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The Future of Association Engagement

2014

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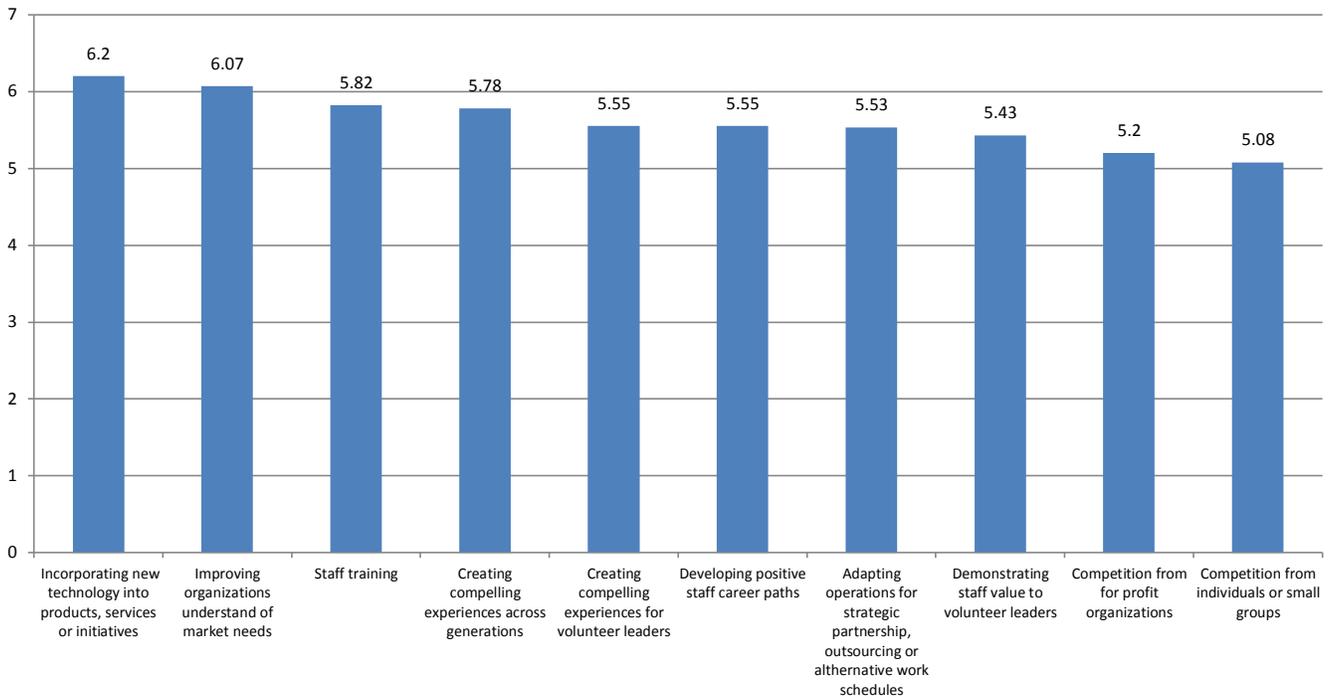
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Introduction

In the spring of 2007, Association Laboratory conducted a study of 426 association chief staff and senior association executives on behalf of the [Association Forum of Chicagoland](#). The study assessed the importance of various business environmental factors. **Of the 14 factors tested, the economy was not even on the list.** Such was the confidence of association executives at the time that economic factors were not taken into consideration.

The following table lists the mean *importance* respondents assigned to a variety of environmental factors likely to impact their associations in 2007. In this survey, a rating of 7 meant *very important* and 1 meant *not at all important*.

Mean Importance of Environmental Issues of Concern (2007)



By the fall of 2007, the U.S. economy was entering one of the most significant downturns since the Great Depression.

Now commonly referred to as the [Great Recession](#)¹, this economic downturn had a significant impact on how organizations and individuals interacted with associations.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Recession

The purpose of this white paper is to identify how the economy emerging from the Great Recession continues to evolve and how this economic evolution will continue to impact member engagement with associations and membership models.

What is the Economy?

Before analyzing how the economy has changed, we must create a framework for discussing the economy. The following is based on secondary and historical research, and the *Looking Forward* environmental scanning research conducted by Association Laboratory during 2011-2014.

Defining the Economy

The economy is dynamic and diverse.

The “economy” is neither simple nor static. It is not a monolithic “thing” to be analyzed but an aggregation of myriad markets consisting of commercial, government, and individual customers spread across different industries, professions, and geographic regions.

- Economic conditions vary by industry, profession, and geography.
- Economic conditions are dynamic; economic factors respond to changing market behavior.

For purposes of this white paper, the economy is divided into two major components: the private sector and the public sector.

The private sector economy is the sector of the economy reliant on the interaction between private, for-profit commercial entities. The public sector economy is the sector reliant on government purchases or funding, such as road construction or public school teachers’ salaries.

Companies in the private sector have maintained near record-setting levels of capital on balance sheets while organizations active in or dependent on the public sector continue to face funding challenges due to government action, particularly at the federal level.²

Association Laboratory conducts an annual environmental scanning study to identify trends likely to affect the association environment in the coming year. This research is cited throughout this white paper.

² *Looking Forward 2013*

The following is an excerpt from *Looking Forward 2013*, Association Laboratory’s environmental scanning study:

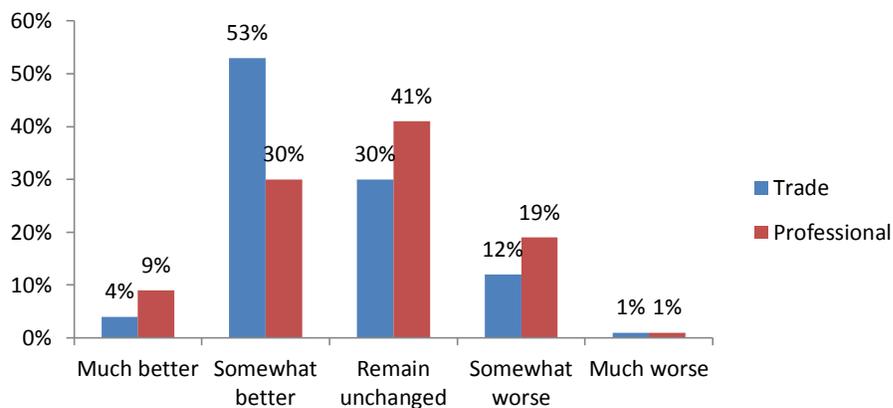
Restrictive Government Funding

Discretionary government spending will be restricted as a greater percentage of tax revenues are allocated to existing and expanded entitlement programs; this will limit resources to industries reliant on government funding. National governments are large customers in the economy. From teacher salaries to healthcare outlays and infrastructure investment, national governments are a substantive source of economic activity. As a larger portion of government expenditures become devoted to existing entitlements and debt payments, fewer funds are naturally available for investment in other initiatives. Many local, state/provincial, and national governments continue to face challenging economic situations. The negative environment for substantive increases in income tax revenue, particularly within the United States and the EU Zone, will make it difficult to substantively increase government revenue through tax increases. Finally, economic conditions will be uneven across states or provinces. The result will be uneven expenditures by geographic market.

The *Looking Forward 2014* Association Environmental Scan of 195 association chief staff officers and senior staff found that there was “cautious optimism” about economic prospects for association members in 2014.

The optimism was tempered by concerns by professional societies regarding budget restrictions by state and federal governments that would reduce funds available for membership and participation in professional development activities.

Expected Change in Economic Situation by Type of Association



Strategic Forces Impacting the Economy

Analysis of the implications of the economy on association engagement cannot be conducted in isolation from other strategic forces.

Based on Association Laboratory's environmental scanning research, and on primary research supported by a research grant from the ASAE Foundation, the following areas substantially impact the association engagement decision.

