

Not Your Grandfather's VFW

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A fish fry with a group of men over 60. Not the type of get-together a 20-something guy is likely to view as an appealing way to spend the evening. But the Veterans of Foreign Wars wants to attract exactly those young men as new members. The VFW believes switching from old-fashioned socials to social networking Web sites is the answer.

The 110-year-old organization whose VFW posts are a common sight in towns across the country, is branching out through blogs and Web sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The efforts hope to offset declining membership due to dwindling numbers of World War II and Korean War generations and difficulties attracting the new generations of Afghanistan, Iraq and even Gulf War vets.

The VFW created a feed on Twitter, which allows a user to post 140-character messages with links that other Twitter subscribers can then “follow,” or subscribe, to read.

“You have to go where they go,” said Jerry Newberry, communications director for the VFW. “This generation is very computer-savvy so some of the old tradition ways don’t work.”

The VFW Twitter feed is updated with messages alerting followers to upcoming events, official statements and links to advocacy causes. It is also a reminder that the VFW is more than a social group or provider of a cheap place to host a party. The organization is dedicated to advocating for military members and their families while supporting overseas troops.

But to advocate you need numbers, and to get numbers you need new members.

“Strength is in numbers,” Newberry said. “We can’t accomplish the things we want to do unless we have the numbers.”

The decline in VFW membership might not have anything to do with stereotypes or a lack of young blood. It might simply be a matter of demographics. There were more veterans coming out of World War II and the Korean War, once the draft and the Vietnam War ended, fewer enlisted in the military.

Since 2001, 1.8 million veterans have become eligible for VFW membership. Of those, about

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10 percent became members. That is a recruitment rate higher than for veterans of Vietnam, Korea or World War II, said Newbury.

But the VFW leadership wants to increase its reach among young vets and to make up for the difference.

“The stereotype might be there,” Newberry said. “The old-style posts are going by the wayside and they are adapting to change and becoming centers of communities. They are providing child care, Internet cafes and computer gaming rooms. It’s a slow transition. The VFW had been around for 110 years and this is not the first time we have had to adapt.”

In a true sign of adaptation, Newberry said national VFW leaders soon will be equipped with mobile devices when they are on official trips. This will allow them to take pictures and record video, then transmit those images instantaneously to members across the country.

For some new members, the draw isn’t the latest technology but the older tradition of responsibility to those still in uniform.

Michael Finley joined the Marines at age 20 and served a tour of duty in Iraq before leaving active duty at age 25 for the reserves. He now is starting his own business, but found time to join the VFW post in Orland Park, Ill.

“When I was overseas we got a lot of support from the VFW, and, honestly, I think it is a responsibility to give back to the troops,” Finley said.

There is also a definite sense of camaraderie that exists between veterans who have seen combat.

“I feel like they are interested in what we have to say,” Finley said. “A lot of them are very accepting.”

That acceptance and understanding is the result of overlapping experiences, according to Roger Barton, club manager of Finley’s post, VFW Post 2791. Barton served in the Army and fought in Vietnam. He said Vietnam vets have a deeper understanding of what troops who recently returned home have experienced.

“You didn’t always know who the enemy was,” Barton said.

That shared experience of a complicated war where the enemy could be the guy standing next to you in a marketplace makes Vietnam veterans especially interested in hearing about the experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, Barton said.

The Orland Park post is unusual in that it has seen its membership grow every year for the past 23 years, Barton said.

He said the post is able to attract new members by reaching out to active-duty service members from the area and sending care packages to them overseas that often include VFW membership forms.

The VFW is banking on the combination of new media and traditional outreach to continue its traditional mission with a new generation of veterans.

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