

The Federation of Astronomical Societies



Helping Societies Grow

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Document History

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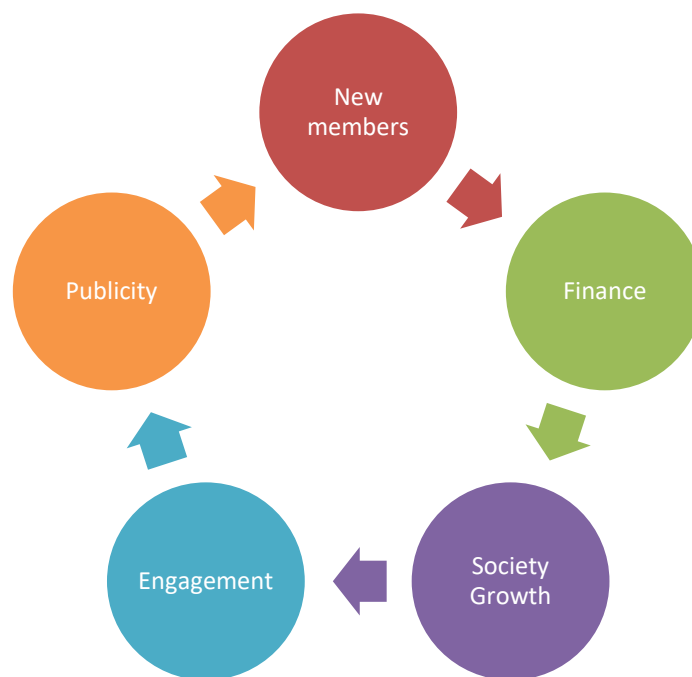
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1 Introduction

Many members have asked for direction and support in growing their society and how to publicise themselves. There is no one answer to what makes a society grow, and it would be worth trialling multiple approaches and seeing what works for your society. One thing that seems clear is that growth and self-publicising can go hand in hand. Some of the larger societies are the ones that engage with the public in community outreach, as this results in the society having greater exposure. It is without a doubt that the unknown nature of astronomy is what keeps the public interested, but quite often they have no idea how to get involved and joining a society provides them with that opportunity.

This document is a collection of ideas from various societies on how they engage with the public and their members; we hope that some of the ideas are of interest.



2 Publicising

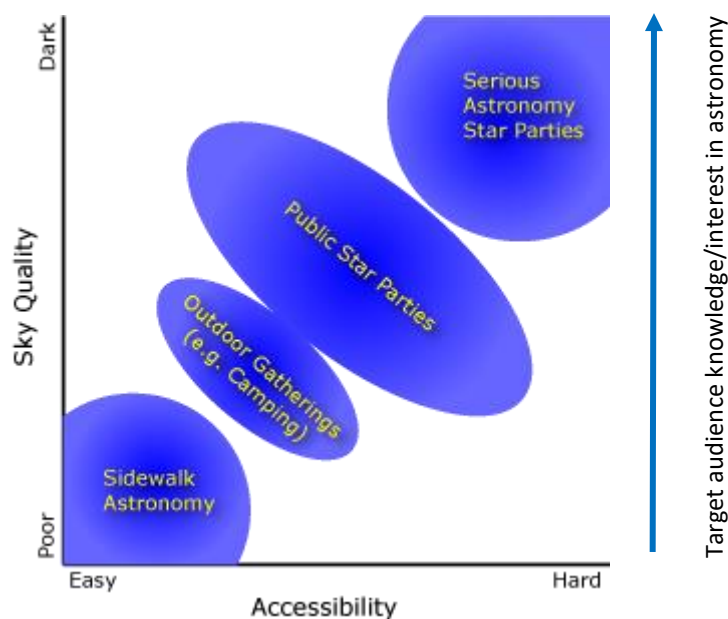
2.1 Outreach

Outreach is a perfect opportunity to engage the public with astronomy while getting the name of your society recognised in the local area. While the advantages can range from new members, financial gain, *etc.* it also relies on the volunteering and goodwill of society members. Not all society members will be interested in engaging with outreach, but they will be surprised with how rewarding it is, also as you recruit new members from outreach they are more likely to be willing to engage with outreach themselves. Remember if you are going to engage with outreach it is important to have public liability insurance (PLI) this is something that the FAS can offer to member societies.