Role of Government

In addition to being a buyer and seller of products and services, the government also establishes the rules of commercial interaction via legislation and regulation. The volume of changes and the nature of these actions substantially impact how organizations and the individuals they employ do business.

Technology

Technology is a disruptive force that creates or allows access to new or different markets, lowers the barriers to market entry, and allows for new business models. Technology allows for faster, more seamless exchange of information between customers and suppliers, and among potential customers, as customer reviews impact new or potential buyers.

Globalization

Organizations and individuals operate in an interconnected, global system. The following is an excerpt from *Looking Forward 2013*:

The global system includes the movement of capital, labor, and information. Even small organizations are participants in a global supply chain. Consider the following:

Economic Globalization – Individuals and businesses now access a global market place and the barriers to providing services and products worldwide are rapidly decreasing.

Government Globalization – From regulatory action to trade agreements, actions by governments in one part of the world routinely impact organizations across the globe. The actions of governments and relevant non-governmental organizations (NGO) are now seldom restricted by borders.

Supply Chain Globalization – Modern supply chains access raw materials and production capacity from all over the world to serve widely dispersed markets.

Financial Globalization – Capital markets operate across country borders allowing investors' access to companies worldwide.

Workforce Globalization – Individuals have routinely traveled across borders in search of opportunities. Now, workers are connected virtually and communication technology has made it possible for businesses of all sizes to access labor on the other side of the globe through services such as [Odesk](#). [Odesk is an online professional services portal where individuals from all over the world post their expertise, accept business, and provide contract-based services.]

Cultural Globalization – Cultural influences now routinely affect people worldwide. For example, in Chicago, IL, USA, people gather each Sunday morning at an Irish pub to watch English premier cup football, then eat lunch at a local Ethiopian restaurant before dancing the night away “gangnam style” to a Korean pop song. Communication technology virtually eliminates the barriers to cross-fertilization or transmission of ideas, meanings, and values across national borders. However, despite the enjoyment individuals receive from global influences in entertainment and leisure options, this creates pressure on cultural identities. Creeping nationalism is a growing influence as humans seek their place in a world with no borders.

While these cultural influences have existed for some time, communication technology now allows aspects of globalization to be integrated at speeds unprecedented in human history. Today, even the smallest rural markets can participate in the global economy in a way that only larger urban areas could in the past.

No discussion of the economy and the implications on association engagement and membership models can be complete without acknowledging the impact of these strategic forces.

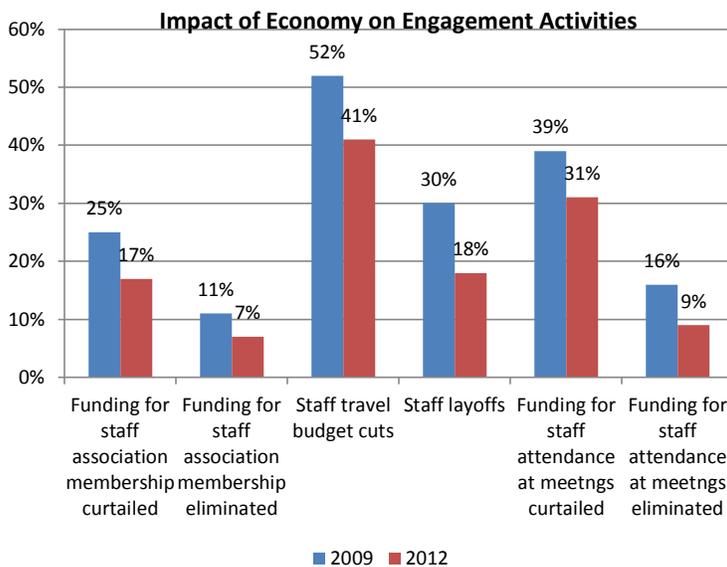
Implications of Economic Strategic Forces on Association Engagement

Perceptions of Economic Direction Influence Engagement

The perceived future economic direction of an industry or profession impacts engagement decisions. Improving economic circumstances increase the likelihood of engagement while static or declining economic circumstances decrease the likelihood of engagement.

The recent economic downturn provided evidence that as the economic situation deteriorated membership engagement, as measured by anticipated membership revenue, decreased.³

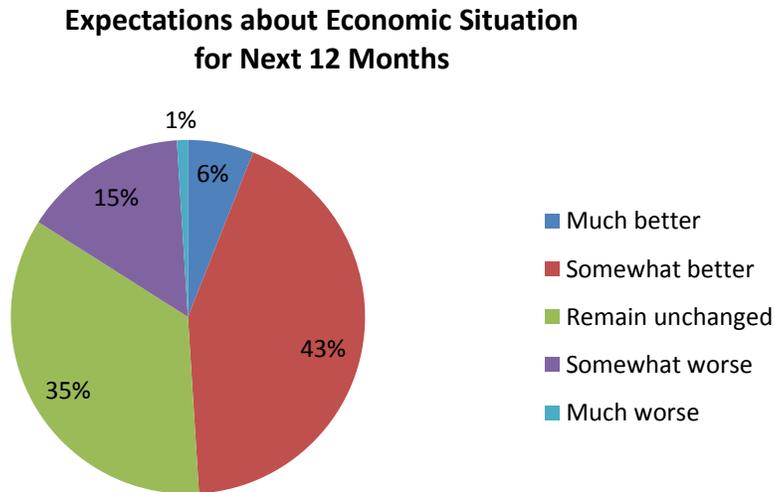
As the following graph from the *ASAE Foundation Impact Study 2012* shows, in 2009, 66% of association chief staff officers stated that a slowing economy would decrease membership revenue. In 2012 — following the recession — 27% stated membership revenue would decrease. The impact of this change is highlighted by changes in common engagement activities identified by respondents to a study of 2,284 association members drawn from names contributed by 31 co-sponsoring associations.



As anticipated membership revenue increased, the impact on common engagement activities became less pronounced.

³ ASAE Foundation Impact Study 2012

Based on the December 2013 survey of 195 association professionals for *Looking Forward 2014*, about half anticipate improvement in the economic outlook for their members in 2014; most others predict no change rather than a worsening of economic conditions.



Survey respondents identified the economic forces most likely to impact the association business environment and association strategy over the next 12 months.

As shown on the following graphs (see page 11), the primary drivers of their perception were the following:

1. Reduced investment by Federal and State governments
2. Business mergers/consolidation
3. Entrance by non-traditional competitors

