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7 Drivers of Membership

What ASAE Foundation Research Says About Value, Affiliation, and Evolving Association Membership Models

The seminal association research captured in the ASAE book *7 Measures of Success* emphasizes a practice of the most successful associations: Their leaders and staff make data-driven decisions. That cultural habit and belief underpin work of ASAE and the ASAE Foundation in funding and developing research from which leaders, executives, and managers can draw insight and a basis for their decisions and plans.

A significant focus in an ever-growing body of research principally conducted through the ASAE Foundation has been on membership.

- What attracts people to associations and encourages them to join?
- What compels them to remain members—and even spread the word about the associations they join?
- What part does creating opportunities for member involvement play in decisions to remain members?
- What is changing about how people view affiliation, and how might associations adapt their value propositions?

These and other questions have been part and parcel of a series of robust—and ongoing—research initiatives undertaken by ASAE and the ASAE Foundation since 2007. This paper summarizes seven key themes discovered and explored in the research. The conclusions and practical insights drawn from this body of research are discussed in greater depth in the sources listed at the end.

- 1. The balance of association benefits extended to the individual and to the field is a critically important one.** Conventional wisdom might be that members and prospects most value benefits to themselves. But two *Decision to Join* studies—conducted five years apart—both affirm that individual ROI and being a part of a larger impact on the field hold nearly equal value. “Good of the order” benefits actually scored slightly higher than benefits to the individual. Bottom line is that both the perceived value *and* the mix matter. Perhaps adding further credence to the idea that attachment to something larger resonates, more recent ASAE Foundation research underscores that an association’s position in positively affecting a larger societal concern can be an effective element of membership-recruitment and retention strategy.
- 2. Getting members involved matters—a great deal.** For newer members, the essence of *associating* in your association remains an abstract concept until those people get involved, in some way. With involvement, what it means to be part of and realize the true benefits of your association becomes concrete. But equally important, the research shows that the involved become advocates, provided their experiences are positive ones. Even with only ad hoc involvement—writing an article for the association’s newsletter, for example—individuals’ perception of the value of the association and the likelihood of telling others good things about your association rise significantly. Remember to recognize their contributions, and not only the formal committee and board ones but the ad hoc voluntary contributions as well.
- 3. Values drive volunteer choices.** Consistent with other studies of individuals’ motivations for volunteering, the ASAE research found the primary reasons for volunteering had to do with being part of something bigger than themselves. While volunteers also sought career benefits, contributing to the strengthening of the field was a powerful driver. Further, the direct ask—approaching prospective volunteers with meaningful work—was a more effective recruitment technique than more passive means, such as website postings.
- 4. Degree of involvement influences perspective.** Proceed with care. Perception of value and the likelihood of an individual promoting an association to others rises with each level of association engagement—from no involvement to committee work to involvement in governance—so systems and a discipline for understanding who is involved and in what ways are important. Understand, too, that level of involvement begets diverse perspectives. In the research, for example, board members placed significantly higher importance on influencing legislation than did rank-and-file members. A challenge, then, is working with board members to be sure they understand their perspectives are not necessarily reflective of the membership, and to avoid the inherent dangers to priorities and the member-benefits strategy of their thinking they are.

5. **Awareness of career-development needs is a greater influencer of perceived association value than is generational brand.** Age and conventional wisdoms about preferences and habits assigned to entire generations are less useful to association membership strategists and managers than is this: The potential for profession-related association membership and engagement is there, when individuals reach the point in their career where they begin to see that career-development offerings can make a difference in their career trajectories. That doesn't mean their needs and preferences are all the same, or that associations should wait for that magical career realization to happen. In fact, getting their attention sooner is better. The research did show a correlation between age and importance ratings of these personal benefits: access to career information and prospective jobs, opportunities to gain leadership experience, education and professional development offerings, and access to member discounts.

6. **Meeting members where they are trumps market segmentation by traditional demographics.** In a world in which members and prospects can design, identify, and access their own professional development and networking journey, traditional models such as structuring membership offerings strictly around such demographics as age or career level are less likely to succeed than those strategically aligned to member needs and aspirations, offering members value that syncs with where they are on their life journeys. One association in the *Exploring the Future of Membership* research, for example, realigned its membership and pricing structures to coincide with member interest areas and levels of commitment to the organization—as opposed to professional levels.

7. **Curation: A contemporary opportunity for providing value.** Associations once controlled the channels and enjoyed a position of being seen as the sole credible provider of news and information for and about a field. But today, as the research affirms, members get their information from a variety of sources, and they're savvy about doing just that. But there's a lot of it, and therein lies an opportunity for associations: to separate the wheat from the chaff as curators providing the means for association members to choose, prioritize, and access the information that is of interest to them. The research showed that development of relevant content, customization of content for distinct audiences, and delivery of that content in ways that meet members' needs are keys to successful engagement strategy. Challenging? Yes, and the means of addressing the challenges may mean tilling co-creation and other territories relatively new to many associations. But an opportunity? Absolutely.

Sources

- *The Decision to Join: How Individuals Determine Value and Why They Choose to Belong*, James Dalton and Monica Dignam, copyright 2007 ASAE
- *The Decision to Volunteer: Why People Give Their Time and How You Can Engage Them*, Beth Gazley, Ph.D., and Monica Dignam, copyright 2008 ASAE
- *Exploring the Future of Membership*, research by lead investigators Dean West, FASAE, Association Laboratory; Sheri Jacobs, FASAE, CAE, Avenue M Group; Suzanne Connors Bowman, The Haefer Group Ltd; Lisa Dicke, Ph.D., University of North Texas—Department of Public Administration; report by John Barnes and Jenny Nelson, copyright 2014 ASAE Foundation

Exploring the Future of Membership research white papers:

- *The Future of Association Engagement*, Association Laboratory
 - *Innovations in Association Engagement: A Benchmarking Study*, Avenue M Group
 - *New Realities Existing Within Converging Trends: The Future Is Now*, The Haefer Group Ltd.
 - *How Can Professional Associations Provide Meaningful Value for Their Members: Creating Models of Affiliation and Engagement*, University of North Texas—Department of Public Administration
- *10 Lessons for Cultivating Member Commitment: Critical Strategies for Fostering Value, Involvement, and Belonging*, James Dalton and Monica Dignam, copyright 2012 ASAE

The above resources are available at asaecenter.org/bookstore, except for the *Exploring the Future of Membership* white papers, available at asaecenter.org/membershipresearch.



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