Outreach can also be a great way to bring in an extra income into societies; these funds can be reinvested in outreach, the society or even new equipment. While it shouldn't be the primary motivator, it can be a good source of an extra, regular income.

Volunteers for outreach do not require any DBS checks (a DBS is the Disclosure and Barring Service and can help to make safer decisions when recruiting volunteers and prevent unsuitable people from working with vulnerable groups, including children) if you insist that the group organising the event supply a member of staff who is DBS checked or that parents attend. If you decide that you wish to start a junior club or would prefer to be DBS checked then your Local Authority would probably be able to act as an umbrella organisation for your society. As volunteers, there would only be an administration cost.

The level of outreach can vary, each requiring different levels of preparation, number of volunteers and sky quality. The graph below from an American website shows a good representation of how the accessibility of an event changes with sky quality, we've also added that how this would also vary with interest/knowledge of the target audience.



[1] <https://themcdonalds.net/richard/wp/public-outreach-take-astronomy-to-the-public/>

2.1.1 Sidewalk Astronomy

The idea of 'sidewalk astronomy' is engaging members of the public in astronomy in areas of high footfall. Generally, this would be close to towns, and as a result, the sky quality would be poor. However, this doesn't need to be a problem as bright objects, *e.g.* Jupiter, would still be visible and would have the desired "wow" impact from the public. Alternatively, if you have access to a solar telescope, this would be the perfect form of outreach as the sky quality no longer becomes a concern and you can then target an area of high footfall, particularly at fetes, fairs, *etc.*

Number of volunteers required: 5-8 members

Target audience: General public

Size of target audience: High

Financial gain: Donations/spare change – handy to have a donation bucket available.

Advantages: High footfall, availability of parking, the possibility of new members.

Disadvantages: Poor sky quality can be overwhelming if there are many interested members of the public.

2.1.2 Outdoor gatherings

This refers to engaging in smaller scale outreach activities for specific organisations; these are always in demand and can be a regular form of extra income for a society. Organisations such as schools, Cubs, Scouts, Brownies, Guides are usually interested in the help of an astronomical society as it is often beyond the skill set of anyone within the organisation, and as space is part of the curriculum (and there is an astronomy badge available) these groups are always interested in getting an external group in to support. Again, as a society you have to decide on your main motivator here, some societies would request a nominal suggested donation but would even do an event for free to support a school or group. This form of outreach is unlikely to be a big source of new membership, but in the long-term, it might encourage the target audience to engage with astronomy and even to join your society when they're older.

Number of volunteers required: 1-3 members

Target audience: Educational groups

Size of target audience: Small ~ 30

Financial gain: Suggested donation of £1 per student

Advantages: Smaller more personal group, the chance of greater donations, can be a regular event

Disadvantages: Recruitment of new members unlikely

2.1.3 Public Star Parties

Public star parties have the benefit of targeting a, potentially, large audience with a good quality of sky. The first hurdle can be to find an appropriate venue; it is worth talking to your local Wildlife Trust^[2] who have access to reservoir or areas of outstanding natural beauty (AONB) or your local authority who again have access to parks/large open areas. Once a location has been established, it is then important to think carefully about the date of your event. As an avid astronomer you may try to avoid the Moon if observing deep sky objects, however, given the nature of weather in the UK it is worth having some of the Moon visible, as even on a partially cloudy night some observing will be possible; it is also worth checking on what dates/times planets might be visible, an effective way of demonstrating the dynamics of the Solar System is to show pictures of planets (and their moons) and how they've changed in appearance (or location in regards to the moons). A good time to organise an outreach event would be to have it around the time between New Moon and First Quarter so that the Moon is visible with shadows on the surface to show relief on craters, mountains, etc, as well as setting early-evening to get a darker sky later for deep-sky observing.