Economic Forces Most Impacting Members in Next 12 Months

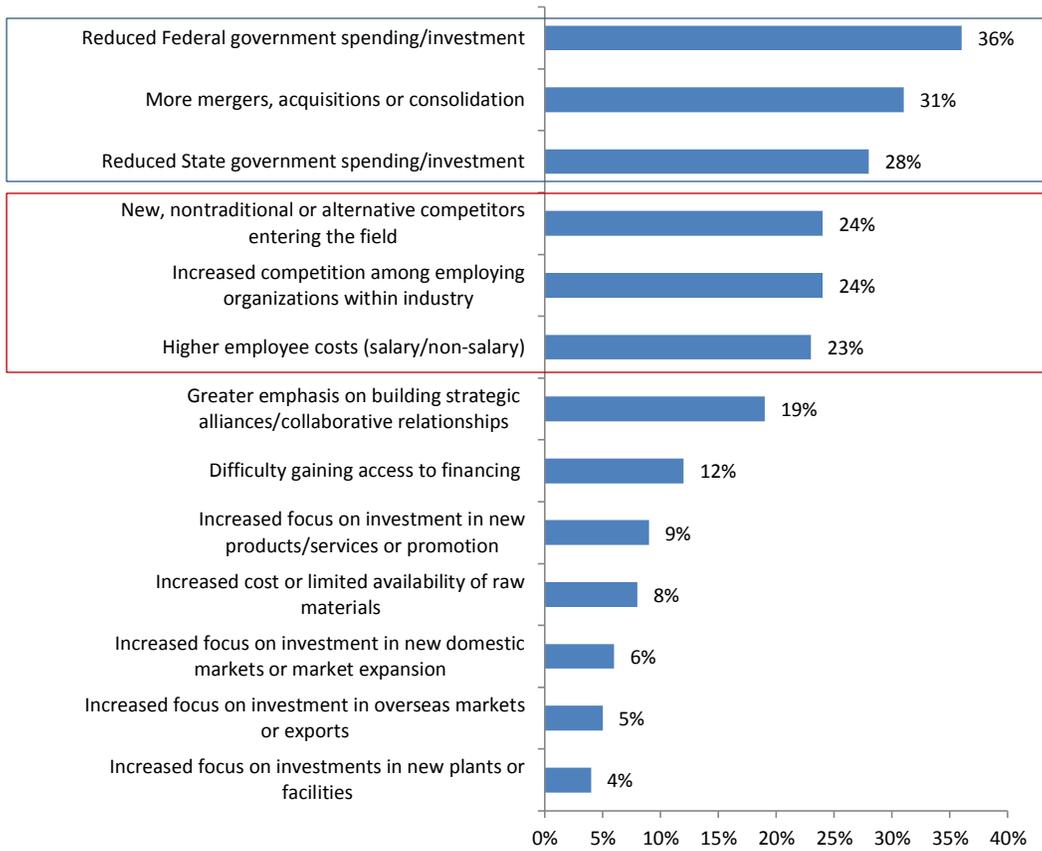


Figure 2 Looking Forward 2014

Impact of Economic Forces by Type of Association

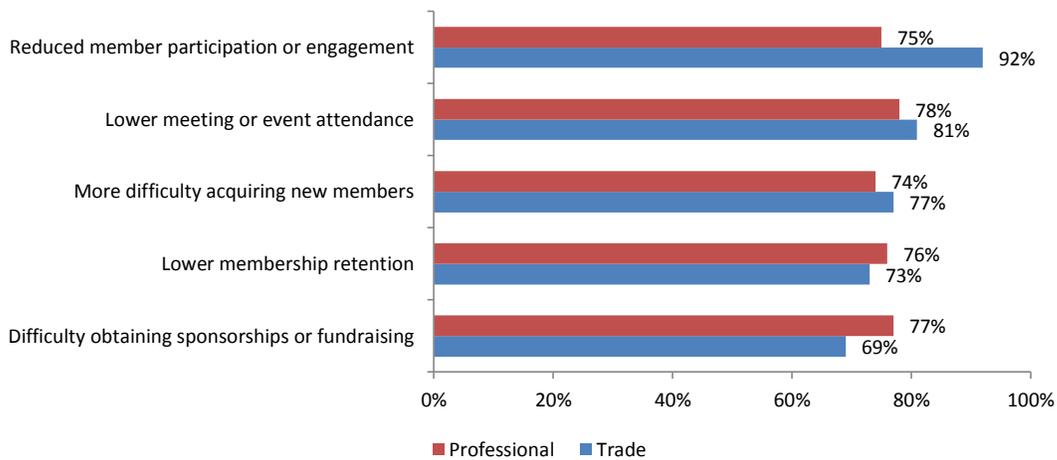


Figure 3 Looking Forward 2014

Employer Attitudes and Structure Influence Association Engagement

ROI Consciousness

Organizations and the individuals they employ are more conscious of the specific return on investment (ROI) of their membership dues, association product purchases, or personal commitment of time — these circumstances impact engagement.

The recent economic downturn has created a climate wherein employers minimize expenditures not essential to the company's product or service, or a person's direct professional goals or responsibilities. Organizations and individuals are not necessarily value conscious or price sensitive. They are willing to pay but only for products, services, or initiatives they deem essential.

Participants in the ASAE Foundation Bulletin Boards conducted for this white paper cited the link between member economic circumstances and engagement.

Professional association executive:
"While I anticipate growth for our membership, I would anticipate an overall decline in membership for the association industry. The scrutiny over expense is more intense in poor economic times. CFOs will scour budgets to find possible cuts and memberships and staff development will be one of the first areas to go."

Trade association executive:
"Companies are more discriminating about the organizations they join, the level at which they join and how active they are as a member (e.g., attending meetings, participating on committees, etc.)."

As noted earlier in this paper, the Association Laboratory association environmental scan *Looking Forward 2014* validates these perceptions. The financial and time expenditures necessary for association engagement are often considered discretionary. As a result, employers and individuals are doing some of the following:

- Reducing *the number* of association memberships
- Reducing *the budget* for association memberships
- Reducing professional development budgets for outside education
- Reducing the number of meetings/conferences attended or the number of attendees per meeting

Association Laboratory concludes from the data that organizations and activities that are considered essential are more likely to engage members and other stakeholders.

Company Mergers, Acquisitions, and Consolidations

Economic forces are creating incentives for company mergers and acquisitions, which reduce the potential number of individuals to engage, while conversely increasing the potential economic impact of the people engaged.

Across a variety of industries, participants in the bulletin boards identified industry consolidation as a significant force impacting engagement.

Consolidation creates smaller numbers of larger organizations. This reduces the number of companies and individuals to be engaged. For example, in the Building Managers and Owners Association, historically, each building had a manager who was targeted for membership. Now, if five buildings are managed by a single entity there is only one person to engage, and this person now controls a larger organization with a substantially larger budget.

Professional association executive:
“With for-profit organizations consolidating into fewer, larger organizations, a result for associations could be fewer memberships, less meeting registrations, a drop in sponsorship dollars, less purchases of products.”

In Association Laboratory’s environmental scanning study *Looking Forward 2014* 23% of professional and 41% of trade association executives believed mergers, acquisitions, or consolidations would impact their association.

Association Laboratory concludes from the data that the more an industry or profession is impacted by consolidation, the more modifications in membership models and engagement strategy need to take these changes in member employer structure into account.

Market Demographics, Expectations, and Behaviors Influence Engagement

Generational Expectations

Different generations have different personal and professional experiences which create different expectations of engagement.

Expectations are framed by experiences. Many associations are currently structured to serve the professional and industry needs of the post-World War II Baby Boom generation. The experiences of this generation throughout their work life determined their expectations of why and how they engaged with an association.

Individuals from different generations seek different engagement paths. A professional's expectations of engagement are shaped by his or her professional and business experiences.

Younger professionals, in particular, are more accustomed to online and virtual engagement paths because these forms of engagement have been prevalent during their early career stages.

Professional association executive:
"One of the most significant changing requirement/ expectation is in regards to how they are receiving this education. More and more the demand is for online delivery of education, and less on the traditional face-to-face learning environment. And they expect this online learning experience to be interactive and participatory, not merely a webcast of a talking head."

These engagement channels do not necessarily signify less engagement, simply different engagement.

As the following chart from *Looking Forward 2014* shows, associations anticipate substantial challenges from these perceptions.

