



Member Communications & Engagement

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Abstract

Successful member-driven organizations exchange information with their membership through streamlined communications that is clear and direct and converges on value propositions that are relevant to both sides.

Much of the energy spent by these organizations is to win the mind share, affiliation and loyalty of its members and create synergy from a symbiotic relationship. Great member communications helps achieve these results by being highly relevant, delivering value through knowledge and encouraging member participation – some of whom may become advocates for the organization.

These organizations are fighting for members in never-before-seen rates of direct competition from like-minded organizations seeking the same constituent – one who faces a relentless bombardment of information and knowledge from a myriad of sources in a social networking age. All of this is coupled with rising expectations from members demanding more for less from their associations.

This White Paper focuses on Ingenium’s findings from work with its clients, supported by a consolidation of corroborating research. It shows the challenges that associations and their members face along with trends in the industry. It offers best-in-class solutions to enhance membership engagement¹

Success in member communications and engagement is dependent on winning the battle for relevance in an age when social networking demands clarity and rising expectations

¹ Ingenium Communications wishes to thank its member communications and engagement project clients for contributing their expertise and experience to the development of this White Paper.

A Truly Engaged Membership Values its Organization and Feels Valued in Return

Ingenium's work with many of its member-driven clients has uncovered solutions and insights to unique challenges presented by communicating with their members. If an organization is

Engaging organizations communicate relevant value propositions to their members through meaningful knowledge exchange and seamless communications – the bottom line is the creation of value for both sides

communicating effectively with members, it is engaging them through meaningful knowledge exchange where relevant information is easily transmitted and received and members contribute feedback and ideas conveniently. The bottom line is the creation of value where the organization gains contributing members who are satisfied with the return on investment of their time and money. An actively engaged member-driven organization has a better handle on the pulse of the constituency it serves and its members receive the kind of support and relevant information they expect from the relationship.

So, how do successful organizations know if they're doing a good job in member communications and engagement? One key factor is member satisfaction because it affects renewals and renewals are a measure of loyalty. To explore these principles further it's important to understand what drives someone to be a member – through the lens of the membership community itself – and how organizations view their environment and segment their membership communities in order to define, make relevant and communicate their value propositions.

What Members Say and What They Expect

Ingenium's professional experience has provided direct exposure to the membership community allowing the firm to offer a unique perspective through the lens of members. In the course of our research we consistently encountered the same question - why do people choose to become affiliated with a group, association, not-for-profit company or professional body? While there are many reasons, for most it is to join an organization that represents a subject matter they are interested in. If the quality and delivery of the subject matter meets expectations, then the organization is well on its way to addressing the primary incentive for someone to become, and remain a member.

The top reason members join an organization shouldn't be a mystery – they're interested in the subject matter

Membership is often voluntary and non-restrictive, however there are exceptions where member-driven organizations are responsible for the self-regulation and licensing of certain professions and there is a mandatory requirement to belong. In either case, it is energetic, active member participation that affects the objective of achieving productive, high quality dialogue and interaction. It's easier for an organization to gauge customer satisfaction, propensity for renewal, community feedback and loyalty through active members who communicate freely.

Published research from Dalton and Dignam (2007) in *The Decision to Join. How Individuals Determine Value and Why They Choose to Belong*, shows that a member's level of participation has a lot to do with the personal benefits – reasons for joining and renewing – they receive from their association. Members were categorized into four groups based on type/level of participation – governance, committee-work, ad hoc and non-participating members. While all four groups ranked networking, up-to-date information and professional development as the top three personal benefits sought in joining, the non-participating members ranked these benefits differently from the rest. This is an important observation since it demonstrates that level of engagement – active versus passive – affects members' perception of what they value from their association. Table 1 summarizes these findings.

Table 1²
Members Rank Reasons for Joining

<i>Association Function</i>	<i>Governance Participant</i>	<i>Committee-work Participant</i>	<i>Ad hoc Participant</i>	<i>Non-participant</i>
Networking	1	1	1	3
Up-to-date information	2	2	2	1
Professional development	3	3	3	2

² Dalton, J. and Dignam, M. (2007). *The Decision to Join. How Individuals Determine Value and Why They Choose to Belong*. American Society of Association Executives (ASAE). 106 pp.