Number of volunteers required: 4+ members

Target audience: General public (interested)

Size of target audience: Medium-large (can easily be 100+)

Financial gain: Depends on setup structure, entry fees or donation buckets.

Advantages: Greater chance of new members, can be a regular source of income

Disadvantages: Can require several volunteers, greater organisation required.

2.1.4 Serious Astronomy Star Parties/Events

This can be a serious stargazing camping weekend, *e.g.* Kelling Star Camp or a convention. These can be very difficult to establish and require vast amounts of preparation and effort. These should only be undertaken if the committee and members of the society are willing to put in the time requirement to make these events a success. A poorly run event could do some damage to the reputation of your society, this is worth bearing in mind when organising an event.

Number of volunteers required: 8+ members (depends on the size of the event)

Target audience: General public and astronomers

Size of target audience: Large (can easily be 150+)

Financial gain: Depends on setup structure, entry fees or donation buckets.

Advantages: Greater chance of new members, can be a substantial source of income

Disadvantages: A large amount of organisation required

2.1.5 Fetes and Fairs

Going along to local fetes and fairs can be a unique way of boosting membership. If you can offer something exciting, such as solar gazing that will help to draw people in. Also, the people attending a fair and fete (depending on its size) are likely to be local and therefore have a greater chance of joining.

2.2 Social Media

Growing your society, as previously stated, quite often can be as simple as letting the general public know that you exist. One way of achieving this can be through the power of social media. The primary sources of social media to focus on would be Facebook (for adults), Twitter (for adults) and Instagram (all ages). Twitter and Facebook have the benefit of sharing quick information about any events being run, whereas Instagram (being imaged based) can be a great tool to share inspiring images of space. However, social media is only as powerful as the information put on it. Infrequent use of social media will lead to people 'unfollowing' and a lack of impact^[3]. It is important that you have someone in your team that is keen to grow your social media presence; it is also important to have your social media linked to your website.

It is also possible to link together your Twitter, Instagram and Facebook accounts so that you can post to all of your accounts simultaneously. There are various tools to do this, but the easiest is "Buffer", which is designed to be used by individuals rather than media managers. Ideas on how to link your accounts can be found [here](#)^[4]

2.3 Website

Your website is the first port of call for many new members or general members of the public. It is important that your website is mobile friendly; over 52% of websites are accessed using mobile devices^[5]. Wordpress is an easy, and free, way to build an accessible website, it is important to keep your website regularly updated and don't be afraid to brag about all the amazing things you do/offer *e.g.* advertising your society meeting times.

2.3.1 Online Membership

We live in an age where people want and even expect, instant access to a service. Having the ability for new members to sign-up and join your society online can dramatically increase your member levels, including those who may spontaneously join; if new members have to fill in physical paperwork the percentage of conversions drop, an Ofcom report in adult media practices shows that 75% of people prefer to fill in paperwork electronically^[6].

2.4 Local Media

It is always worth getting in contact with your local newspaper and radio station (including the local BBC radio stations) offering your services as an astronomy 'expert'. When big astronomical events hit the media, *e.g.* Super Moon, Blood Moon, anniversaries of key space travel events, *etc.* local radio stations are very keen to speak to astronomers, and generally, the questions are quite basic in nature, *e.g.* can you explain how this event happens? This is a great opportunity to get the name of your society out into the public domain and hit new audiences that your traditional communication paths do not target.

Newspapers are keen to cover local interest stories, so it is always worth inviting them along to an event you are holding especially if it is for a special astronomical event such as an eclipse, transit, *etc.* Sometimes local newspapers can send a journalist but not a photographer, so it is always worth taking your camera and taking images too – these can also be used as further promotional materials for your website and social media accounts.

2.5 National Media

Astronomical magazines *e.g.* Astronomy Now, have sections in them where local societies can promote their events, from listings to small write-ups of large events. A quick email can be an effective way of promoting

your society to interested parties in your local area.

