

# Young Professional's Guide to YPOs

A Guide to Giving and Receiving  
Value in Your Membership to a  
Young Professional Organization

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## Welcome to the Club

Congratulations on joining a Young Professional Organization (YPO) or if you are already a member of one. Being a member of a young professional organization can be one of the most valuable and rewarding things you do in your young career.

I have been the founder of a couple of YPOs, a traditional member in others, as well as having done research on and consulting with them. In all of my experiences with these organizations and its members, I have met many individuals who have had their involvement in a YPO make a significant impact on their lives. I have witnessed \$300,000 business deals between members, future spouses meeting for the first time, and young professionals developing into leaders of a community. All of this made possible through a local YPO.

However, like anything in life, you get what you give. Receiving high value in your membership is up to you. If you expect that by simply joining you will be flooded with new contacts and a sense of real value, not only is it unfair to yourself, but to the organization you joined as well. Getting the most out of a YPO takes time and effort on your behalf.

In the past five years, numerous new YPOs have been formed and are growing at a tremendous rate. Chambers of commerce have embraced this concept and are launching their own organizations rapidly. Young leaders have also been taking it upon themselves to start their own YPOs – some of which I have seen grow to over 1,000 members!

No matter what type of YPO you join, who founds it or which organization runs it, how you profit from the organization does not change. Based on research and testimonials, this guide will give you some basic fundamentals on how you can achieve high

value in your membership. If you are interested in starting your own YPO or if you serve on a leadership committee for one, you will also be equipped with information on how your YPO could provide more value to its members.

The most important factor for a successful membership in a YPO is to enjoy it and have fun. You are investing time away from work and possibly your family, so there is no reason why you shouldn't enjoy yourself and make it a great time!

Best of luck on your YPO journey,

Ryan Kohnen  
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## Why Do People Start YPOs and What Are They?

Young Professional Organizations (YPOs) are typically social and business organizations for individuals in their 20s and 30s. The vast majority welcome all occupations and ages; however some are more strict requiring specific levels of experience or age limits.

To achieve value in your membership, it is helpful to understand why most YPOs are in existence. YPOs are founded for a variety of reasons. Chambers of Commerce or Economic Development organizations typically start YPOs to help attract and retain top young talent in their geographic area. In addition, these organizations pride themselves in discovering, developing and producing the future leaders of their communities.

Most YPOs founded by young professionals themselves serve three primary purposes: networking, community service, and/or professional development. Networking and meeting other young professionals with common interests and goals is almost always the number one reason for an organization's founding.

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**With good reason too – in a survey of 1,127 YPO members belonging to 47 different YPOs, 79% of the members surveyed responded that “Networking/To Meet New People” was the primary reason for them joining and getting involved in a YPO. The primary reason receiving the second largest amount of votes was “Community Service/Non-Profit Involvement” at only 15%.\***

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Non-profits and charitable organizations such as United Way or a local symphony have also joined in on creating their own YPOs. Although these types of YPOs have set goals of promoting and

\* *All future statistics in this booklet will be based on this survey.*

fundraising for their institution, networking is still the number one reason people join and attend these functions.

The United States Junior Chamber of Commerce, sometimes referred to as the “Jaycees,” is a worldwide organization that has been around since 1920. With thousands of chapters around the world, you can find a Jaycees or Junior Chambers in almost any city. The Junior Chamber is one of the more structured organizations for young professionals and focuses on professional development. The survey, as referred to earlier, represents a combination of all these types of YPOs.

Most major cities have many YPOs, so you have the option to be a part of a business-focused group, or a charitable-focused organization, or both. 21% of those surveyed reported being a part of multiple YPOs. If you can get value out of just one, why not get more value in your life by being a part of several!