What Organizations Say and Their Solutions to Membership Challenges

Ingenium has uncovered a number of critical pressure points faced by its member-based clients and solutions to success. These are validated through consolidated research from the Canadian Society of Association Executives (2008) in Associations in Canada Overview which highlights the perspectives of member-driven organizations and identifies external pressures and internal impacts affecting membership engagement today, solutions offered as factors contributing to success, and the expected paybacks.

It's also important to understand dissonance from former members and their reasons for dropping membership. Not surprisingly, lack of relevance ranks at the top of this list. This is a critical observation because it sheds light on the reasons for low customer satisfaction.

Member-driven organizations not only face demanding expectations from their diverse constituents but rapidly changing external pressures and challenging internal issues

External Pressures

Changing demographics. Evolving interests, career changes, lifestyle shifts, ethnic and cultural diversity affect the magnitude of membership engagement. When recruitment, membership management and communications are mired in unresponsive methods – it becomes increasingly difficult to handle new generations demanding more flexibility and short-term rewards; growing ethnicities and cultures looking for social sensitivities and all members expecting instant service, convenience and tangible returns on their investments in time, volunteerism and money.

Volunteerism. This is the basis that drives membership involvement. Trends however, indicate that leading membership organizations are now shifting from individual engagement to community-building in order to ensure long-term relevance and viability. In a marketplace mediated by the Internet and Web 2.0 applications, virtual foras allow members to connect and affiliate with other like-minded individuals around a common purpose.

Self-regulation. Governance is being challenged by pressure from governments introducing legislation for stricter oversight into member-based organizations.

Competition from other associations for members. This is particularly true of national organizations that compete for members with municipal, regional, provincial or territorial organizations that may do a better job of representing their constituents' local needs.

Internal Impacts

Financial challenges. Due to broad coverage, diminishing revenues (however sourced) place burdens on covering national jurisdictions and a broad base of diverse constituents.

Database decay. The maintenance and mining of an association's database is crucial to membership engagement. Poor database management results in communications inefficiencies and membership mismanagement.

Solutions

- Assign dedicated resources to a membership unit
- Invest in a contact management system that regularly maintains (populates, updates and cleans) the database
- Segment the membership based on benefits sought and isolate the characteristics of active versus non-active participants
- Target designated segments based on desirable profiles to encourage volunteerism and channel other groups into public or self-serve categories
- Integrate the latest social media into two-way communications
- Develop an online self-serve information model that allows members to retrieve information but also submit ideas and feedback – acknowledge contributors and show that their inputs are valued
- Address retention at the time a member is recruited – engage members early and often since membership is a yearly decision³
- Expand face-to-face forums with key note speakers and discussions with industry experts
- Ensure member expectations (due to environmental and demographic changes) are actively monitored and acted on and results communicated
- Cultivate co-operative alliances with other like-minded organizations that serve the same constituents
- Strive for value creation (for members) to exceed members' expectations and offer them choices for interaction
- Make membership engagement a critical piece of the organization's strategic plan
- Conduct regular mission-reviews to ensure that the mission and vision of the organization reflects the current socio-political climate

³ Sirkin, Arlene Farber. *Retention Tips You'll Want to Retain*. 1995 ASAE

Return on Investment

- Communications success is measured in higher member satisfaction
- High member satisfaction manifests itself in improved renewal rates
- Greater and more accurate membership community insights
- Engaged, satisfied members mature from being active participants to become

Great member communications is clear, relevant and directly supported by engagement practices that provide choices in how to interact with the organization

Best Ways to Engage Members and Their Top Preferences for Receiving Information

What are the best ways to engage members and foster meaningful communications? Best-in-class communications and engagement practices provide members with choices in how they receive information and options in how they engage in return. Information/knowledge exchange is clear, relevant and direct.

Member perceptions of value and relevance are based on status – member, non-member and former member. All three member groups are identical in their preferences for receiving information. Top preference for receiving information includes professional magazines or journals, conferences, E-newsletters and dedicated websites. Internet searching is cited as an important method for collecting information. Table 2 summarizes these findings

The most important observation points to the overwhelming need for **a flagship publication or standard bearer** that integrates the information members seek. This is not only important for brand support but it's the leading or core medium that builds professional subject matter credibility regularly and consistently. **Two-way online communications** is expected as a convenient and timely way to communicate priorities. **Face-to-face networking forums** are appreciated as tangible communications formats to meet industry leaders and interact with peers.