2.6 Public Lectures

Regular talks from experts is not only a great way to engage your membership in the latest areas of astronomy research, by opening lectures up to the public it can be a great way to encourage members of the public to join your society by showcasing what you can offer. A list of potential speakers can be found on the RAS website^[7].

3 Social Activities

Most of those that join your society will be there to meet like-minded people (that can also help them to get their telescope working!) and so socialising amongst the society will be an important aspect, especially in terms of retaining those that have joined your society.

Depending on the size of your society it would be worth having a committee member whose sole responsibility is to organise events for the members, these can vary in complexity depending on the time you have to organise the events. A simple and effective way to bring members together is to organise a meal at a local restaurant/pub, especially around Christmas time. This would help to engage those who are not interested in outreach or public events.

If you have the facilities, most societies offer a weekly meeting which can vary in formality, some use this as an opportunity for formal talks on astronomy, whereas other societies will use it as an opportunity to for a catch-up and some casual stargazing. You need to assess what is right for your society and pick the appropriate level of interaction. If you're without the facilities to host this yourself then a free option would be to meet down the local pub or at a minimal cost, you could hire out a local hall.

If your membership is keen to engage with social events, then the next step would be to organise day trips to astronomy-related locations, *e.g.* Kielder, Herstmonceux, Greenwich, Scottish Dark Skies Observatory, *etc.* To keep the event simple you can complete a group booking and tell your members to meet you at the venue, however, remembering that this could alienate some of your members who may not have access to transport so where possible it is always best to arrange lift-sharing or a form of transportation so as many of your members can attend as possible.

Making your members feel valued and engaged in your society will encourage them to engage in other aspects, it could be that a casual conversation at a meal that encourages a member to join the committee, engage in outreach, or simple to attend more events.

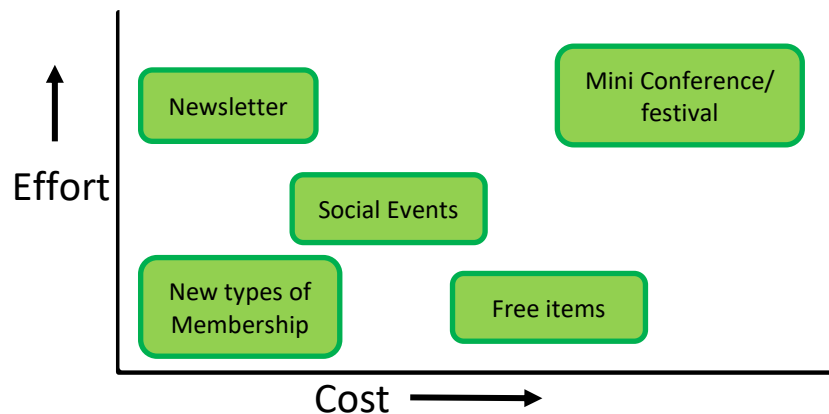
4 Controlling Society Growth

4.1 Membership types and structure

Do you only have one type/tier of membership? Reviewing your membership structure could make your club more accessible to new members. Firstly, reviewing what membership to your society offers and comparing this to other local societies. The FAS website has a list of all astronomical societies so you can compare yourself to other local societies and their offering. Remember to include on your website that you are also a member of the FAS this will show prospective new members, and those looking for outreach, that you are part of a larger organisation/affiliation.

New members will want to get "value for money", while this can be very easy if you have access to a member's observatory, it is still easy to achieve without one. Offering a monthly newsletter with members' photographs, articles written by members, NASA photos of the day (copyright free), crosswords, competitions, *etc*; this can be a high effort but low-cost offering. Some societies give new members free items when they join, *e.g.* Astrocalendars, diaries, pens, *etc*; these can cost you a little more but would possibly allow you to charge a little more for membership. Once your membership has grown, and you have a number of volunteers, you could look at organising a mini-conference/festival with discounted rates for members; while the event will take a large amount of financing and organisation it can be a direct benefit of being a society member, while having the bonus of getting your societies name in the public domain and potentially sign up new members.

