

How to Create and Foster Member Engagement

As many professional associations get immersed in the various stages of strategic planning, one issue that inevitably arises is how to create and foster member engagement. Current trends suggest that member engagement will likely become increasingly important in the second half of this decade—and well into the next—due to the following factors:

- **New segments:** Many associations are broadening their membership base to include new segments. This tactic can be key to a solid growth strategy, yet including new segments in a membership base can pose a challenge; much of what was successful in attracting and retaining members before in a professional association's history may not work as well for new members or those who differ significantly from those who joined earlier.
- **Retirement:** Many experienced association members will likely be retiring in the next 5-10 years. More and more associations are beginning to assist members with this transition but are unsure how to keep retirees engaged so that their valuable talents and knowledge can be leveraged, utilized, and passed on to newer members.
- **Technology:** Changes in both equipment and applications are forcing professional associations to reevaluate how they can remain relevant to members and be able to meet their needs, regardless of the devices or the apps they use.

Rest assured that you can stay on top of this increasingly important topic. Megan Kirkegaard, President of **Association Research, Inc.**, a survey research firm located in Ijamsville, Maryland, explores several methods that professional associations can use to address member engagement.



1. Association Newsletter/Magazine

Often the main vehicles for member communications, newsletters and magazines, are also critical tools that members use to get important industry information. However, with the trends previously identified, associations can't assume that the topics popular in previous years will also be those of greatest importance to the membership in the future. In fact, as members age and retire and new members are added to the base, it becomes likely that member concerns will evolve as well. A great way to stay on top of issues of importance to members is to conduct periodic surveys to understand how member needs may have changed, and then incorporate articles that address these hot topics into your association's newsletter and/or magazine. Associations can further leverage these learnings and create greater engagement by asking members to write about these topics and post their articles in the newsletter and/or magazine and on the association's website.

2. Personalized Messages

Since it is likely that there will be vast differences in terms of professional needs between Millennials coming into the membership, Gen Xers as they age, and Baby Boomers who are retiring, each group will respond to different messages. It is critical for associations to understand not only what these differences are, but also the language to use in messaging for each segment as well as how each prefers to receive any communications.

Understanding these differences and responding to them by relevant messaging can impact how well members believe the association understands them, and can have a direct influence on how engaged different member segments want to be.

3. Association Website

Changes in technology have impacted not only devices and software, but also the opportunities for websites to become more functional, engaging, and navigable. Many executives and experts in the communications field believe that websites should be updated every few years to keep pace with what's available and deliver information to members in a way that they expect to receive it. There are several actions that associations can take with regard to their website to impact member engagement.

- **Usability Study:** Before updating your website, experts suggest that conducting a website usability study can maximize this investment in determining what would be most engaging to members and how the site should be structured to maximize a positive user experience. Additionally, associations can promote study results to the membership, demonstrating that they are current on technology trends and showing that they are sufficiently concerned with their membership's needs and preferences to incorporate their feedback into a useful website design and satisfying user experience. Overall, website usability studies increase member engagement in the association's



communications strategies and demonstrate the commitment the association has toward understanding its members and their needs.

- **Create Online Communities:** Some associations have created their own online communities where members can ask questions, get advice, and solicit feedback on ideas. While associations often rely on outside sources, such as LinkedIn, some have found that by hosting their own communities they achieve more value in having greater control over content and the individuals who can contribute. However, these online communities can require a sizeable investment from the association in terms of resources for monitoring discussions, making sure that members get answers to their questions, and managing any software snafus that may occur. Further, it does not help the association if members find the forum difficult to use or have little interest in, or time for, this type of interaction. Therefore, it makes sense for an association to ask its members—through surveys or other types of research—if they would be interested in participating in such a forum and the goals they would envision for such a community.
- **Salary Calculators:** This unique, interactive tool can be an added bonus provided to members after conducting a salary survey. Association members find salary calculators highly useful and relevant. They benefit from it by being able to see how their salary compares to others within their industry based on criteria such as age, geographic location, years of experience, job title, certifications, and gender. Some associations choose to allow nonmembers access to this tool but often limit the number of criteria that can be selected by nonmembers, thereby drawing them to the association website while teasing them with one of the many benefits of membership.

4. Net Promoter Scoring

Some associations find it useful to ask members about their likelihood to recommend membership to other individuals in their fields. This question can be added to a survey, where respondents can indicate their likelihood to make such a recommendation on a scale of 0-10. Those who answer with a “9” or a “10” are tagged as “Promoters” and the answers among individuals in this group can be compared with other respondents in terms of how they answer other survey questions. Do they tend to prefer certain association benefits? Do they attend events for reasons that are different from other attendees? Why do they join the association or renew their membership, and are these reasons different from those among other members? By learning more about who the promoters are and how and why they are engaged, the association can work toward increasing the number of promoters among its ranks, thereby strengthening overall member loyalty.

5. Volunteer Recruitment

For many groups, volunteers are the backbone of a number of association activities, including committee leadership and participation, mentoring, and assistance at association events. Therefore, it is not surprising that when surveying members, many associations take a critical look at volunteerism among their members. By studying the motivators and barriers that members experience when considering volunteering, associations can enhance the volunteer experience, while also learning what appeals to volunteers so that the group can attract more.

6. Apps for Events

Many associations report success with using various apps at their conferences, successfully creating a more appealing and valuable conference or event experience. However, as membership bases become

more diverse, it is important to know which apps will appeal to your membership – or if these experiences will have value at all. To make sure that an investment into apps will achieve the desired results, many experts recommend that associations assess opinions *before* the conference about which types

would be preferred by members and how this experience might impact member attendance. Also, by surveying attendees *after* the conference, associations can learn which member segments used the app, and if the experience met their needs, whether it improved the overall meeting experience, and how it impacted their overall member engagement.

Associations are finding that increasing member engagement is vital to the group’s future. By using just one or two of ARI’s suggestions above, associations can position themselves as a key resource and a critical part of their members’ professional lives.

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.

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