### **Laura Sudduth, Frankfurt Jaycees**

*I initially joined the Jaycees at the urging of my husband who said that this would give me a chance to meet people in the community. You see, after college, when we were finally ready to settle-down and establish some roots for our family, we moved back to his hometown – where my only friends were his friends or my co-workers. So my initial involvement was purely social.*

*But my view expanded when I went to my first state convention less than two months later. The Jaycees had competitions and trainings and networking....Oh, and lots of fun! But it was the professional development training and fine-tuning of my writing and speaking skills through the competitions that hooked me. After the state convention, I went on to the national convention where I was a competition finalist.*

*It changed me.*

*I gained the confidence I needed to chair a community service project. And from that project, I learned the basics of project planning, managing manpower, budgeting, internal communications, public re-*

*lations skills and reporting. So while the community service project was for the community, I really felt like I gained from it as well.*

*Since then, I have served on several boards in the community (including our local main street organization and our chamber of commerce) and I'm starting a new arts non-profit in the community, thanks to the strong bond that has been created between the Jaycees, our local chamber and our tourism commission. Instead of being just another transplant to the community, I'm seen as one of Frankfort's future leaders (heck, maybe I AM a leader NOW) and someone who people can call on when they need a task completed.*

*As far as my career goes, my Jaycee experience has helped me move from a secretarial role into a marketing and outreach role, often being called upon to speak in workshops and conferences representing my company (Kentucky's state housing finance agency, the Kentucky Housing Corporation). I often manage projects, coordinate timely and urgent changes to marketing efforts and typically have many projects going on at the same time. I attribute my ability to multi-task to the training and experience I have gained through the Jaycees.*

*And community connections... I can't even begin to explain how my Jaycee involvement has helped me to meet and work with community leaders and businesses. It is incomparable to anything else I've ever experienced.*

## Networking: The Basics of a YPO

Sometimes networking is mistaken as just “meeting people” or “talking to people,” but do you or the people you talk to receive any value from just meeting each other and chatting about the weather? Probably not (unless you are REALLY into the weather).

Networking is all about exchanging information and resources among the parties with whom you interact. More simply, it is about finding and giving value to build your network. A network is your community of friends and associates that you can call on for services, advice, assistance, or to fulfill some need.

There are many articles on books on networking and building relationships, but my simple strategy on building a network is outlined in four basic steps.

1. Creating Your Network
2. Building and Growing Your Relationships
3. Maintaining Relationships
4. Calling on Your Network

In steps numbered one and two, you need to consider these items: Quantity and Quality.

You know the old saying, “It’s quality, not quantity”? That is partially correct, since you definitely want both when building your network. The larger your network, the greater your access to building relationships and resources (Creating Your Network). The better your relationships are with that network (Building and Growing Your Relationships), the more opportunity you have to gain valuable and numerous resources.

In EACH aspect of the four steps to building a network, everything is based on providing mutual value to the relationship. People you meet will need to see you as a valuable resource, just as you

are looking to find value in them. That quality could be as simple as talking to someone because they have a positive and uplifting attitude, incredible knowledge on a subject, or work experience in a specific industry. On the flip side, you'll have to offer something of benefit to them in order for the relationship to work.

### **Creating Your Network**

In joining a YPO, you have taken the first step in building or adding to your network. There are no limits to who can be in your network or how you build it, but for a lot of YPO members, their membership is the primary method to creating theirs. The young professionals in your organization are potentially your long-term network!

### **Building and Growing Your Relationships**

So you made the handshake, exchanged names, found out where you each work, and what you do for your respective companies.

Now what do you talk about?

If you are new to a YPO and do not know the attendees, here are some “stock” questions that can get the conversation going:

“How long have you been involved in this organization?”

“What aspects of the organization have you found particularly valuable or interest you the most?”

These questions will not only be a source of great information for you as you begin your journey in a YPO, but are great relationship builders – people love being an “expert” and helping others.

Keeping up with current events, the local business journal, and blogs can usually generate some great conversations relating a news item to either of your professions. You can ask a whole host of questions from “How do you think that will affect your industry?”

to “What is your take on that situation?” If the person has not heard about a particular headline or read a specific article, this is an excellent opportunity for you to talk about it briefly and thus provide substance to the budding relationship.

When you begin attending YPO events to create and expand your network, you will likely encounter four types of people.

