

5 Steps to Help Your Members Manage Today's Information Challenges

Information Management

Chances are very good that one of the most challenging tasks for you as an association executive (AE) is the ability of your organization to help its members manage the deluge of information bombarding them on a daily basis. Assisting members with information management, however, can increase the potential for your association to be a highly valued resource for your membership.

Megan Kirkegaard, President of Association Research, Inc., a survey research firm located in Ijamsville, Maryland, recommends that AEs incorporate these **five steps** to help their members manage information more effectively and to direct them to meaningful content:

1. Identify and Prioritize Information Needs

When identifying the information needs of your members, it is critical to have conversations directly with them. These discussions will help you understand how members' information needs factor into their daily lives and can also shed insight into their priorities.

There are a number of issues involved in accomplishing this step, but it ultimately provides members with the invaluable opportunity to be heard in a setting that meets them where they are.

- Arrange to interview 10-20 members to find out what types of data would be most valuable. In this way, you'll get a

sense of what they'll do with the information and data and how it impacts their daily job. Ideally, these interviews should be conducted face-to-face but, if members are widely scattered geographically, you can conduct them via phone or through focus groups (online or live). While 10-20 different discussions should yield sufficient insight and minimize the chances that you are only speaking to individuals who don't represent the larger membership, keep in mind that additional interviews lengthen the process and demand greater resources.

- When selecting participants for these interviews, be sure to cover various segments of membership by gender, tenure, industry segment—anything relevant to the industry that your association serves. In this way, you will get a broad base of opinion from members who may have varying needs and perspectives.
- Scheduling and conducting these interviews can be time consuming, and there is always the risk that participants might not be up front when talking directly with an association executive. There are out-of-pocket costs in hiring an individual outside of the association to conduct these interviews; only you can judge which method (do-it-yourself versus outsourcing) will generate greater overall value.



Once you've conducted these interviews and determined what the greatest needs are for your professional members, the next step is to gather data that addresses the needs that they have identified and prioritized.

2. Gather Actionable Information Content

There are a number of ways to gather information that would be useful to members, including a search of information that has already been compiled and analyzed (see Step 5 for more details on finding resources that already exist). However, many professional associations find that the data most needed by their members is not readily available, nor does it necessarily address the highest-priority needs. In this case, your association can conduct assessments for greater clarity. Since the interviews in Step 1 are conducted among relatively few members, many associations find that member needs surveys/assessments provide greater results. These studies provide quantitative projections and best practices as to how prevalent member concerns are, how members would like for data and information to be disseminated, how members have effectively managed industry challenges, and how member needs can differ by various segments. You can also learn which association products or services may no longer have value to members and then redirect resources to needs that have a higher priority.

With the member assessments, it is important to carefully construct questions so that they don't bias results. Additionally, it is highly recommended to use a third-party to collect and analyze the data to be sensitive to member privacy and to remain an objective authority.

3. Package Data so Members Can Quickly Assess and Understand the Implications of Major Findings

We've already established that professional association members are overwhelmed by all of the information bombarding them. Therefore, it is critical that you disseminate data/information in a way to them that it is easily and quickly understood:

- Create infographics/slide shares/videos that convey main takeaways and convey key observations to your members in less than a minute.
- Prominently display links to this information on the front page of association's website so that members can easily find it.
- Make sure your website is optimized for mobile/tablet usage so that members can retrieve the data based on their own preferred experience.



4. Facilitate Networking so Members Can Quickly Get Answers to Pressing Questions

Sometimes your members need quick answers to questions, and it is important for associations to facilitate platforms for members to access data when they need it.

- Optimize LinkedIn for members to explore ideas and get answers to questions. Your association needs to consider devoting resources to monitoring this resource for a few reasons. First, it is important to screen potential LinkedIn group members for their interest in becoming part of the group so that it matches the needs of your association membership. Second, the group conversations need to be monitored so members do not feel they are being spammed. Since, ideally, anyone who asks a question on the network should get an answer within 24 hours, you'll want to be sure to delegate that responsibility to someone so that the community becomes an active, trusted, and meaningful resource.

- You can create your own online community so that you have greater control over content and members have a greater sense of privacy. However, these communities also demand resources similar to those mentioned above for LinkedIn groups.

- Online and face-to-face networks are great opportunities to stimulate volunteer involvement. Asking volunteers to staff virtual meetings or live events can be a great way to foster their engagement, demonstrate their presence as a vibrant part of the community, and tap into industry expertise.

More than ever, professional associations need to cement their value in the minds of their members. Assisting members in overcoming one of their greatest challenges—managing information needs—will continue to position your association as a relevant resource in their daily lives.

will come to perceive your association as a resource for highlighting reliable data and dispelling rumors. Salary calculators based on data collected from salary surveys are not only easy for members to use, but by giving

members the ability to filter by certain variables (e.g., geography, certification, experience), the data is more engaging to them and more relevant to each member's unique situation. Salary calculators can also be an effective way of creating more web traffic to your site and exposing your members to other helpful information you have collected.

- Other associations provide reviews of information sources so that members can ascertain which will have the most relevance, and which they can rely upon for valuable insights.

5. Be THE Authoritative Resource

Members look to their professional associations to be the thought leader and the **arbiter** of information and tools to make their working lives better.

- Some associations have begun using content aggregator web-based tools, many of which have free versions. By typing in some keywords into these tools, you can receive updated content each day, cull through the sources to determine which is most reliable, and then summarize and push that content out to your members through your e-newsletter. Members

These steps will have your members perceiving you as their go-to resource for identifying the most relevant industry information, guiding them to the most reliable resources for data, determining how they should manage key industry trends, and providing them with the keys for navigating their careers.

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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