example to others and, more importantly, are ready and willing to share their experiences.

Resources for clubs.

A range of Club development resources has been created to support the Club Development Officers and these are freely available on the GFA web site at www.gfa.org.au/development.

The resources available include

- ***Club development guide***: Provides advice on actions that club committees can take to improve membership value.
- ***Post solo training syllabus***: What should be the focus once the member has gone solo, rather than just leaving them to their own direction?
- ***Member progress tracking tool***: What are the key goals, and what is a reasonable time line for success?
- ***Member surveys***: Finding out what your members want from their involvement in gliding.

Results

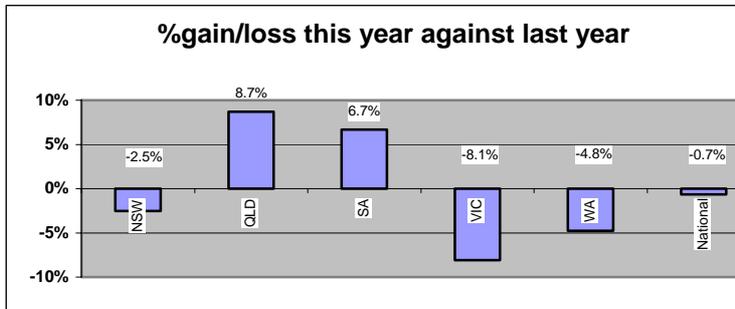
There has been significant growth in a number of clubs, who are now focusing on improving member services.

Many other clubs have not changed their approach to looking after members and continue to reduce in numbers.

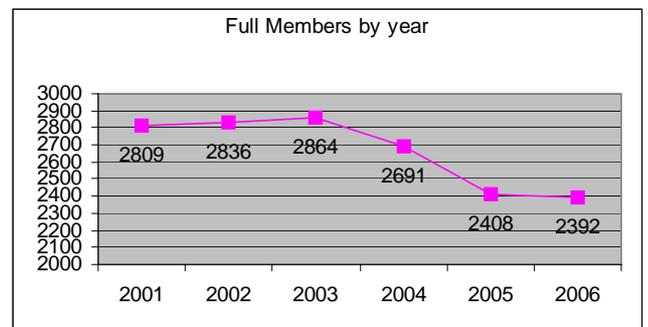
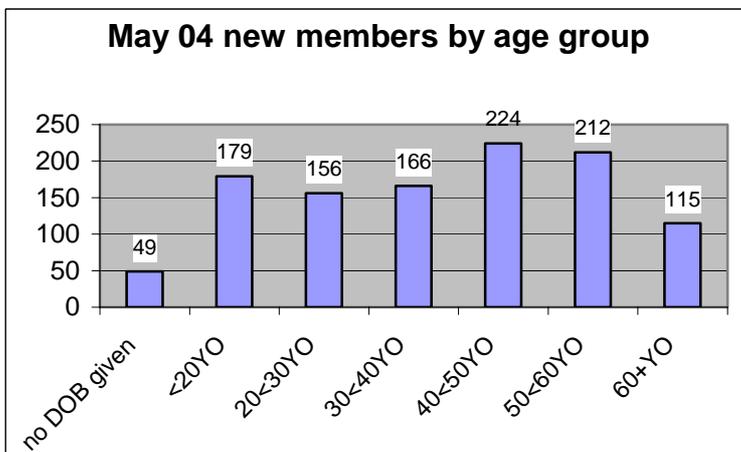
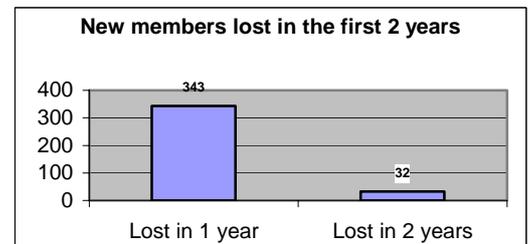
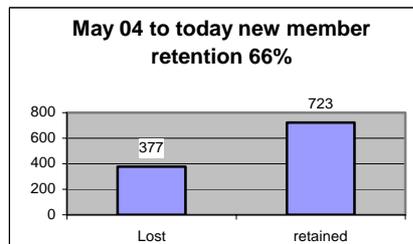
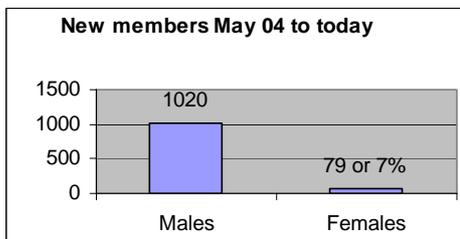
The GFA has a definite plan to improve member numbers, time will show how successful we have been.

GFA Membership Trends

In broad terms the GFA presently has about 2440 full members. It has 85 clubs across 5 regions and over 40% of these clubs have less than 20 members and are therefore at risk. In 2005/6 total national membership fell 0.67%. In 2006/7 membership is up 3.6%, however it is too early to say that we have turned the corner. Last year GFA clubs introduced over 8500 new people to gliding and this was without any particular concerted effort or special advertising or promotion. Clubs did not however manage to convert enough of these into members.



The GFA is now collecting and recording valuable statistics from its members such as age, period as a member, hours flown, flights done and general activity and satisfaction measures. The graph shows membership trends in each of Australia's 6 main states which shows that some areas are having success with increasing membership numbers.



A sobering statistic. The above chart is the Australian glider pilot membership trend. Arresting the decline is the first goal. Reversing the trend is another matter. GFA will continue to report its successes or otherwise on the various strategies being applied.