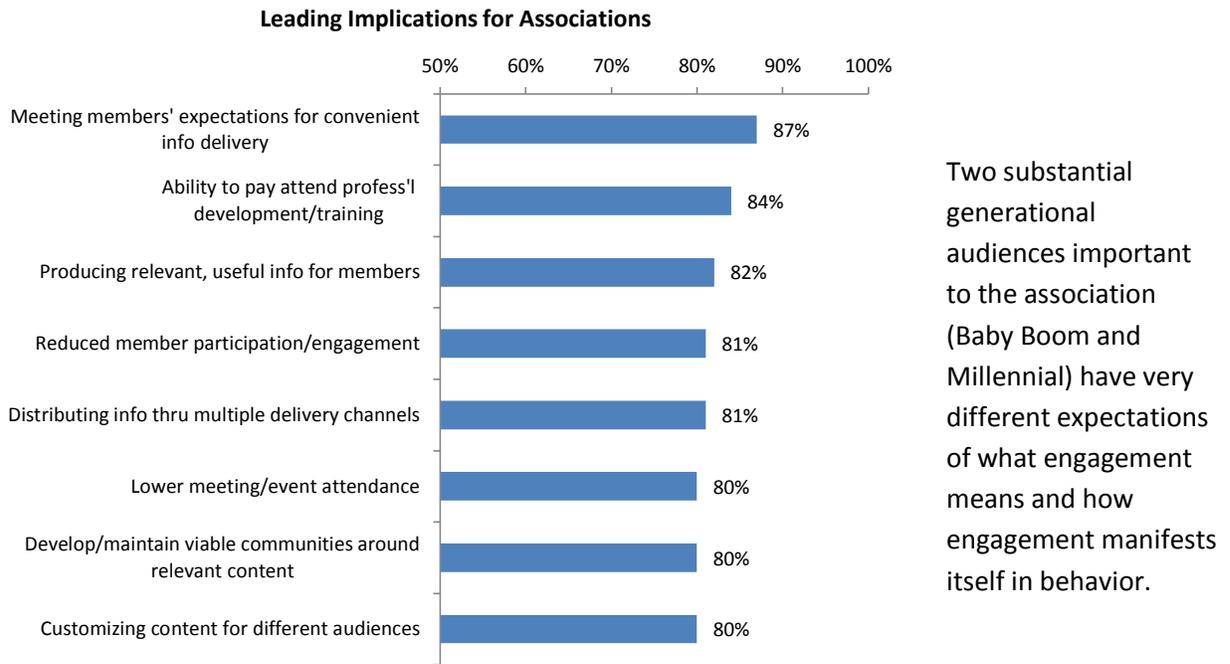


Figure 4 Looking Forward 2014

Differing expectations impact everything from information delivery to the development of communities.

Association Laboratory concludes from the data that understanding the different perceptions and expectations of engagement across generations is essential to developing successful membership engagement and membership models.

Customer Caution and Reaction to Economic Conditions

Customers are cautious about their economic circumstances and this impacts engagement.

The following chart highlights how consumer confidence plummeted during the Great Recession.

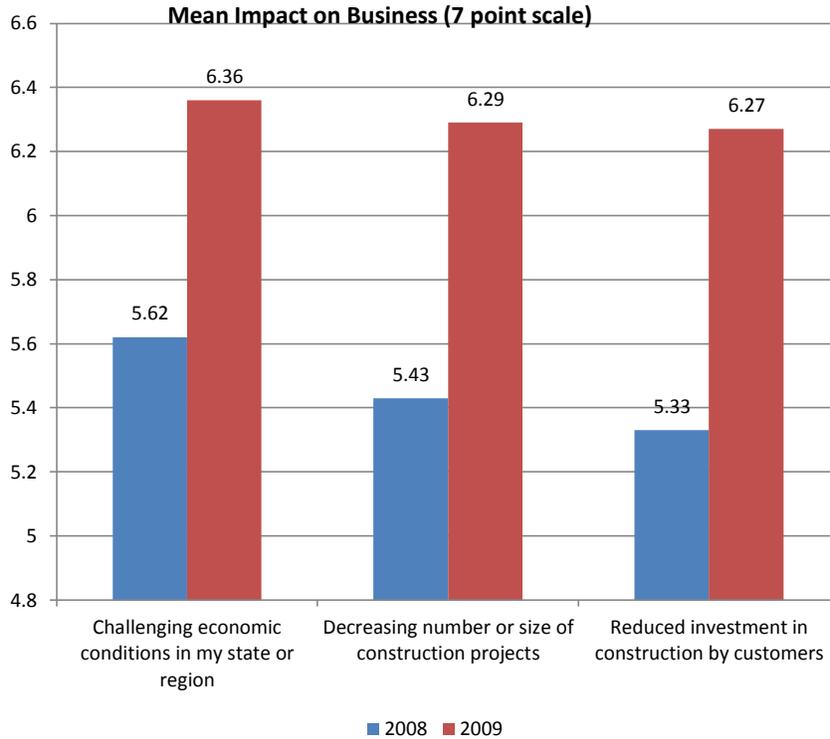


When customers are confident, they are more likely to invest, take risks, and experiment. Confident customers are also more likely to accept secondary or tertiary expenditures.

Conversely, when customers are concerned about their employment or professional future, they are less likely to take risks or to invest.

Professional association executive:
 “Cutbacks by employers in their willingness to sponsor professional society dues have made recruitment and renewal harder. This change in recent years has been driven by a change in the mindset of employers. Often, they don't see employees as long-term assets worth investing professional development in.”

Trade associations discovered reductions in both private and public investment as highlighted in the following chart⁴.



Commercial construction leaders, in a study on behalf of the [Associated Builders and Contractors Inc.](#), cited a substantial increase in their concern regarding the economy from spring 2008 to spring 2009.

Residential construction leaders shared their concerns. In a study Association Laboratory conducted on behalf of the [National Association of the Remodeling Industry](#) in 2009, respondents were most concerned about *challenging economic conditions*.

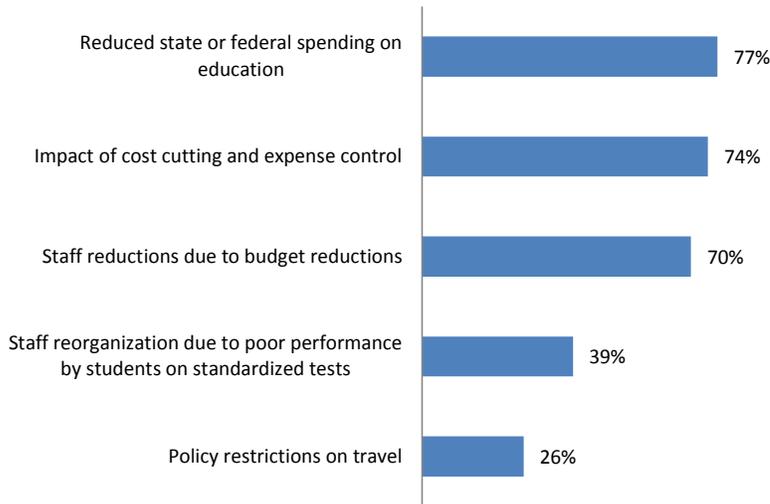
The personal nature of the economy was reflected in the opinions of individuals in professional societies.

The following two graphs highlight the concerns of teachers and school administrator members of [ASCD](#) during the fall of 2010 regarding the impact of economic conditions on their organizations and the resulting concern for their personal situation⁵.

⁴ Associated Builders and Contractors Inc. (2009)

⁵ ASCD (2010)

Concerns for School Districts



If you are concerned about the financial situation facing your employer you are also concerned about your personal situation.

The following highlights how these concerns about their employer’s financial situation were reflected in teachers’ and school administrators’ attitudes about personal life.

Concerns for Personal Life



Time Crunch

Individuals have less time to engage and choose different paths of engagement because organizations are running “leaner and meaner” due to their ROI awareness.

Engagement requires time and financial resources. If time and money are limited, engagement, by definition, is limited.

Consequently, engagement paths that take less time gain wider acceptance; for example, online engagement may be preferred to face-to-face engagement or local engagement at a chapter may be substituted for travel to a national convention.

Trade association executive:

“There are two factors, in our observation that dictate membership engagement. First, does the organization provide something that I can't get somewhere else, doesn't matter if that alternative is an association or not. Second, does involvement in the association fit into my priorities (e.g., professional or business-related)?”

