



The AMA History Project Presents: History of the SONORAN DESERT FLYERS, INC.



Written by BS (2016); Reformatted by JS (03/2016)

Bob Schumann wrote the following, which was published in the In the Air section of Model Aviation magazine (April 2016 issue).

Growing a Club Through Positive Attitude

Once upon a time, there was an AMA Chartered Club that had a great field for roughly 25 years. Then a telephone call from the new landowner put the club on the street.

From a membership of more than 100 glow fuel-powered aircraft fliers, the group dispersed to other flying fields and clubs in the area, leaving a handful of stalwarts who traded flying for site searching. This was in 2006.

A park site within a town was found and the law changed to allow its use for flying electric-powered model aircraft with a weight limit, flying height restriction, and club membership ensuring site owner's insurance. On August 18, 2008, eight members of the reconstituted AMA Chartered Club #3249 Sonoran Desert Flyers, Inc. stepped onto their new flying field for their first flights.

The site was an abandoned asphalt and gravel pit operation that the town of Oro Valley, Arizona, had in inventory for a large community center project. It was used for hiking and dog walking, and as a material-storage area for the town's public works operation.

A dirt road that had been built as a training exercise for the town's heavy equipment operators had north-south orientation. That coincided with the prevailing winds and became the runway. The license with the town did not allow any permanent structures or improvements and had a 30-day notice clause.

The starting number of members was eight and that first day a neighbor was walking his dog and asked what we were doing. He became our first new member and we taught him how to fly after he joined the AMA.

Because our position within the park/town was temporary and certainly not heavily invested, we set modest dues at \$20 per year, with no restrictions on the membership number, but they had to be AMA members. Because there were houses adjacent to the flying site, we felt that electric power was the only option. We haven't had any noise complaints.

Our attitude was to please everyone we saw because we were such beggars that we couldn't offend a soul. And we needed numbers to show the town that this wasn't some tiny group satisfying its own private interests. Plus, when you look at yourselves as the "Johnny

Appleseeds of electric-powered model aircraft flying," you became fervent in your approach to newcomers.

The amount of fun we were having flying at a convenient place where everyone was learning about electric powered aircraft, and then teaching what they knew or had just learned to newcomers, generated a camaraderie and open feeling among the members. This was sensed by the new arrivals.

The first years, our growth was slow because we did not have a visible location, did no advertising, and our club wasn't particularly noticed or promoted by the town. We felt we needed to be recognized by the town to ensure our continued use of the site. We encouraged people to bring airplanes they had purchased for their grandchildren to us to assemble, and teach them how to fly. We put together a program that we called "Buy, Build & Fly," and timed it for after the holiday gifting season.

We had a small membership that we thought just wanted to fly, so the first thing we needed to do was to sell them on helping us get this off the ground. The small group of people did a lot of the work, but as the event unfolded, even our more reticent members jumped in... and had fun doing it. There is something rewarding about talking about your hobby to others without having to pay them to listen.

After each of these events, the membership grew. The people we talked to at the event came back, we taught them how to fly, and they joined the club. Many of the old timers had undergone bad experiences at other clubs, where they weren't made to feel welcome. That was not going to happen at our club. The enthusiasm of our members spilled over to the newcomers to the hobby. Every member is an ambassador for our hobby and our club.

At events, we have field marshals who introduce themselves to newcomers and ask if they know about our hobby. They show them our model displays, introduce them to the members, and have them explain their models and aircraft functions.

Sometimes this leads to an introductory buddy box flight or an appointment for the next week for training and club joining .We train newcomers every Saturday from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. with club trainer planes and instructors. We have 60 youth members.

During normal operations - both during weekends and throughout the week - we greet all visitors. If they have been in the hobby, we ask about their interest and their background. Most aircraft flown at our field seem to interest our visitors.

Not all club members can come on like Chamber of Commerce types or other sales people. We are selling both the hobby and our club as a nice bunch of people. Our club motto is "We fly the wind and shoot the breeze." Our club's ambience is that of a country store and the gatherings there.

We certainly aren't gaining members from our "hard scrabble" operation because the only site improvement we have is a safety fence.

Why were we asked to write an article about growing a club's membership? Well, it could be because we had 60 members in February 2013 and in January of 2016, we had more than 160!

We give the community a place to have fun and exercise from the neck up. Physics, chemistry, aerodynamics, and several other disciplines come into play when flying model aircraft. Several of our youth members have gone on to aircraft education and careers. We continually sell our hobby.

We had a successful National Model Aviation Day event in August 2015 - not a great time for an outdoor gathering here in Tucson, Arizona! And on December 7, we had an Aviation Day at Naranja Park. We had a full-scale medical transport helicopter with crew and paragliders drift in, with a 90-minute RC flying demo from our members. It drew more than 400 people.

Self-promotion works. We've made our case before the town council, and or the community. The community responds by supporting our club, joining, and learning how to fly. There is a link to our website on the town's park website.

We seem to have the formula for growing our club by first being friendly, then being exciting in both our flying and the events that we can develop.

Look at our website, www.sonorandesertflyers.us, to see all of the stuff going on with the videos and still photos, and listen to what an RC dad has to say about the fun he and his family are having, as his 11-year-old son is on his way to becoming a great RC pilot. Don't be afraid to extol your virtues. No one is going to do it for you.

If this sounds like a motivational speech, I have been successful! Look at what we have to sell - - certainly not a country club. It is the members and their friendliness. We have a fun hobby; don't let the negative types in your club run potential new members away.

Make a group of ambassadors and have them hustle the visitors. You have a great product to sell. Remember, we started with eight members and some of them had to work to put on their game faces. It is worth it.

*-Bob Schumann
Vice President, Sonoran Desert Flyers, Inc.*





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AMA History Project
National Model Aviation Museum
5151 E. Memorial Dr.
Muncie IN 47302
(765) 287-1256, ext. 511
historyproject@modelaircraft.org