The first character is “The Salesman.” It is obvious that this person is here to make sales and everyone in that room is nothing more than a prospect for a sale. They are not interested in anything you have to offer, unless you are interested in purchasing their product or service.

The second personality is “The I’m Looking For Someone More Important Than You” networker. Have you ever starting talking to someone and instead of focusing their attention on you, they are already looking for the next person with their wandering eyes? At least the Salesman has potential even if it is for selfish reasons; this person may just be a lost cause.

The third type of person is “The Business Card Grabber”. This person is a combination of the Salesman and the Wandering Eyes, but not necessarily an evil person. They are too focused on quantity, without realizing the importance of quality in the relationship. This person is all about making as many contacts as possible.

There is one other type of person out there I like to call the “Someone of Value” networker. As I mentioned earlier – a relationship is about providing mutual value to each other. This “Someone of Value” is with whom you have the ability to carry on a real conversation and establish a connection. This person provides value either personally or professionally through their experiences and knowledge (a potential mentor perhaps).

Having something valuable to offer is easy...knowing what that is can be challenging. Early on in many careers, my own included, it is easy to fall in the category of Salesman, Wandering Eyes, or Business Card Grabber.

## **Maintaining Relationships**

In the face of great technology, this generation has no excuse for not maintaining relationships. Our parents' generation had to rely on face-to-face conversation, the landline telephone in their home or office, and snail mail. We now have email, text messaging, mobile phones with internet, Facebook, Twitter, Instant Messenger and a rapidly growing market for other greater forms of communication and social networking. We should all be masters at maintaining relationships.

Providing continuous and new value to a relationship is important. If you are not someone that provides constant value to the people in your network, you may lose touch and the relationship.

There is no real science to maintaining relationships other than a little time and effort.

## **Calling On Your Network**

If you have gone through the work of building and maintaining a network, you need to get some return out of your investment, right?

Calling on your network is the simply reaching out to individuals for specific needs. When I was the President of the YoungExecs of San Antonio, I had built a solid network of over 100 members in the organization.

In our first year, we created an event called “YoungExecs for Kids”, which was a fundraiser for two local children’s charities. Within our own YPO, I called an event planner, a pizza chain marketing director, an owner of a local brewery, a commercial real estate professional and many other individuals. What came out of these phone calls was an amazing event with pizza, beverages, door prizes and a location all generously donated for the cause.

We charged only \$20 per person for the event and every penny went directly to the children’s charities. We ended up raising over \$2,500 – now that truly is “calling on your network!”

For something more self-serving, you may be trying to get a meeting with the Director of Sales & Marketing for XYZ Company and know that someone in your network is a friend of that person. You owe it to yourself to give that contact in your network a phone call and ask for assistance in setting up that meeting.

These are just two examples of the benefits of building your network, but I find myself using my network multiple times a week for a variety of reasons. As mentioned earlier, the key to a great personal network is to continually provide added value to the members in it. If you frequently ask for things without giving back, the network will gradually become smaller and less likely to help when you need it.

Look for ways to offer more value to your network – it could be referring business, providing business intelligence on competitors, or just sending an email with a link to a great magazine article on their industry.

Your network will be the best reward of your YPO membership. It could be the key to your next job, your next big client, or the future partner in your first big business venture.

### **Alex Fisher, Young Professional Connection (Metro Detroit)**

*I was on my way out of town for a business trip and stopped in to see a friend and have a martini with beforehand. I had just recently moved back to the Detroit area and had learned about YPOs from a great organization I discovered in my old location. I had told her about it and how I wished we had something like that where we were. Many YPOs focused on Detroit City proper, but there wasn't one to really represent the whole Metro area – so we decided to try it out and put together an event.*

*Our first event saw about a foot of snow and really bad driving conditions (anyone familiar with the Motor City will understand you have to drive everywhere to get anywhere). Even with that bad weather we*

*managed to get a great range of 21 young professionals and it was a great success– people made new business contacts, new social contacts, and I think a few people even got some dates out of it!*