The time crunch also influences volunteer leader engagement by reducing the willingness of individuals to participate in volunteer leadership or activities where member leadership is essential to success, such as government advocacy.

The time crunch influences engagement in some of the following ways:

- Reducing the time spent on associations in general or eliminating secondary or tertiary associations
- Changing to engagement paths that take less time, for example, online vs. face to face, or local instead of national meetings
- Reducing the number of meetings attended or number of attendees

Organizations and activities that are considered most essential are more likely to engage members and other stakeholders.

Reduced Influence by the Individual

Decision making about association engagement is evolving from individual-based into a group or team process.

Historically, associations identified the prospective member, communicated the value proposition to this person, and encouraged him or her to join or otherwise engage with the association. For trade associations, a “primary contact” was identified who was considered to be the primary decision maker or primary influencer who would act as the champion when it came to association engagement.

Current research indicates that many individuals are not as involved, or not as substantially involved, in the membership decision as they were in the past. Instead, their association membership decisions are being heavily influenced by the organization’s goals and made within the context of the organization’s needs and budget.

The evaluation of trade association memberships, in particular, is more likely to be team-based. Several individuals with different responsibilities compare notes before deciding with which associations to engage.

In other cases, the business is no longer contributing to the cost of association membership and the individual must decide whether to make the investment with his or her own funds.

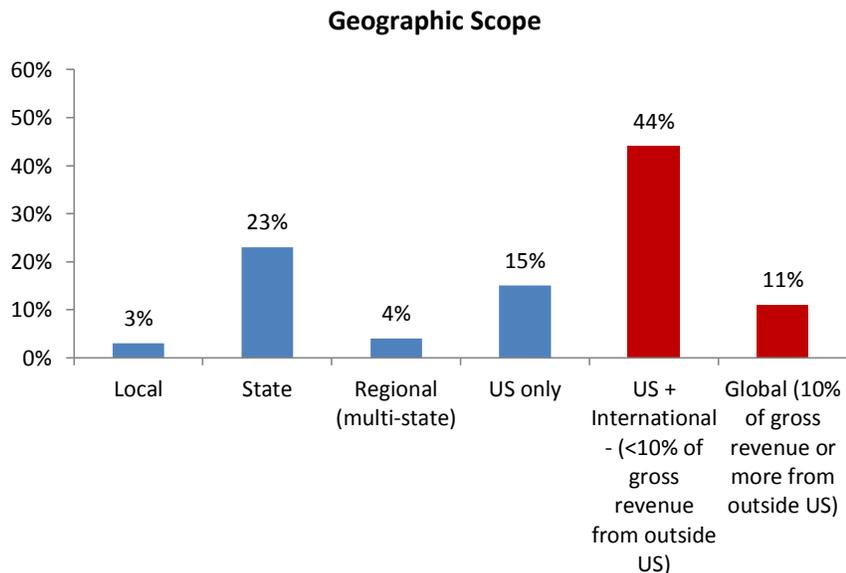
Professional association executive: “Companies will cut back on paying membership dues for their staff, leaving the individual to make decisions about paying for dues out of their own pockets.”

Globalization of Engagement

Engagement will be affected both positively and negatively by the increased speed and volume of professional and commercial interaction across country boundaries.

Over half the association executives in the *Looking Forward 2014* sample report their organization receives at least some revenue from outside the United States.

If associations become more active globally, it stands to reason that this globalization will begin to influence engagement strategy.



Professional association executive: “We are also seeing a huge influx of exhibitors from China at our annual Convention and Exposition. Many chemical manufacturers in Asia are seeking us out to exhibit and sell their products to water treatment professionals and find distributors in the U.S. market. As an international organization, we are also experiencing growth in membership from many other countries.”

The odds are very high that activities or audiences outside their traditional geographic market will influence the association’s members and, as a result, their potential engagement. The more members are influenced by these external global forces, the more it will impact their engagement.

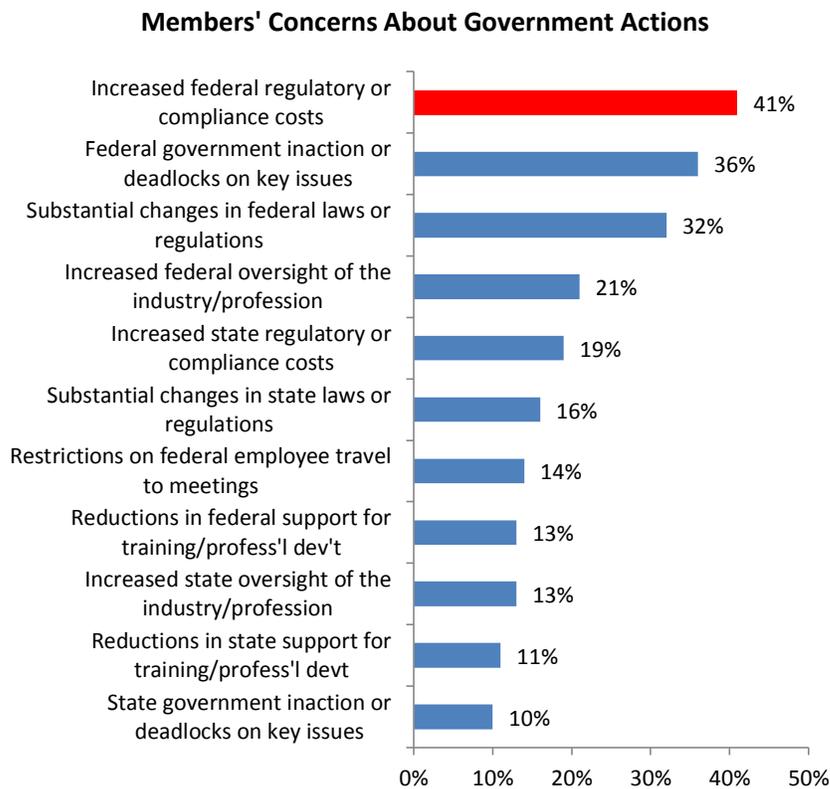
Government Action, Interaction, and Inaction

The relationship between state and federal governments and the market is heavily influencing employers and professionals and this is influencing the type and volume of engagement activity.

Increased Government Scrutiny

The more the government creates uncertainty or anxiety within a particular industry or profession, the more likely it is that individuals will seek resources or networks to address these issues, thus improving the likelihood of engagement.

The following chart from *Looking Forward 2014* identifies the level of concern regarding government activity.



Organizations are operating in a business environment characterized by higher levels of government scrutiny.

Local, state/provincial, and national governments are under public pressure to increase scrutiny of corporate activity.

In addition, government efforts targeting organizations to find new revenue sources will increase.

Association Laboratory concludes that associations that have successfully positioned themselves to address member concerns regarding the regulatory environment will enjoy opportunities to improve engagement.

Government as Customer

The changing type and level of investment by government as a customer is affecting how people engage with associations.

