

## Factors Affecting Member Retention

### Overview

It's no secret that member involvement has a direct impact on a member's decision to renew. The biggest challenge has been how to accomplish that! With numerous demands on members' time, the prospect of getting them involved is always problematic. In a special member involvement and leadership development research project, more than 250 association members in seventeen chapters of a national association were asked to identify the factors that contributed to a positive membership experience.

### Findings

The following factors highlight what we have learned:

#### **How the organization makes me feel.**

Members reported a greater desire to participate when leaders and other members make them feel welcome and connected. Membership in a "community" is more than simply sharing common characteristics. That was the incentive to join – to meet "people like me." The actions that guide members on how to become active in the "membership community" and feel part of it are very effective.

#### **Manner in which my orientation was conducted.**

Members who attended a formal orientation reported the session to be pleasant but not extremely useful in helping them understand how to make the most of their membership experience. Those who recalled receiving a package in the mail admitted to scanning the information but gave it little attention. The greatest benefit reported was receiving one-on-one informal advice and guidance from members who were successful and had some tenure in the organization. Associations are about relationships that first begin by establishing bonds and then expand to become more productive personal and professional working relationships.

#### **Overcoming the confusion of how to fit the association experience into my busy lifestyle.**

Most members reported a willingness to participate if and when they have the time and initiated their membership experience through the traditional route (attended a meeting). Many reported that the perceptions from their first exposure to the association directly influenced their decision to get involved. This initial exposure is not sufficient to overcome the member's ignorance on how to use the association effectively to achieve their personal or professional goals. It also stresses the importance on the part of volunteer and staff leaders to understand the direct and indirect cultural messages that are conveyed through its communications as well as the delivery of its programs, products and services.

#### **My own eagerness and willingness to contribute time, talent, and expertise.**

Members recalled joining the chapter with a great deal of enthusiasm and lots of expectations. In spite of this initial enthusiasm, most of those interviewed reported that their decision to volunteer was the result of being asked directly by a member. Many said that the secret to getting them to say "yes" was clearly related to the selection of a task with realistic time commitments and adequate support. Organizations that appear more organized reported having less difficulty getting members to volunteer over those that have no formalized goals and annual plan of work.

#### **What have we learned from this research? Culture and environment are critical factors.**

A membership-based organization is not just about providing services. Rather, it is about helping the member develop his or her human potential, more often stated as achieving his or her personal and professional goals. And most importantly, it is about how members feel each time they come in contact with the organization whether in person, online, or in print. Proper attention to these factors will impact member retention positively.

#### **Many members are unaware of how to take full advantage of their membership.**

Associations offer a wide range of programs, products, and services. Many members are overwhelmed by all that's available and never fully explore much beyond that which influenced them to join. New member orientation packages are usually designed to impress but not guide. Greater attention needs to be paid on gaining members' attention and building a greater understanding and appreciation of how members can use the association as a vehicle to achieve their personal and professional goals.

**Associations need to learn how to identify and cultivate the eagerness and enthusiasm that members exhibit during the first few months of membership.**

Volunteer and staff leaders need to learn new ways to learn more about their members, beyond their names, contact information, and work status. Every member has a rich background of experience, expertise, and contacts. And most are willing to draw upon these if the right match is presented.

In order to do that, associations need to define better than they currently do the opportunities for making a contribution. Volunteerism is more than sitting on a committee. And many different tasks that need to be done are actually opportunities for members to achieve their own specific goals.

Members who are treated as customers will behave like them. They will evaluate your programs, products and services through the lenses of thrifty customers. Very few members join organizations simply to purchase discounted products. Most, by far, join to build relationships with other members who share their common concerns, share information that will contribute to and advance their own well-being.

Building these types of relationships requires volunteer and staff leaders and staff to demonstrate a real interest in their members (whether in person, online, or in print). They need to quickly assess their background, areas of interest, the level of time available at the moment, and their most pressing needs (personal or professional goal). That information will provide volunteer and staff leaders with the information they need to suggest the most appropriate activities that will meet the greatest needs of each member, thereby yielding the greatest member satisfaction.

Contact Melos for more information about member involvement techniques and tools that can be used to support your renewal efforts.

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