

10

Tried and True Methods to Increase New-Member Retention

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You've invested the time and money in recruiting new members, but now you have to convince them to re-enroll as dues-paying constituents in your organization.

While membership renewal is always a continuing process, regardless of how long someone has been paying dues, retaining first-time members presents a unique challenge – and opportunity – for professional associations, trade groups and nonprofits.

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Here are 10 strategies and techniques that you can implement now to enhance your odds of retaining this critical segment of your membership.

1 Have an 'on boarding plan'

First, recognize that first-time members are a specific group within your membership profile and that they need to be approached with specific strategies, said Kimberly Gray, the Events & Communications Coordinator with the Associated General Contractors of Alaska (AGCA).

"Things we address with first-time members is how to keep them engaged," she said. "Engaged members tend to come back. Unless you can show them the value of their membership, they can slip through the cracks. That is something that is of concern to us as I'm sure it is with all trade group associations."

2 Say hello with a personal touch

Your first contact with the new member should come from an association member in a local chapter, Gray said.

"The personal touch is really important," she said, noting the local chapter member should, "Point out, 'Here is the value I got. Here is why you want to hang with us.'"

Follow that up with emails about product offerings from association staff, and an email from the organization's president or executive director welcoming them aboard.

Of course, never address the newcomer as "Dear member" and avoid using Ms., Mr., or Mrs.

Use first names only.

3 Reach out at three and six months

After initial "on boarding" and "welcome aboard" contacts, Gray suggests a hands-off approach for the next three to six months.

"Don't overdo the contacts. Maybe make fewer contacts than with long-term members. Take them out of the loop a bit with the heavy emails," she said, noting it can be difficult to determine "what is enough, what is not enough, what is too much."

At three months, Gray suggests, the association should email the newcomer a listing of continuing education opportunities and other benefits, followed up by an email at six-months highlighting local and national association events.

4 Do a first-year 'loyalty assessment'

"You need to find out what they want, what they appreciate" about the association about six to nine months into that first year to determine if new members recognize the value of their membership, Gray said.

To do that, you need to develop a survey that "more granularly examines" the needs of first-time members to get an accurate portrayal of what they want and what will induce them to re-enroll, said Dr. Larry Seibert, Associations Practice Leader with the Loyalty Research Center in Indianapolis, Ind.

"What are they trying to get? What do they want to do? If you ask such a general question, you'll get 15 different reasons," he said, suggesting you ask that they name organizations they compare your association with.

Their responses will provide meaningful insight, he said, noting if they compare your association to an organization that provides continuing education, they are saying continuing education is among the needs you can address to convince them to renew.

There are three or four reasons people join associations, Dr. Seibert continues, listing medical benefits, continuing education, networking and career advancement opportunities among the ones most commonly cited.

Rather than think of this survey as a needs assessment, think of it as a loyalty analysis.

"Go back to basic needs. Are their needs being met?" he said. "Your publications, conferences, continuing education, website – we don't know which will be the most important until you start analyzing and see if there is a difference between what you are providing and what they want."

5 Sell your association

Dr. Seibert said when he speaks with staff members from associations, trade groups and non-profits, they are often “too focused on their specific roles” and don’t think it is their job to sell the organization.

“I’m not your salesperson” they tell me,” he said. “Yet, when I ask them would they recommend to someone that they join the group, they say, ‘Of course I would.’”

The key, Dr. Seibert said, is every member of the association should be selling the organization and should understand that it is their job to do so, whether they are a “salesperson” or not.

6 Always stress benefits

Gray said that the AGCA’s website constantly updates and promotes its offerings, from webinars to online seminars on varied topics, always stressing that the association is the only one providing this information and that it is specifically designed for its members

Publications, continuing education, certifications, group insurance, as well as interactions with the association – conferences, email communications, contact with member services representatives, association website – are among the benefits that should be emphasized in different ways and different times throughout that first year in the association, Dr. Seibert said.

7 Keep it local

Rather than promote national events and emphasize advocacy on broad issues, Gray recommends keeping it local during that first year.

“It is more important initially to stress the local chapter,” she said. “People want to talk about their own people, what’s going on in their local chapters.”

That doesn’t mean you don’t address national issues or promote national conferences. “There is definitely a value to going to a national conference,” Gray said. “That seems to be missed by some people.”



8 Provide programs

Associated General Contractors of America (AGC) Senior Executive Director of Public Affairs Brian Turmail said that his national organization has created a young leadership group tailored to members under 30 years of age.

It is particularly important to emphasize this “C-Suite for young professionals” to first-time members, to encourage them to participate and, in turn, induce continued enrollment, he said.

“This way, they can see, ‘Hey, we have a future here,’” Turmail said.

The Alaska chapter of the ASG follows suit with an Emerging Leaders program, Gray said.

“You have to keep in mind that an association membership is always changing. You have 50-year members leaving, and new members joining,” she said. “Younger members have different priorities, and you have to address their priorities. I think that is one of the challenges of a trade association – it’s a good challenge, though.”

Gray said another way the AGCA accomplishes this is by encouraging owners of contracting companies to encourage first-year members who want to be involved in local chapter and state chapter events to get into the mix.

“We don’t just want the owner (to attend),” she said, “we want the employees. Just because you can’t come, send someone else.”

9 Capture engagement data

The association needs to capture and document engagement data: Volunteer activity, attendance at chapter events, usage of professional development and continuing education resources, responses to emails and so on.

There is “a little bit of confusion” about the definition of engagement, Dr. Seibert said. “Nobody really has one or everyone has one – all different. Most use the term participation in the definition and I’m not sure if that is a good word to use.”

The bottom line, he said, is that if an association is keeping track of who is accessing its website, attending conferences and taking advantage of continuing education, it has another resource for accurately assessing needs and inducing loyalty.

“The best way is to break out each of these categories and focus on different areas,” Dr. Seibert said. “That is the way to granulate – and to generate more revenue and create stronger relationships with members.”

10 Meet them

“We have members all over the map. We can’t have orientations in our office,” Gray said, noting face-to-face contact can be nearly impossible because of Alaska’s vast size and brutal winters.

That is why AGCA makes it a summer priority “to do a road trip” and visit all its chapters and to specifically meet its new members, she said.

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