



Discussion Topic

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Membership for the benefit of all

Groucho Marx is commonly credited with saying he would not join a club that *would* accept him as a member. But Michigan Farm Bureau has a different criteria. Regular members, of course, must be farmers to benefit from the lobbying, public relations and service efforts built around member wants and needs, and most farmers understand the influence they wield when they join nine out of ten farmers to fight for a common cause.

Associate members, however, join because there are benefits that have nothing to do with farming. Insurance. Discounts on General Motors vehicles, hotel rates and tools and equipment, to name a few. Then there are special rates on telephone service, vision checks, prescriptions and more. Is it enough?

"Membership has been down of late, but that's to be expected in an economy like this," said Jenna Schrot, manager of member services at Michigan Farm Bureau. "Our response has been to revamp member services to make them more responsive to member needs and give them a closer Michigan focus." The Michigan focus means more membership dollars will stay in this state with offerings for discounts at Michigan hotels and resorts, including the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island. "We wanted to do our part to stimulate the Michigan economy," Schrot said. "Discounts start at 10 percent for hotels and restaurants, golf packages, etcetera, and go up from there. It's an attempt to have the money spent in Michigan."

Among the more popular benefits of being a Farm Bureau member are the long-standing Grainger discounts on farm supplies and equipment, and the member discounts on automobiles, which is in a state of flux presently, for obvious reasons. "GM has committed to the \$500 discount for Farm Bureau members for the rest of this year, and we're hopeful it will continue." Schrot said. "We understand that everyone has to pinch pennies these days, and we'd like to continue to help our members." Even if auto discounts go away, there are plenty more member benefits to go around, Schrot said. "We're going to continue to do everything we can to make membership as valuable as possible," she said. "That's important these days with so many organizations trying to get your attention. But remember that many groups that seem worthy on the surface may be working to eliminate farming from the state and nation. Farm Bureau is truly a grassroots organization."

Farm Bureau membership isn't all about taking, however. Farmers and associate members can give back to help farmers and non-farmers understand the food industry through projects such as Project RED (Rural Education Days) and Farmers CARE, an effort to educate people about their food and the farmers who provide it. "We're not an organization that just takes membership money and forgets about you," Schrot said. "We encourage members to get involved and support the agriculture industry because they're all that stands between this state and nation and a dependence on foreign food. We already know where dependence on foreign oil has gotten us, and we all need to work hard to stop that from happening to our food."

The bottom line, Schrot said, is a choice. Members can take the benefits offered and sit back, or they can get involved in an organization that fights for issues that are important for every American and every Michiganian. "It's for your benefit to get involved," Schrot said. "Together, we have the power to change things."

QUESTIONS

1. What can your county Farm Bureau do to increase awareness of the benefits of Farm Bureau membership?
2. Without Farm Bureau, where would agriculture in this state stand? Would it be number two, poised to be number one?
3. What can you do to increase involvement in Farm Bureau and to increase the knowledge of farming outside the farming community?