Looking at your types of membership can help to subconsciously make your society more accessible, by having a family/student/concession rate will tell new members that you are inclusive of all types of new members. Family memberships can be a great way to get keen astronomers to join, with a possibility of their children joining one day this helps to develop longevity with accruing new members. A summer BBQ, with solar gazing, can be a great way to engage the families in your societies. If you are located in a university town/city, a student membership can be a great way to bring in new members with a new skill set, especially if your local university offers astronomy/astrophysics. It is important to have a diverse membership, especially as astronomy (as all sciences do) have a reputation for being for older men when it couldn't be further from the truth, student/younger members help to demonstrate this.



4.1.1 Young Astronomers Club

Societies considering setting up a young members section are advised to refer to the FAS document on Child Protection - especially regarding the circumstances and need for society members to obtain a DBS check.

Cambridge^[8] and Liverpool^[9] Astronomical Societies are both good examples of established clubs specifically designed around engaging school-age students. For the long-term success of astronomy and your society, it is vital to engage the younger generations. While it is assumed that the immediate conversion rate of 'Young Astronomers' to full members (once they get to an appropriate age) may be low, there is a good chance they will come back to at later life especially more so than those with no astronomical background. As astronomy is an expensive hobby, so parents may not be keen to invest too heavily in this when their child is still young, a Young Astronomers Club offers a great opportunity. A club of this nature is as successful as the person running it; they need to be enthusiastic so that they engage the students.

5 Merchandise

Merchandise can be a great way to: a) promote your society and b) raise some extra capital for your society, which again can be used to help the society grow.

5.1 Society branded clothing

Branded clothing can help build an identity and sense of belonging amongst your members^[10]. Getting your logo printed on a variety of clothing, *e.g.* hoodies, fleeces, beanies, *etc* can be sold for either their cost price (don't forget to include VAT as quoted prices often exclude this) or with a small percentage on top which goes back into the society. Branded clothing also has the added benefit that it adds an aspect of 'corporate' feel at outreach or society events

5.2 Other forms of merchandise

The Federation of Astronomical Societies offers various publications to be found on the website^[11]. These can be purchased for £1 each (for FAS members), and these can then be sold on for £2 each. Many societies give the Astrocalendar to their members as a perk of membership

6 Applying for Grants

Sources of grants can include local councils, county councils, the Royal Astronomical Society, Institute of Physics, *etc.* However, it is worth noting that to access most of the funding, you often must show how it will benefit a larger audience, *i.e.* not just the members of the society. Sometimes the funding is very specific as to who should benefit or who it should be aimed at *i.e.* children, promoting women in science, access for those with disabilities, *etc.*

There are many sources of funding available, here are a few of the bigger organisations that can help:

Organisation	Link to organisation	Details
STFC	https://stfc.ukri.org/public-engagement/public-engagement-grants/pe-funding-opportunities/	Various grants linked to public engagement.
IOP	http://www.iop.org/about/grants/outreach/page_38843.html	Provides up to £3000 for funding public engagement schemes
RAS	https://ras.ac.uk/awards-and-grants/outreach/education-outreach-small-grants-scheme	Up to £5000 for innovative approaches to outreach
Local Gov	https://www.gov.uk/apply-funding-community-project	This will direct you to your local council's grant pages – although due to budget cuts these are limited.
Local Councillor	https://www.gov.uk/find-your-local-councillors	A page to find your local councillor, it is worth approaching them directly as they all have money to spend on local projects (this money has to be spent before the end of the tax year).
RSE	https://www.rse.org.uk/awards/cormack-small-astronomy-outreach-grant-2/	Royal Society of Edinburgh offers £1000 for STEM projects that benefit a larger audience.
UKSA	https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/space-for-all-community-funding-scheme-2019	UK Space Agency offers funding for projects up to £10,000 that achieve the education and outreach aims of the UK Space Agency.

References

- [1] <https://themcdonalds.net/richard/wp/public-outreach-take-astronomy-to-the-public/>
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