*From that point on we decided to give it a name and formed the Young Professional Connection. We decided to hold monthly meet-ups/mixers the last Thursday of every month and also matched it with a website ([ypconnection.com](http://ypconnection.com)), a monthly newsletter, and various groups on social networks. We now have over 400 members and have been around for almost a year. I was even asked to participate as a representative at the Young Professional Leadership Council, a group endorsed by the Detroit Chamber to bring local YPOs together and increase involvement in local business.*

*I have since followed-up the creation of Young Professional Connection with an additional resource for our members, young professionals in general, and people in their 20s and 30s. The Young Professional Blog Aggregator ([ypblogs.com](http://ypblogs.com)) brings together over 100 quality blogs surrounding topics of interest to young professionals. It's updated every 10 minutes and lets YPs see what other YPs are writing, discussing and learning everyday. I encourage our members and all bloggers who think their material would be interesting to young professionals to submit their site so we can all grow and benefit as a community.*

## **Get Involved: You Get What You Give**

The number one mistake of individuals joining a chamber, YPO or any organization is that they expect to receive value without doing anything for it. I cannot tell you how many times I have had the following conversation:

PERSON NOT INVOLVED: “I am not renewing my YPO membership because I didn’t get anything out of it.”

ME: “Well, what did you give into the YPO?”

PNI: “Ummm...I paid them money and I thought there would be some benefit to it.”

ME: “You have got to give value in order to receive value.”

PNI: “I did. I gave them my credit card number and showed up to their events.”

ME: “That is just the beginning. The YPO’s objective is to provide the venue for you to network and build your own relationships. It is up to you to take advantage of those opportunities. They can’t do that for you.”

It is extremely rare to have someone claim to “not receive any value from membership” when they are involved in a committee or serve on the Board. Same organizations, same events, but a different perspective of the value they were receiving. There is a direct correlation between the value you will receive out of membership and the work that you give to your YPO.

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**In fact, our YPO survey showed that members who served on a committee or board rated their chance of renewing their membership a 9.4 out of 10. Those that did not serve on a committee or on the board rated their chances of renewing only 7.2 out of 10.**

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Your solution to receiving value is simple: get involved any way you can. You don't need to serve on the board or lead a committee to make this work. It can be as easy as offering to make name tags for the luncheon. You are involved and vested in the interest of the organization, not just yourself.

I suggest that by the first or second event, but at the most, it should only take you three events to ask what you can do to get more involved.

Volunteer based organizations are ALWAYS looking for help and volunteers. You will not be turned away! If you are turned away wanting to volunteer, you don't want to be a part of that organization anyway. Run away from it.

So why is this? How is it that people receive more value through giving their time and efforts?

First, you will build stronger relationships in a service or volunteer atmosphere than a networking atmosphere. Let's say you serve on a committee that helps host quarterly happy hours. You are now a part of a "team" working together towards a common goal. There is more of an instant bond with that group of people, than those that you will meet at an evening happy hour.

Secondly, your sense of purpose within the YPO will be greater. Instead of feeling like you are just attending events, you will be a part of the events. You will feel personal fulfillment out of what you are giving and accomplishing for the organization.

## **Taw Jackson, Flathead Area Young Professionals**

*“I have been in the FAYP for 6 years. In 2002 my wife, daughter, and I moved to the Flathead Valley for my employer. Having only visited once I thought this would be a great way to meet and network with other young people. It did not take long to make friends and develop networking relationships. Soon I wanted to become further involved and volunteered to chair a committee. This soon led to me becoming President. I spent the next three years in this position, which taught me more than I could have ever imagined. It was not an easy time as I soon found the amount of work needed to keep a volunteer organization running is unbelievable. From this experience I have many take-aways that will last a lifetime in both my professional career and on a personal level. This experience, the friends I have made, the contacts I have made, and the knowledge I have gained is something I will always be grateful for. “*

## Get Involved II: Training Ground

The long-term relationships you build through your YPO are invaluable. However, I have also benefited from the immediate value of professional development and training that I received from my positions within a YPO.

Think about which of your personal skills you would like to develop. They could be leadership, accounting, marketing, or anything else. Now, imagine the YPO as your training ground to developing those skills.