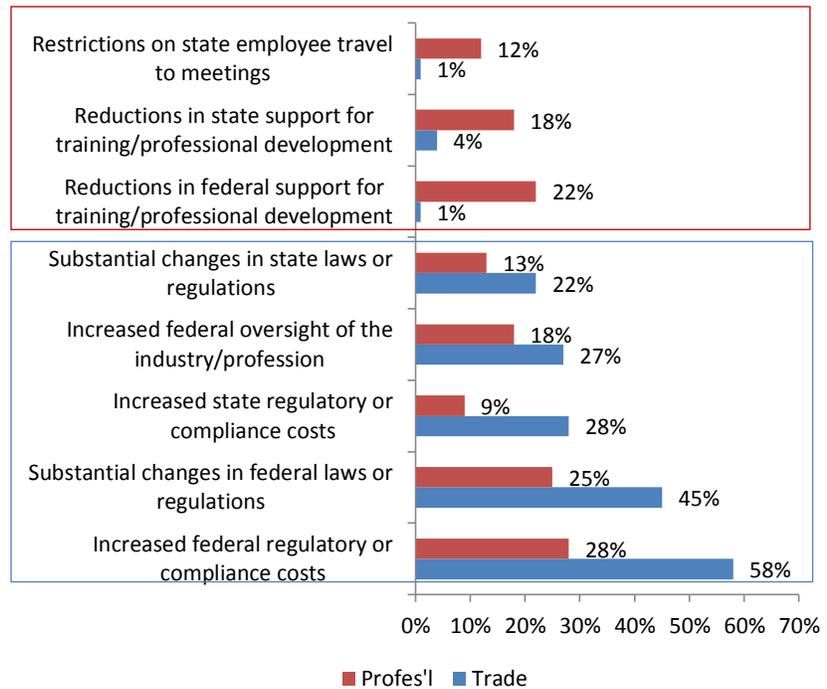
The government is a substantial customer within the economy; professions and industries who are heavily reliant on government funding or audiences will be directly impacted by restrictions in government expenditures. By reducing travel allowances for professional development and restricting subject matter expert attendance at events, the impact on face-to-face events is particularly pronounced.

Professional association: “The biggest outside influence that the association faces is government budget cuts related to sequestration as well as travel restrictions for federal and state government employees. Twenty five percent of our members are federal government employees and more than 20% are state employees.”

The following chart from *Looking Forward 2014* identifies the key implications on engagement.

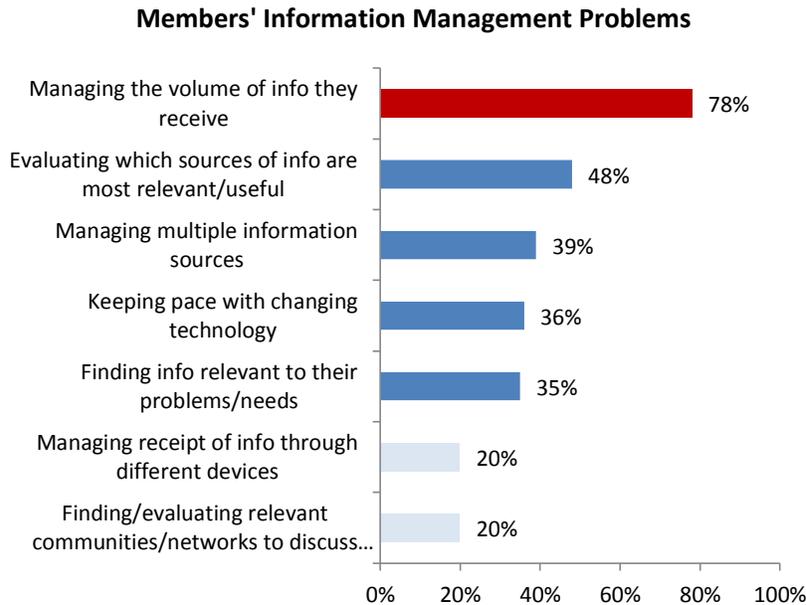
Professional societies are particularly concerned about the impact of changes in government funding on engagement with associations.

Member Concerns, by Type of Association



Information Value Chain Disruption

An overwhelming majority of association executives believe their members are experiencing difficulty managing the volume of information. This is true regardless of the type, size, or geographic scope of the association.⁶



Almost **8 in 10 association executives say** their members are concerned about managing the volume of incoming information; no other concern approaches that level of universality.

Association Laboratory concludes that the management of information is a central challenge to the development of successful engagement strategy.

The disruption of the traditional information value chain, in which associations were historically a vital link, is creating new engagement patterns.

The information value chain is the path between producers of information and end users of that information. As information proceeds down this path, each personal or organizational “link” in this chain adds value through evaluating or disseminating the information.

Trade association executive: “The most disruptive, and probably not recognized for the full strength of its impact, is technology. The rapid tech changes aren't bound by political, economic or government constraints.”

The historical information value chain has been disrupted by advances in communication technology, the emergence of mobile devices, and increasing access points for information via the internet.

⁶ Looking Forward 2014

Continuous connectivity changes expectations of engagement opportunities.

Association members operate in an environment characterized by continuous interconnectivity and dynamic exchange of information. Today's consumers and professionals expect continuous access to information unrestricted by time or geography.⁷

This has created an expectation of 24/7 access to information, as well as access to the organizations that provide this information.

Association members now operate in an environment characterized by a decentralized web of access points for information and content that is no longer specific to an organization or a location.

The convergence of technology from distinct information channels such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and interest-specific websites to a single all encompassing, multi-media experience accessed via multiple entry points and devices will continue.

Professional association: "Economic forces worry me less than the advent of the Internet and the ability of anyone, knowledgeable or not, [to] now inexpensively provide the products and services that only we could in the past."

Association executives are struggling to meet members' expectations for assistance in managing the volume of information.

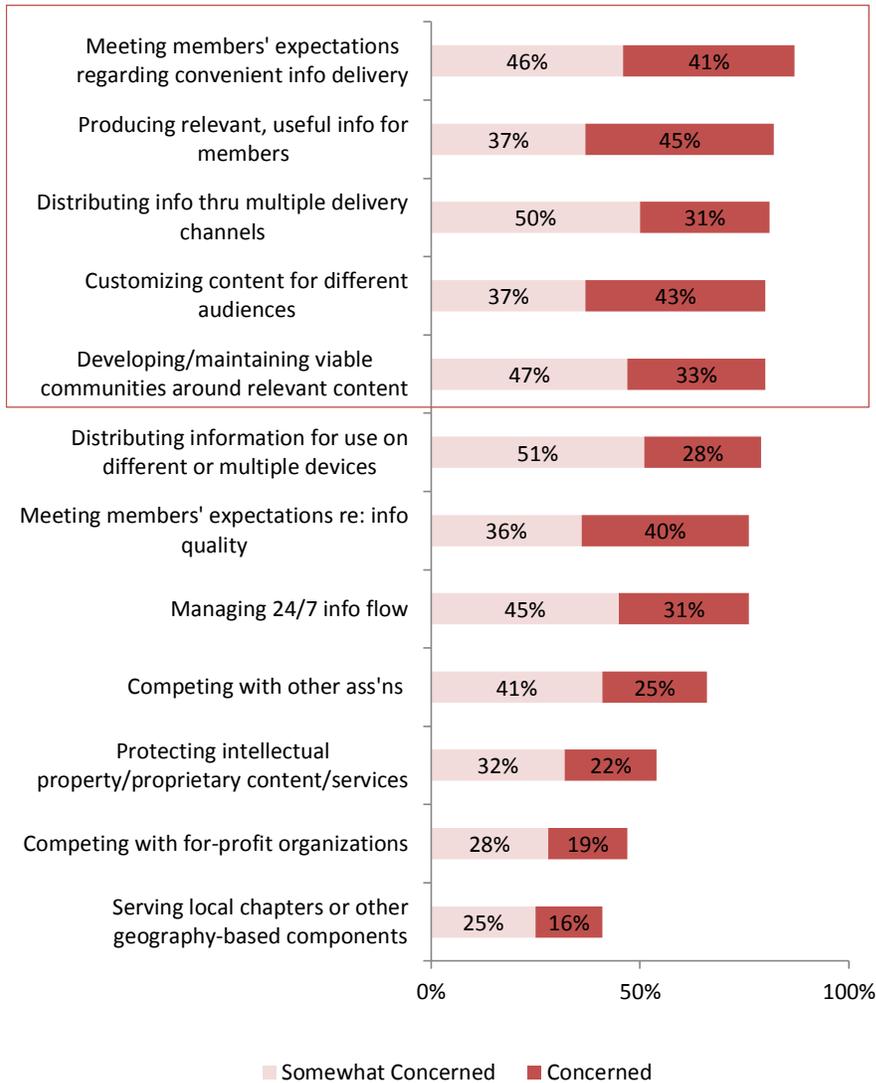
- Nearly nine in ten association executives are either somewhat concerned or concerned about the ability of their organization to meet members' expectations for delivering information in a convenient manner.
- **Eight in ten worry** about their ability to produce relevant and useful information, customize the content to meet the needs of differing target audiences, and distribute it through multiple channels.
- Developing and maintaining communities of interest around relevant content areas is troubling to an equal proportion.

