



# The Six Keys to Increasing Member Loyalty

With many studies illustrating that it is easier and less costly to keep existing customers than attract new ones, member loyalty has become one of the main goals for association executives. However, many AEs find this goal to be increasingly elusive, particularly in an age characterized by easy access to information and increasing competition for members from other organizations.

Many associations have discovered that surveying their membership is one of the best ways to foster loyalty because it:

- allows members to feel that they have control over what the association offers them and how it can best impact their careers,
- gives members a reliable and confidential method for communicating their interests to the association,
- provides the association with direction as to where its resources can be most effectively utilized,
- facilitates the opportunity to understand and meet the needs of different member segments, and
- demonstrates to members that their feedback is valued and will be acted upon.

Yet AEs are often unsure of the best ways in which to create a member needs survey, how to deliver it, when to launch it, and which types of questions to ask. Megan Kierkegaard, President of **Association Research, Inc.**, a survey research firm located in Ljamsville, Maryland, suggests the following as six ways that AEs can maximize their investment in a member needs survey.



## Timing is Everything

Because members have so many daily issues demanding their attention, AEs need to determine when a survey will most likely facilitate the best response. Achieving a high response rate is important because it ensures that the feedback is representative of the membership base. Therefore, when preparing to launch a member needs survey, it is important to consider other industry events and

seasonal trends that are unique to the members' industry. By avoiding competition for member attention with other pressing issues, AEs can get a better response to a member needs survey with data that accurately reflects member needs and preferences.



## Keep it Simple

Sometimes AEs fall into the trap of thinking that a member needs survey is an opportunity to get member feedback on every issue under the sun that the actual survey instrument becomes too burdensome to complete. Ideally, the survey length should not exceed 30 questions—or take longer than 10 minutes from start to finish. The survey's content should be clearly focused on areas in which feedback is most needed, and should be structured so that it flows in a natural progression and is easy to navigate. It's easy to throw in a few last-minute questions since you'll have members' attention, but you risk compromising data quality with questions that may be superfluous.

## Need to Trend

A member needs survey should have a prominent place in an association's strategic plan, so that feedback can be solicited on a regular, ongoing basis. Most organizations find that conducting this survey every other year is sufficient to see how member needs are evolving. However, other associations prefer to conduct such a study every year so that they can react quickly to changes that may result from a changing economic picture and an environment that is highly dynamic as a result of changes in technology. Regardless, however, the survey should be conducted on a regular schedule, so that changes can be observed in a way that supports the ability of the association to best address the needs of its members.

## Prevent Ballot Box Stuffing

Another important step to take when designing the survey plan is to ensure that each member can take the survey only one time. Each member should receive an email that directs them to a hosted survey, which can be either completed online or, if the member so chooses, via PDF. This ensures that each voice is heard but that none is permitted to be louder than any of the others.



## Build Sufficient Field Time into the Project Plan

Most of our clients find that it is ideal to make the survey available for 3-4 weeks. This length of time tends to provide members with the flexibility they need to respond knowing their busy schedules. We have also found that it is best to remind non-respondents each week that the survey is available, while avoiding reminders being sent to those who have already responded. The language in each reminder should convey clear information about a final deadline and about any incentive that may be offered for submitting feedback.

## Assurance of Confidentiality

It is vital to receive feedback that is candid and honest, otherwise AEs can be easily misled into making decisions based on inaccurate data. In order to receive accurate data, members need to feel that their feedback will be confidential. The best to assure this confidentiality is to have a third-party involved in the data collection. Third parties can make sure that data is handled so that no respondent is individually identified, and associations often find that such assurances result in higher response rates and more valuable feedback. Third parties can also help to word questions in clear language that will minimize response bias. Finally, if an incentive will be offered and the member's identity will therefore need to be disclosed, the use of a third party often reassures members that their name will not be associated with their individual comments.

Conducting a member needs survey does require some investment of association resources. However, the member loyalty that can result from these studies can generate payoff that is both immediate and long-lasting for years to come.

*If you would like more information on this topic or have any other research needs, please contact Megan Kirkegaard, president of Association Research, Inc., at 240-268-1262, ext.102, or [mkirkegaard@associationresearch.com](mailto:mkirkegaard@associationresearch.com). Since 1984, Association Research, Inc. (ARI) has produced customized survey research exclusively for associations and non-profit organizations, earning a superb reputation for analytical insight, professional service, and business integrity. Throughout its history, hundreds of professional, trade, and charitable organizations have been served. While ARI's clients are exclusively non-profits, its services are wide ranging and include member needs assessments, benchmarking surveys, economic forecasts and analyses, marketing surveys, readership surveys, monthly business statistics, quarterly economic opinion surveys, annual operations surveys, and compensation and benefits surveys. ARI has successfully designed, developed, and processed thousands of survey instruments while maintaining total client confidentiality. ARI is a member in good standing of Insights Association, the national trade association that promotes standards and ethics for marketing research and data analytics.*