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KEEPING YOUR MEMBERS HAPPY

GETTING NEW MEMBERS, RETAINING A HIGH PROFILE IN YOUR SECTOR AND ENSURING A POSITIVE, ACKNOWLEDGED IMPACT ON YOUR INDUSTRY ARE ALL DIRECTLY INFLUENCED BY THE MAKE-UP AND CONTRIBUTION OF A DEDICATED AND FAITHFUL MEMBERSHIP. BUT WE'VE ALL SEEN HOW COMPETITION FROM OTHER LEISURE AND WORK ACTIVITIES - AND OFTEN FROM RIVAL ASSOCIATIONS - PLACES INCREASING PRESSURE ON YOUR MEMBERS' FREE TIME AND RESOURCES. WHAT SHOULD OUTWARD-LOOKING ASSOCIATIONS DO IN ORDER TO PROVIDE SUSTAINABLE, MEASURABLE VALUE TO THEIR MEMBERS - ENCOURAGING THEM BE PART OF A COMMITTED TEAM, AND, ULTIMATELY, TO TAKE ON A RANGE OF LEADERSHIP ROLES?

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Recruiting new members is high on our lists, and most of us devote a significant chunk of our efforts to reaching prospective stakeholders and telling them what we're all about. Often less time is spent focusing on how to retain a core group of engaged, interested members. This is a particularly thorny challenge for those associations with international members.

Holding on to your existing association members tends to be more profitable than looking for new ones because of the notable marketing costs associated with engaging and actually recruiting any prospective new member. Financially, retention problems can be very draining on an association and actually losing members can create problems very quickly.

And **if your association has membership retention problems**, it's likely that you'll be working much harder on the recruitment side. Not only is this relatively more

expensive, but it places your association in jeopardy as your existing members decline, and those who remain are often less able or willing to join the recruitment effort.

This is not to say that recruitment problems is not a key focus, or that recruitment problems do not need to be addressed urgently. However, if your retention rate is strong, your association can survive for a period of time while you fix your association's recruitment problems. Moreover, if your retention rate is strong, then when you do fix the association's recruitment problems, your association has a good chance of surviving long term, building on its secure base of happy members.

Membership retention problems could signal that your association has larger issues. The problem may be in your mission, member benefits or leadership, but if no one wants to stay in the association after joining, then the association is in some kind of fundamental trouble. Before

embarking on a mission to retain or recruit members, it may be worthwhile to step back and take a good hard look at what enticed your members to join in the first place. Is it time to have a re-think in view of changing markets, member demands and expectations, new technology, legal issues, or your competition?

Many associations do not take into account the goldmine of information which is in their hands in the form of an existing member database - even a primitive one. As a starting point, many associations will gain significantly by examining the basic information already available.

At the very least, every association has **basic information** about members which is likely to include each member's membership type and contact details. But this is just a starting point; many associations have far more information about their members, including such wide ranging items as length

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of membership, change in membership category over time, individual specialisations or areas of focus, and items or services that have been purchased from the association over the years.

Despite having this information, many associations don't make full use of it. As a result, these associations may miss the opportunity to improve member services, find like-minded non-members, and increase membership levels.

What are the trends that may help an association identify other likely association candidates? For example, does there already exist a strong level of membership - disproportionate to the level of population perhaps - in particular geographic areas? Why might this be the case? How can an association use that information to gain more members in similar areas?

Associations with global memberships may want to concentrate on the value to be

gained from the particular specialities and professional skills in the membership body. Some key areas in your industry are bound to be the "topic of the month" - something of particular interest to the membership at large. New legislation - or response to an industry crisis - are typical examples, but there are a host of others which apply to specific sectors. Who among your members might be available to share knowledge and experience with other members, addressing topical issues and offering a real benefit of membership? Networking and information-sharing are bound to have great appeal across a wide spectrum, particularly to new members, more junior members, members from less developed regions, and even to non-member professionals in the wider industry - your database of member prospects! Appealing to the special skills of your members and sharing this skills and knowledge effectively can offer a definite advantage, raising profile and adding real value to the work of your association.

The status of your members is flexible.

A member can be a delegate, a committee member, or a board member, a corporate or affiliate member as well - and many members change categories over time. One global association has taken advantage of this to gain another kind of success by offering their more skilled members not only additional professional recognition and exposure - but also leadership roles on the board or with committees. Senior, skill-sharing members are retained as they gain official recognition and status in thanks for helping the association.

In many associations, the problem is not the lack of data, but the need to review the data on a regular basis. Analysing membership data to stimulate original member offers is key to providing those innovative solutions sure to help you retain a dedicated membership.