These three issues substantially impact engagement strategy.

⁷ Looking Forward 2013

The following graph highlights in more detail the challenges to engagement caused by the information environment.

Associations' Information Management Concerns



The development of relevant content, customization of content for distinct audiences, and the delivery of this content; all in a way that meets member expectations is essential to successful engagement strategy.

Internal Engagement Factors: Association Leadership and Structure

Disconnected Volunteer Leadership

The attitudes of the Board of Directors and other volunteer leaders influence association engagement.

First, volunteer leaders are traditionally long-term members who may have different ideas of the association than new or younger members. Successful engagement requires strategies that appeal to different market segments with different ideas of what engagement means. Often, volunteer leaders look at engagement through their personal lens, which may be substantially different than how new or younger individuals view the association.

Second, in some associations, volunteer leaders are resistant or openly hostile to increased engagement by audiences or individuals they perceive as unrelated to or less important to the association's goals. This resistance creates negative perceptions of the association, its leadership and direction, and thus, reduces engagement.

Finally, volunteer-led entities have governance models that are often too slow to make the decisions necessary to adapt the association's engagement value proposition to the needs of the primary audience.

Misdirected Marketing and Communication Efforts

Association marketing and communication efforts are failing to set the stage for engagement, not adapting to changing engagement patterns, and failing to create the meaningful emotional connection necessary for engagement.

Pre-Engagement Communication

Too often associations begin engagement activities with individuals who have already begun the engagement process, without considering what happens in advance of these individual's decision to engage. By waiting, associations sacrifice an opportunity to shape pre-engagement expectations and create a climate supportive of engagement actions for new or returning members.

Adapting Engagement Channels

Many associations continue to pursue legacy programs, services, and initiatives without considering how new or younger individuals may want to engage. If there is no channel for a person to engage, then they cannot engage. For example, a person who chooses to engage via online or digital channels will struggle with an association that does not provide adequate services through these channels.

Professional association: “More professionals will be turning to associations for services and education, but won't want the barrier of membership dues. We are seeing more individuals turn to us for resources, industry best practices, and networking opportunities, but few of them wanting to join and pay dues for access.”

Creating Emotional Relationships

Engagement is a personal relationship, not a transactional relationship. If you limit the definition of a person's engagement to purchases and attendance, you create an artificially-limiting definition of engagement that ignores the personal feelings of commitment to the organization and the emotional connection to the Mission and people of the association.

Poorly Structured or Priced Membership Categories

Many associations are structured to provide engagement paths that are no longer consistent with how people choose to engage.

Many associations have membership structures designed around internal political considerations, not market-driven characteristics. In addition, associations have been slow to modify association membership benefits to reflect changing market needs. This results in less successful engagement.

Competition

Substantial, viable alternatives to associations exist that influence expectations of engagement and provide individuals and businesses with greater choices regarding engagement.

Communications technology has lowered the barriers for entry for many traditional association activities such as publishing. In addition, corporations are expanding customer engagement strategies in order to build brand strength and improve customer engagement. This combination means that there have never been more opportunities or choices for engagement by Individuals and organizations.

Increased competition in the marketplace means increased competition for attention, money, and time. Specialized competitors may have dedicated resources for niche products and services, where the association may have more general resources spread across the (universe) of the industry or profession.

The association industry will face very disruptive activity from multiplying alternatives in the market. Consider the following:

Open Access Publishing

When individuals need to sort through competing information and information sources, engagement becomes more difficult.

Accessibility to all published documents is rapidly becoming the norm through open access publishing. If the association traditionally provided this information or access to information for a fee, open access eliminates or substantially reduces the value of information that may be currently provided through a relatively exclusive network, such as an association.

Commercial Engagement Strategy

For-profit organizations are implementing competing engagement models which may alter peoples' expectations on interaction with organizations.

Professional society executive: "If a person gets loyalty points at their grocery store, why not at their association?"

Many for-profit organizations, from grocery stores like Sam's Club to credit cards like American Express, have instituted "membership" strategies very similar to associations.

A bundle of benefits is provided to people who engage more often and more substantially with their brand. These commercial strategies influence people's perceptions of what engagement means and what they receive in return.

For-Profit Associations

There are now for-profit associations that mimic the look, feel, and experience of a membership association without some of the governance limitations. For example, the [Association of Professional Coders](#) (APC) is virtually indistinguishable from a traditional professional society.

The APC identifies a Board of Directors as responsible for oversight and their messaging and delivery channels mimic those routinely used by associations. Underneath though, the organization is organized as a for-profit commercial entity.

Niche Associations

As it becomes more essential to focus on a specific audience and provide a more focused value proposition, the role of substantial niche associations may increase as individuals decide to engage with associations that more directly meet their needs.

Associations need to strike a delicate balance between the strategic focus and critical mass.

Professional association: "We are seeing the associations in our field growing and becoming more niche [oriented] every year. That means more competition for fewer dollars. We are also seeing the growth of for-profit conference producers who are competing for audience share."

Thought Leaders

The Internet has substantially reduced barriers to publishing and content distribution; content strategy has become prevalent among thought leaders such as consulting firms and academic institutions.

Historically, the association was a key source for vetting content and distributing it to target audiences, but now other organizations can distribute directly to the market without involving the association.

Professional association: "Every day I find more "experts" online, while we remain stagnant in our offerings to our members. I still see the growth of the Internet as a 'general store' and distribution center of (sometimes doubtful) information as a continuing and greater threat to our relevance in our market niche. In the paper age we used to be able to 'hide' our members from dubious information and vendors by being front and center in their view for all of their needs. This is much more difficult in the electronic age."

Associations today face far more competition from entities claiming and/or promoting their expertise in a particular subject matter. This may erode the association's historical role as a content arbiter.

Association Laboratory concludes that, given the competition to be a subject matter expert, associations that do not successfully position themselves in this intellectual arena will be challenged to improve member engagement.

Potential Strategies to Improve Association Engagement

Strategic Market Selection

To improve engagement, the association needs to identify and develop a deep understanding of the primary audiences, stakeholders, or markets it serves.

An association can serve anyone it wants, but not everyone it wants. By trying to serve larger, more diverse markets, associations dilute their resources. As the number of distinct audiences increase, it becomes more challenging to understand similarities and differences between audiences, to determine a unique value proposition to serve each audience, and to manage an organizational structure that can provide these multiple value propositions effectively.

Setting the Stage for Engagement

To improve engagement the association needs to understand the expectations, needs, and surrounding business or professional environment, and how these factors influence future choices regarding engagement.

Before deciding to engage with the association, individuals face a variety of factors that may positively or negatively influence their desires for and type of engagement. Examples include previous history with association engagement, alternatives to the association, business or professional influences, or limitations on engagement.

The association needs to understand these factors and begin preparing for their influence prior to the decision to implement specific engagement strategies.

Assessing the Culture of Engagement

To improve engagement, the association needs to assess the historical culture of engagement within the industry or profession.

