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INDUSTRY TRENDS  
**PRACTICAL EXECUTION OF A  
MEMBERSHIP MARKETING  
PROGRAM**

# Practical Execution of a Membership Marketing Program

Written by the Association Laboratory

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Many of us struggle to improve our membership growth and retention. Within our offices, and before our boards, we search endlessly for one idea that will reverse our membership fortune. Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet. To successfully attract and keep members, we must continually remind ourselves that membership marketing is a process. No single “super” idea will turn everything around. Until we face this fact, we will continue to repeat the mistakes of the past. There are three distinct phases of membership marketing. First, you must understand your membership. Second, you must attract new members to your organization. Third, you must keep those members.

## Understanding your membership

When building a membership recruitment program, getting bogged down in complex marketing theory and fancy ideas is easy. Before you commit your valuable time and resources to the buzzword of the moment, consider three questions:

- Who are my members?
- What problems do my members face?
- How does my association solve these problems?

Once you have answered these questions, you will understand how to target your membership recruitment activities. The individuals or companies that have already joined provide insight into what individuals or companies might join. There are countless ways of studying membership. Begin by asking the question: What are the demographics of my membership? Demographic information could include some or all of the following: age, income, education, geographic location, title, length of membership and type of membership. While collecting many different types of information is possible, try to focus on areas that will help you identify and understand your current and potential members. A common means of collecting this data is to include this information in your database or directory update process. Simple, inexpensive surveys can also accomplish this task.

Next, answer the question, what problems do your members face? The only way to understand your members’ problems is to ask them. Traditionally, this is done every three to five years as part of the strategic planning process. Unfortunately, your members do not face a changing personal and professional environment every three to five years. Your members face these problems every day. It is a simple process to distribute a small survey each year to your membership. Allow your members to identify and rank issues of concern. You can then adjust your programming and other activities to reflect the priorities of your members. Optimally, you will execute this survey with your budget process so that you factor changing program needs into next year’s budget.

After determining the problems your members face, begin deciding how to address these issues. Once you have an accurate demographic picture of you membership and a strong understanding of the issues they are concerned about, you can assess whether the priorities, programs and services currently provided are consistent with your members’ needs. It is difficult to objectively review the program/service offering of your association. Many sacred cows exist. The historical precedent of certain activities may seem insurmountable. By understanding your members and their problems, you can provide a more fact-based assessment of each program’s worth. While you may not be successful in changing the program mix, at least you’ll know which programs offer the highest potential for marketing success.

## Recruiting new members

There are many different tactics for recruiting new members. Tried and true methods include direct mail, telemarketing, member-get-a-member programs, etc. By focusing on how your organization addresses the problems of the potential member and by focusing on individuals or companies that fit the profile you have developed, each of these programs will be incrementally more successful.

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The following 5-step process can be used to carry out major membership marketing programs.

- **Analysis** First, using the information gathered through the membership profile process, establish your current membership status. What is your retention rate? What is your new member growth rate? What is your current financial situation? The purpose of this step is to identify the current situation of the association. You cannot measure the success of your programs without first identifying the present situation.
- **Goal establishment** Using realistic assessments of market potential and association capabilities, establish end goals for your membership-marketing program. How many new members do you realistically plan on acquiring during the length of the program? What are the financial results you feel are necessary? This goal establishment provides a target by which to measure the success of your program. It allows you to identify whether or not your marketing plan is succeeding so that you can alter your strategies as needed. ?
- **Strategy development** Your marketing strategy is the defining means to acquire new members. Will you focus on price? Will you offer new opportunities available nowhere else? Will the quality of your education be superior to other competing organizations? Often, once you have analyzed your membership, the strategy for success is obvious. If not, test several strategies on an incremental basis before you invest significant resources on an overall program.
- **Task Development** Many marketers say that a successful marketing program is 10 percent strategy and 90 percent execution. Your goal should be to create a marketing program that you and your association can achieve. Remember, be realistic. Break down the major tasks associated with your marketing plan. What are the individual components? Activities might include some of the following:
  - Monthly broadcast fax to key media representatives
  - Five mailings to member prospects identified at the annual conference
  - Six-week telemarketing program to individuals that request magazine subscriber information.
  - These steps represent the guts of your marketing program. Once you have broken these steps down into manageable pieces, visualizing the work is much easier.
- **Task assignment** Review the major tasks necessary to achieve your marketing objectives. Assign these tasks to the volunteers and staff responsible. Allow everyone to review the entire plan so that each individual involved is familiar with the overall strategy and end goals. Work with each individual to identify interim measurements that will allow you to track success. This gives you the information necessary to make strategy or program changes. You can now limit damage or take advantage of unexpected opportunities.

## Retaining your members

A common mistake in the association world is to focus on new member recruitment and forget member retention. New member marketing is exciting and appealing. You get to develop marketing plans, create brochures and write fascinating promotional copy. Existing members, while far more beneficial to the organization, get a generic thank you note with their dues invoice. Your organization should invest more of its resources on member retention than recruitment. Your goal should be to increase the affiliation of these members.

## How do you recognize declining affiliation?

You discover that the number of volunteers is decreasing. Your member retention rate is falling. Each of these are symptoms that the organization is no longer maintaining a relationship with the current member.

There are two areas that should take priority to retain members. First, the organization must continue to adapt to the changing needs of members. Use the tactics outlined above to continually reeducate yourself on the problems and issues faced by your members and how the association can solve them. Second, focus on improving your member service. The quality of your member service is one of the primary factors influencing the decision to retain a membership. Oftentimes, it is the only personal interaction between the member and your organization. Is this interaction enjoyable or convenient? Does the staff seem to care about their work and the problems they face? Are phone calls returned promptly? Are commitments delivered on time?

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The world is full of people who attach their loyalty to an inferior product or service that displayed a higher level of concern and service. The customer service process is not a one-shot deal. You must commit to these activities and build these initiatives into your budget to the extent that your resources allow. As the positive interaction between your members and your association builds, their affiliation with the goals and programs of the association will increase. Over time this will allow your association to try new initiatives or use this support for more intangible activities like government affairs or public relations activities.

The bottom line? As stated earlier, there is no silver bullet. You must pursue the marketing process methodically. If you make a commitment to this process, your reward is to sit back and enjoy the results!

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### About the Author

Association Laboratory is a national consulting firm that specializes in the research and development of marketing and organizational strategy, including professional development, for associations.

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