Blogs and social media rank lower on the engagement list but they are no less important. They offer opinion-based platforms and share interactive points-of-view from a variety of internal and external sources. They also promote organizational transparency and show members that the organization views its member's inputs and feedback seriously.

Table 2⁴
Members Rank Their Communications Preferences

<i>Information source</i>	<i>Current member</i>	<i>Non-member</i>	<i>Former member</i>
Professional magazines / journals	1	1	1
Conferences or meetings	2	2	4
E-newsletters	3	3	2
Association Web site	4	4	3
Internet search	5	5	5
Peer networks	6	6	6
Special interest groups	7	7	7
Other print sources	8	8	8
General interest magazines	9	9	9
Newspapers	10	10	10
Blogs or podcasts	11	12	12
Broadcast media (TV / radio)	12	11	11

The Top 10 Lessons Learned From the Membership Community and their Organizations

1. **Entrench membership in the corporate mission and define the constituents you represent.**
 Associations with growing membership programs ensure that members are a cornerstone of the organizations' vision statements and strategic directives – understood in all levels of these companies.

2. **Measure success in membership growth but use meaningful indicators and understand how the metrics interrelate.** Market penetration is a key measure of relevance and legitimacy; market share is a key measure of competitiveness; renewal rate is a key measure of customer satisfaction and customer satisfaction is a key predictor of growth. Successful member-driven organizations measure their performance at all stages of membership engagement.

⁴ Dalton, J. and Dignam, M. (2007). *The Decision to Join. How Individuals Determine Value and Why They Choose to Belong*. American Society of Association Executives (ASAE). 106 pp.

3. **Share information with members through direct forms of communication.** This includes outreach through professional magazines or journals, conferences, E-newsletters and dedicated Web sites – media focused on industry-specific information and dedicated fields of expertise. Internet searching was consistently listed as a top method for collecting information by members pointing to the need for associations to invest in enhanced search engine capabilities.
4. **Streamline engagement practices across all spectrums of interaction.** Reduce burdens and obligations by making it easier for members to enrol, communicate, understand and participate in activities.
5. **Remove restrictive barriers to entry.** Although qualification and authentication are necessary to attract the right members, restrictive covenants coupled with unwieldy application processes represent inefficient control measures. Members aren't looking for exclusivity but easy ways to connect with like-minded people and obtain current industry information from their organization.
6. **Promote participation, recognize contributors and highlight results.** Active members who feel they are valued contributors become meaningful change agents most likely to support the association and its mandate.
7. **Embrace a culture of change and be tuned into evolving and shifting member demographics and lifestyles.** Change is constant and it's reflected in membership diversity, shifts in behaviour and demanding expectations. Membership engagement means being prepared to alter outreach practices to dovetail with member needs and tailor the membership experience.
8. **Address member dissonance.** Positive membership engagement means making value propositions relevant to the various segments and showing positive benefits and returns for their investments of time and money. Volunteerism has a cost even if dues aren't charged. If this isn't recognized then renewal rates could be adversely affected.
9. **Mine and manage the database.** Contact management systems, database marketing systems and dedicated leadership roles and responsibilities are investments that proactively manage membership.

10. **Segment your membership community.** This is an important discipline that should look at members from their organizational status – current members, former members and potential members – and their behaviour based on levels of participation. Members participating in governance and committee-work view their association’s roles differently from ad hoc or non-participating members. Prospects never affiliated with the association, rank their challenges and needs much differently from current and former members. Remember too, prospective members don’t know much about the association while current members already have a relationship. These differences must be reflected in the messaging and outreach activities – let the member define the way in which he/she transacts with the association based on his or her priorities and interests.

Conclusion

To achieve success in member communications and engagement, evidence points to the need to recognize value propositions relevant to both members and the organization and create a streamlined communications process that provides clear, direct, relevant and valuable information. By opening up the dialogue and encouraging member participation – regularly posting relevant information, conducting face-to-face interactive sessions and allowing members easy opportunities to provide input and feedback – member engagement is enhanced. The result is a successful relationship with more active members who constructively exchange ideas, feel valued and become advocates for the association. In return the organization enjoys happier members, increased renewals and clearer insights from the community it serves.

The strategic directions for successful member engagement are to practice knowledge exchange through streamlined communications and converge on value propositions that are relevant to both sides.

Get More

[Contact us](#) for more information about *Member Communications and Engagement*, and to learn how we can help your organization develop more rigorous communications performance indicators.
www.resultsmap.com

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