For example, if you have a new marketing method you want to try, why not try it out with your YPO? If you want to test your accounting skills, why not volunteer to help with keeping your YPOs finances in order?

There are plenty of specific skills you can enhance or improve through a YPO, but I think your leadership skills have the greatest opportunity. Your true leadership qualities will show when you become involved in a YPO. If you manage people and are their boss, they **HAVE** to listen to you. But with a YPO, you are dealing with volunteers and you need them to **WANT** to listen to you.

The following is an excerpt from my book, *Young Professional's Guide to Success*. In this excerpt, I hope you can learn from my mistakes, as well as see the value in the leadership skills I developed throughout the process.

*The first YPO I founded was called the YoungExecs. I founded the YE in San Antonio and in one year's time grew it from an idea to over 100 members. Our very first luncheon event had 50 young professionals that featured a panel discussion of three local leaders. Our one-year anniversary luncheon was attended by over 120 people, including city leaders and some of the area's most talented young professionals. Our keynote speaker was billionaire and philanthropist Red Mc-*

*Combs. The luncheon was a symbol of growth and success in a short amount of time. I began a goal of adding chapters throughout Texas. The second chapter was targeted for Austin.*

*I also mentioned in the first chapter of this book that the San Antonio chapter is no longer in existence. However, the chapter I founded in Austin is alive and doing very well. So how did the YE die in my home-town, whereas the chapter in Austin is alive and thriving?*

*In 2003, the idea for the YoungExecs came about by my being frustrated in not finding an organization dedicated to young professionals. I had been to many chambers, business associations, and civic groups to meet young people in business without luck. While I have found great value in chambers, organizations like the American Marketing Association or Public Relations Society of America, young professionals did not constitute a significant percentage of the attendees at these functions.*

*My goal was to create an organization that accomplished three things. The first goal was the building of relationships with the future leaders of San Antonio. In San Antonio and many other cities there is what is known as a "Good Ol' Boys Network." This is a group of CEOs, executives and leaders in a community that seem to make things happen and lead initiatives. Although the term is gender specific, the network has changed and is no longer male-only. My thought was, "Why not start building those relationships as young professionals, instead of waiting until we are older?"*

*The second goal of the YoungExecs was to create educational opportunities. This included everything from hosting speakers at luncheons to dinnertime conversations with moderators.*

*The third and final goal of the YoungExecs was to encourage community involvement. At every function we had non-profit organizations speak about volunteer opportunities or had someone from the city speak about civic involvement.*

*I still believe that our mission in having the YoungExecs accomplish these three goals was spot-on. However, the way in which I founded and grew the organization determined its long-term success.*

*I love creating things from scratch. If it's a business, a concept, or anything at all, I receive my greatest satisfaction from seeing an idea turn into a success. When I have an idea that I believe has merit, it usually consumes me. Thank goodness that my wife, Lacey, has now*

become accustomed to these times of extreme focus, where she knows that it is probably best to leave me alone as I become immersed in a goal. It was a battle, but she finally allowed me to put up dry-erase whiteboards in our home office so that I could diagram my many ideas, or as I simply say, “whiteboard” them.

So when I thought of the YoungExecs, I had the idea and the concept. I had it all mapped out. I had the vision, the mission statement, the organizational structure, and every aspect of the YoungExecs ready to go. As the founder, I became the President of the organization for the first year and would pass the reins over the following year.

After scheduling the first luncheon, I had a meeting with some of the young professionals that I thought could be of value to the organization in leadership roles. I envisioned specific people for certain roles and was able to spell out to them exactly what was expected out of their role and their tasks. Although they were well qualified to handle their specific roles, none of them met my expectations. I was constantly filling in and taking up the slack. I was basically running the organization by myself.

It was a hugely successful first year. I did not recognize the problem: I was spending 20 hours a week on an organization that produced zero income for me. The organization was growing, young professionals were getting huge value out of their involvement, and I gained exposure in the community for founding the organization.

