

Reply from British Naturism: Doing Nothing has Never been an Option.

Reading NAG's letter, we are reminded of Mark Twain's famous remark "Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated" upon learning that that his obituary had been published in the New York Journal. Much of what has been said in NAG's letter is speculation and opinion rather than fact. The problem being that, having interspersed it with a few facts, it makes it all look like fact.

Obviously, we also view BN's membership numbers with concern, but let us not just throw our hands up in utter dismay, let us *all* think what we can do about them.

Firstly, let's deal with those numbers. The numbers published in February, which presumably inspired the letter, were unduly pessimistic as they did not include members on the new anniversary renewal, so did not reflect total membership for February this year, where last year's figures did. We have amended that practice and are now quoting total numbers and the number of new members included in that figure. This not only makes comparison easier, it has shown that in March and now again in April total membership is *up* on last year.

Before we all celebrate and become complacent, NAG are right that the trend has been downward overall for the last 20 years, although 6% year on year is overstating it; had it been that high our final figure for 2013 would have been 6,172 yet it was 9,471. The truth is that it has fluctuated from a small increase in 2001 to the worst loss we have ever seen of 10% in 2008 when, coincidentally, the three founders of NAG were President, Vice Chairman and Treasurer. These figures can be seen along with others covering the period from 2000 to 2011 in the article on page 39 of BN190 (Winter 2011).

So what are we doing wrong? Or are we actually doing some things right and helping to reduce our losses in difficult times? Let us, for a moment, compare ourselves to other organisations. In their letter, NAG present the Ramblers as a fine example, having 113,000 members, but if they have this figure right, this organisation is not such a good example. We had contact with them back in 2011 when they were complaining that their membership had fallen to 140,000. From that figure to the present one, as given in NAG's letter, is 6.9% loss year on year!

So what of other organisations? We recently completed a benchmarking survey issued by a membership organisation "guru". We have received a complimentary copy of the 99-page report and this shows that our membership trends are typical for organisations of our kind (made up of largely individual members). Given that the report includes organisations of all ages and newer organisations tend to grow in membership more easily – otherwise they would never get off the ground – this shows that we cannot be getting everything wrong!

Enough of detailed numbers and comparisons, the overall trend is what we need to turn around, so let's look at what we can do about it. Important in any organisation is communication. The magazine remains one of our main lines of communication with members, going as it does to every member, not just those with computers and internet access. We have the forum with topic areas for every conceivable subject & the advantage of two-way communication and the e-zine, of which we intend to do more and we are constantly looking for ways of better maintaining our website – a major task in its own right. We are also looking at the packs sent to new members to improve those.

We have been putting survey forms into the packs for some time to find out what new members hope to get from membership. The top answer is social contact with other Naturists. NAG may dismiss the importance of events like Alton Towers and Nudefest, but isn't it these and the many other smaller events that are supplying this top reason to join? Supporting a campaigning organisation comes in as the 4th most important reason for joining. It probably should be higher if these new members thought about it and maybe if asked after their first year or two, it might rank higher. As many of our members will have noticed, BN is increasingly active and successful in this area with a growing team headed by our newly 'rebranded' Campaigns Director. This came about thanks to the National Convention helping to get more members involved – another example of improved communication and one that happens to be a social event as well.

Our events and campaigning successes are great opportunities to communicate our message outside our existing membership, as is our 50th anniversary this year. So we will be issuing even more press releases in future and we continue to develop relationships with the media, especially television.

One of the most damaging things to our membership numbers is when communication is hijacked by the naysayers and prophets of doom. We have to reassure lapsed or prospective new members that BN is now a friendly, vibrant organisation worthy of their membership for what should be a pleasurable, relaxing lifestyle, not put them off!

For the last few years we *have* been talking to our dissatisfied customers in the form of lapsed members mailings to encourage them to rejoin or at least tell us why they left. The most common reason given for not renewing is "forgot to do it"! Email and the two-way communication of the forum are other ways we talk to both satisfied and dissatisfied customers, when they choose to identify themselves as such. We cannot, however, adopt every suggestion made, as some contradict the desires of others. Where we have adopted suggestions, we have occasionally had to reverse them later; the scant details on last year's membership cards being a good example of that. You cannot satisfy *all* of the people *all* of the time...

Much has changed within BN in the last 20 years and we continue to change, we believe in the right direction. The changes that NAG mention Judith is making are driven by and supported by the whole EC and we are hopefully carrying our members along with us, although we have to persuade and reassure some of our members, especially some of the longer standing ones who have grown comfortable with the way things have always been, so our changes are measured and paced to help keep everyone on board.

Finally, where does this 'ivory tower' come from? We certainly don't know where it is located any more than NAG seems to. There is not one member of the EC who either wishes to be or has put themselves into an ivory tower. If NAG sees us as being in one then it is NAG who has put us there, not us.

Here's to the future...

British Naturism
7th April 2014