After I stepped down as the President, I began my focus on expansion, beginning with a chapter in Austin. Phil Rodriguez, an Austin resident who did business in San Antonio, had attended YoungExecs events and was a great candidate to help lead the charge in Austin. Phil had a large network and had the passion and entrepreneurial spirit to take the role as the President of the Austin chapter. He gathered a team of young professionals for his leadership team.

Fast forward one year. The San Antonio chapter has folded. The Austin chapter is alive, strong and still growing. I had not been involved in either the YE in San Antonio or Austin for many months. I decided to go back to school full-time, which took all of my time and I was unable to volunteer any time to either chapter. Although I was disappointed the YE of San Antonio had come to an end, I remember thinking to myself, “Be happy for what you accomplished – it was an undertaking that could not have begun without me.”

*Fast forward another six months. I was reading *Winning*, by Jack Welch – one of my favorite business books of all time. In his book, Welch was speaking of leadership and what constitutes great and poor leadership. His philosophy is that a great leader creates an organization that succeeds after the leader is no longer around.*

*This hit me like a ton of bricks. So did I fail with the YoungExecs of San Antonio? I created an effective organization that accomplished much in one year, and Jack Welch is calling me a bad leader because it did not survive after I left? Wouldn't that make me a good leader, because when I led the organization it did well?*

*Welch was correct. Although I was the founder and ran a series of events for one year, I failed at creating an organization that was bigger than me – one that belonged to the young professionals, not to me.*

*The YoungExecs of San Antonio did not succeed because I did not empower leadership to succeed. I merely tried to use them to fulfill my dreams and wishes, not their own. They would have ideas of their own, but if it wasn't part of my plan, I did not let it have a place in the organization. I looked at them more like employees than as potential leaders themselves.*

*In Austin, where I was not heavily involved, Phil Rodriguez led his team into a successful year and transition. He gave free-reign to his young leaders to try and succeed on their own. Because of this, all of YE Austin has ownership and pride in what they accomplish – not just one person. There is a collaborative approach where everyone is empowered to make change or lead. This is why it is still around today.*

*It was five years later. The San Antonio Sports Foundation had asked me to serve as one of their founding members of the Circle of Champions. This group was to be comprised of young leaders in the San Antonio community to help raise awareness and funding for the SASF. The group started off with excitement, but as with any new organization or group, there was not a clearly defined mission, and it soon lost momentum.*

*I believed the Circle of Champions had great potential benefit for the San Antonio Sports Foundation and had ideas and a plan that could define a mission and get the young leaders energized. I asked if I could lead a meeting and my request was granted. However, from my experience with the YoungExecs, I wanted to get the buy-in of my fellow members and empower them. I could have outlined a plan as*

specific as I had with the YoungExecs, but I knew in doing so would be a grave mistake for the organization.

I had a plan and by implementing it “as is” I felt it would be a success, but I knew I had to approach this differently. I called Erik Darmstetter, CEO of Sales By 5, and asked if he would be willing to facilitate a brainstorming session for the members of the Circle of Champions. I wanted everyone to get a sense of empowerment and equal contribution. Erik agreed that my plan could be great for the Circle of Champions, but the goal was to facilitate a beneficial brainstorming session, not determine what plan should or should not be used.

The brainstorming session began and the wants, goals, and strengths of our members were clarified. The ideas that were coming from the members in this meeting were spot-on of what my original plan was.

I thought to myself, “This is great! We are going to do exactly what I originally wanted and planned, but everyone feels as if this is a collaborative plan, instead of mine. I avoided the mistake I made with the YoungExecs!”

This brainstorming session had been a success beyond what I hoped. Someone then offered a great idea that I never thought of. Then another person took that idea, expanded it and made it better. And another jumped in enthusiastically and made that one better. Soon the collaborative process took the group to a whole different direction than my plan...it was amazing!

We stumbled onto something that made us excited about our group. We were energized with the direction of the Circle of Champions because of a collaborative effort that was MORE than the plan I had in mind. My original plan may have been good and could have worked well, but our new direction was much better.

The value of empowering people is not just so they feel empowered; but that you will achieve more with this mindset. The value of collaboration is that many people will produce better ideas than that of one person.

If you find yourself in leadership positions where you are making large decisions for organizations, you can apply this principle, but you can also apply it to any project of task that involves more than yourself.

*Many times, young professionals feel the need to share their knowledge, prove themselves, or ensure that they get credit and recognition for their work. Although it is important for you to have documented success in your workplace, try to find that balance of getting the recognition you deserve, without being a dictator, and by doing what is in the best interest of your organization.*

## Building a Sustainable Organization

The following sections are for those in leadership positions of a YPO. However, for those not yet in leadership positions and looking for ways to take a leadership role – read on.

If your YPO is in its infancy, you may think that the first year is the toughest. I actually think it's the easiest. It may be more work than the following years, but not the toughest. It is easy to create excitement and capture people's attention. However, KEEPING their attention is the toughest part. I have seen plenty of YPOs start out with a bang and by the third year they are in a fizzle. Just ask me.

I have heard much of the same complaints from these YPOs:

“Our attendance at events has been steadily decreasing.”

“We are having a hard time getting people to volunteer.”

“It's always the same people in leadership positions and no one wants to replace them.”

When you start a YPO, there will be buzz, excitement, and plenty of people willing to volunteer and help. Anything new and different is exciting. This is fun and your events will be of interest. However, by the 13th or 14th luncheon with the same format, people will tire of the repetition. Your members may have established themselves as a great group of friends and don't feel the need to actively network or attend as many events. “They got what they came for,” is their justification.

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**In our YPO survey, 78% of respondents said that their main reason for their original involvement in a YPO was networking and meeting people. However, only 51% of them said that networking and meeting people was the reason for STAYING a member. This percentage actually decreases as the length of membership increases.**

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The YPOs that I see with lasting power are usually focused on one of two things: professional development or community involvement.

Professional development can include leadership development, skills training or career growth. One of the most valuable forms of professional development programs I have seen are in the structure of “forums.”

The first forum I discovered was through the Young Entrepreneur’s Organization. The YEO is a worldwide organization of entrepreneurs, ages 45 and under, with businesses in excess of \$1 million. This obviously limits the amount of people allowed to participate in their forums. However, the concept can be applied to any organization and I highly recommend it for young professionals.

Think of a forum as your own personal Board of Advisors. You may be involved in a Board of Advisors or your company may have one. A company’s Board of Advisors may meet once a month to talk about the challenges and issues facing the company. A forum would also meet once a month to discuss all the obstacles and concerns facing the members within their own careers and professions. A forum is a confidential group of members, who have no conflict of interest, and whose ambition is to create a sense of comradery through the thoughtful exchange of advise and life stories. As these forum members meet on a regular basis, they get to know each other, form relationships and act as each other’s own Board

of Advisors.

All parties involved in a forum profit from its existence. This is just one of the many ways to incorporate professional development as your organization's purpose.

The second most common purpose is community involvement. When the work of your organization supports a specific charity or group of charities, the aspiration of the group again becomes bigger than the individual. Your members will no longer just show up to network or to listen to a good speaker, but to take part in a greater cause.

The common denominator of both of these focuses is the shared responsibility among its members. Whether your YPO members are serving on a board or committee or serving a purpose (with even the smallest of responsibilities), your membership retention rate will increase exponentially.

### **Michael Hill, Holland Young Professionals**

*My involvement in the Holland Young Professionals over the last four years has allowed me to become more involved in my community than I otherwise would have. In addition, I have made many great friends and developed a very extensive network to draw upon professionally. When unified through an YP organization, Young Professionals are able to have a dramatic impact on their surrounding community. I am confident that all professionals under the age of 35 can benefit from the networking, social and educational opportunities available through YP organizations.*

## **Ideas, Events and Programs for Your YPO**

Most YPOs are very similar in structure. There are usually luncheons with speakers, happy hours or mixers, and community events. However, even in this basic structure, there are many variables that can turn an average event into something exceptional.

### **Assigned Seating**

If your YPO hosts sit-down events, and I find this aspect to be a must-do, be sure to consider assigned seating. It is human nature to do what is most comfortable, and sitting by people you know is comforting. Pretty soon, people may find themselves sitting by the same people every event. You could even feel a responsibility to sit by certain people because you are friends with them or already know them.

Have someone randomly assign seating so that every time they attend an event, they will be sitting next to different people. Assigned seating guarantees that your members will be meeting new people at every luncheon or event. At first, there always seems to be some reservations and dislike for this practice, but after a while, your members will understand the value in this and appreciate the time it took someone to assign seats.

### **Member Hot Seat**

This is a fun way to get to know your members. Have a member take the hot seat, or a chair facing the crowd and give them a microphone. Your event facilitator then begins asking a series of questions that serve not only as an ice-breaker but to learn about the member.

Ask some general questions, such as “Where did you grow up?” and “Do you have any pets?” But also ask fun questions like, “If

you were a animal, which animal would you be?” Goofy, yes, but mix up some serious and fun questions and the Member Hot Seat should provide an entertaining 5 minutes, as well as an opportunity to get to know a member better.

### **Non-Profit – Volunteer Spotlight**

At every luncheon or your main YPO event, have a representative of a non-profit organization speak to your group for only 3 minutes. Time them so they don't go overboard. This is an opportunity for the non-profit to tell your YPO what they do and the volunteer opportunities available.

### **Business Leader Lunches**

Business leader lunches are just as they sound: a specified number of members (3-5) have lunch with a business leader in your community. This is an exclusive opportunity for the members to meet a community leader, ask them intimate questions about their job, how they got to their position, what are their aspirations and pitfalls, etc. If your YPO is partners with a Chamber of Commerce, you will already have a resource to connect your group with the leaders in your community. If not, start by researching some of the largest employers in your area and then make some calls! Remember, TALK NOT TYPE. Make a personal connection with these leaders to entice them to take time from their busy schedules to attend your lunch.

### **Business Leader Dinners**

These are along the same line as the Business Leader Lunches. I have attended a variation of this event as a more formal dinner setting that also included a keynote speaker. Dinner and conversation was enjoyed by members and their assigned business leader, but everyone in attendance had the opportunity to listen to the speaker or program.

## **Charity Happy Hour Fundraiser**

By far, this is my favorite venue in all my years of working with YPOs. The YoungExecs of San Antonio held monthly happy hours and socials. Then I thought about the amount of money these bars and restaurants were profiting from us to socialize and realized that we could potentially use that money to support charities and worthwhile causes.

This led to the creation of the YoungExecs for Kids, a charity mixer with all the proceeds going to two chosen children's organizations. As illustrated earlier, it was a huge success with over 120 guests and a sizeable donation to the children.

## **Lunch Bunches**

A Lunch Bunch is an informal brown-bag lunch hosted by a member of your YPO. A member invites up to six fellow members to their place of employment for a tour of their office and to learn more about what they do for a living. The rest of the lunch can just be chatting and getting to know each other, but this is a great way to experience different business settings in your community and expand upon your bank of resources and "call list."

## **Ambassadors**

Every YPO should have a group of Ambassadors. They are an integral part to an organization serving many purposes. First and foremost Ambassadors ensure that the guests of your YPO greeted, introduced and accommodated. They make sure no guest is ever isolated or not interacting with the group. Finally, they follow up with your guests after an event to resolve questions and thank them for attending.

Ambassadors can also serve as your figure heads in the community. If you need a speaker or someone to represent your YPO, Ambassadors are the ones you call on.

## **Lifelong Value**

Your membership to a YPO has the potential to provide lifelong friends, valuable business contacts, leadership growth, and a sense of purpose. Not every community has a YPO, so embrace yours and take advantage of the opportunity that is in front of you.

Try to keep track of all the opportunities that your YPO brings you and when you find the extreme value it has given to your life, make sure you give back and ensure that others can receive the same benefits in the future. Soon enough, you will be mentoring YPOs on how they can receive value themselves.