Different industries, professions, and associations have different cultures of engagement. The more positively the market views engagement, and the more engagement with the association is part of historical experience, the more likely individuals are to be responsive to engagement strategies.

For example, physicians have historically worked in a professional environment where collegial interaction and the use of the association as a conduit for commercial, educational, scientific, and personal interaction are common.

Understanding how the culture of engagement within an industry or profession can reinforce or hinder engagement is important to developing successful strategies.

Strategic Value Proposition Identification

To improve engagement, the association needs to identify and provide only the activities essential to the business or professional needs of the primary audience within the association's sphere of influence.

Many associations struggle under the weight of legacy programs or attempt to provide a huge portfolio of services. Successful engagement may depend more on providing five great benefits or services rather than ten average services.

Professional association: "Some things were 'nice' but they weren't going to help our members do their jobs better or more effectively. For the most part, we don't do programs that are 'feel good' any more, but focus on topics that will allow our attendees to go back to the office and do something differently."

Curated Community

To improve engagement, the association needs to identify and curate not only information but the network of people who use this information.

Relevant information is essential to engagement. Also critical to engagement is a relevant community within which to discuss the context of this information. Without both content and community, an essential component of engagement is lost, making it difficult for the association to sustain engagement.

Professional association: "There is an opportunity for associations to get their message to individuals through public social networking channels, not by using these channels for promotion but by engaging people in discussions - posting links to timely articles from the association's publications or providing answers to questions that are posted and linking the answers to association publications or resources on the subject."

80% of respondents *to Looking Forward 2014* said **developing/maintaining viable communities around relevant content** were a concern.

80% of respondents also indicated they were concerned about **customizing content to [these] distinct audiences.**

Creating Specific Strategies across the Engagement Continuum

Before individuals engage, they must first be aware of the association. In addition, engagement is a process with four distinct components⁸: Involvement, Interaction, Intimacy, and Influence. The following section introduces key strategies for each of these areas.

Awareness

To improve engagement, associations need to implement specific strategies that create positive awareness about the association and its value proposition within the audiences essential to its Mission and its commercial success.

A person cannot engage with an association if they are not aware of its existence, its purpose, or the benefits it provides. Much like a farmer who prepares the ground prior to planting, associations need to develop strategies to prepare the ground for engagement within their primary market.

Involvement

To improve engagement, associations need to implement specific strategies that generate initial contact with the association and track this activity for follow-up action.

Potential involvement could be viewing the website, downloading an article, or calling for information.

At this point, the relationship is very tentative and needs to be encouraged and reinforced.

The focus of these strategies will be creating a preliminary and positive perception of the association and its potential as a valuable resource.

Professional association: "We have many nurses who utilize our products and services--especially continuing education programs--who are not members. We view this as a positive, not a negative, and look for ways to meet the needs of these non-members as well as our members. The key is for associations to provide valued products and services to their community of professionals."

⁸ *Marketing's New Key Metric: Engagement* by Brian Haven for Marketing Leadership Professionals © 2007

Interaction

To improve engagement, associations need to implement specific strategies to reinforce the initial involvement and create a more substantial relationship.

A person happy with his or her initial involvement may decide on more substantial interaction, such as a product purchase or membership. This interaction may include submitting a paper or volunteering on a committee. At this point, the individual has decided to enter into a mutual relationship with the association.

Professional association: "We are already seeing professionals choosing to affiliate differently. We have members who have never been to a live conference or in-person local chapter meeting but who take advantage of our online web courses to meet their education needs, and who interact virtually with their chapter. We also have a number of customers who choose not to be members, either because their employer will not pay or they simply do not see the value of joining--just accessing the products/services that meet their need."

The focus at the point of interaction begins to change from marketing and communications to the successful delivery on the promise of the engagement value proposition (EVP). If the EVP is not met, the odds of maintaining engagement and building to the next stage decrease.

Strategies should encourage a trial purchase or interaction allowing the association to begin demonstrating its value proposition as a potential solution to problems faced by the

primary audience.

Intimacy

To improve engagement, associations need to develop specific strategies to interact with and support individuals to reinforce interaction and build a deeper, more emotional relationship.

Individuals who desire more intimate professional relationships will begin to take ownership of the association's success. Their sentiment regarding the association may be positive or negative and both reflect high levels of engagement. These individuals are commonly referred to as opinion leaders, people who have been active with the association, long-term members, or contributors.

The association needs to monitor and care for these individuals at a higher level because their expectations of the association are higher.

Influence

To improve engagement, associations need to develop specific strategies to support and encourage individuals who have become brand influencers and positive advocates for the association.

A person with strong feelings of engagement with the association often becomes a brand advocate, visibly supporting the association's mission, goals, and initiatives. These individuals have outsized influence because they are proponents of the association, creating a multiplier effect that goes beyond their transactional activity with the association.

Strategies in this area focus on reinforcing and supporting these advocates through higher levels of service or opportunities with the association.

Evaluation and Modification of Engagement Strategy

To improve engagement, associations need to continually monitor the success of engagement strategies and modify these strategies based on audience feedback and objective results.

Engagement is a process, not a destination. Once specific engagement strategies have been implemented, the results need to be tracked to determine success and to identify how each strategy contributes to the objective and whether the link between strategies can be improved.

Strategic Prioritization of the Value Proposition

To improve engagement, associations need to identify, configure, and price only the programs, services, and initiatives essential to the decision to join or participate with the association.

Too many associations continue to produce legacy programs that are no longer relevant. These activities dilute association resources and limit the association's effectiveness in producing truly unique experiences essential to the member experience.

Professional association: "We need to become much more adept at offering more for less..."

Legacy programs sap the associations financial and staff resources but, more importantly, the energy and focus of leadership.

The member value proposition is not what can be offered but what should be offered to solve the unique problems of the target audience.

Trade association: "The million dollar question is: What do our members want or what do they need to help them be successful in business? We have had difficulty getting to the bottom of this, and I think in this past year, we've just been throwing stuff against the wall at the behest of our Executive Committee, rather than paring down the offerings so we can clear resources to explore first, what do our members need from us to be successful and then second, how we can accomplish those."

Prioritizing the benefits helps your association focus resources on the benefits essential to membership.

Consider the following:

- The Society of Manufacturing Engineers discovered that out of 24 potential member benefits, nine distinct benefits attracted 70% of their market. The rest of their offerings provided only limited additional market penetration.
- The Massachusetts Medical Society discovered that 4 benefits out of 15 attracted 85% of their membership.
- The National Ground Water Association discovered that of 28 tested benefits, **only 2 were essential to the membership decision**.

Association Laboratory's historical research consistently shows that *strategic prioritization* is essential to successfully position the association relative to its competitors and allows for a focused concentration of staff and financial resources allowing the association to do 5 great things instead of 10 average things.

Align Governance and Organizational Structure with Market Needs

To improve member engagement, associations need to structure themselves to meet how people desire and choose to engage.

Too often association structure is determined by internal criteria, not market-based needs or preferences. Like trying to fit a round peg into a square hole, if the association is not structured to fit the needs of the market, it becomes inefficient.

Professional association: "We are making several key changes intended to address changing member demographics, expectations, and needs."

This results in an internal focus, dictated by politics and staff priorities, which may not be reflective of the desires of the market.

The market does not care how you are structured; they only care about solutions to their problems. If you have a fragmented structure you may have a fragmented approach to members' needs and this may limit the association's efficiency in providing a meaningful and *engaging* member experience.

***In conclusion**, the decision making environment facing associations will be complex and dynamic. It will challenge many of the assumptions associations have used to guide membership and engagement strategy. Associations that invest in understanding their market more fully and aligning their strategic initiatives and organizational structure more closely with market needs will have a much higher likelihood of developing and sustaining membership engagement.*

How to Use this White Paper

This paper should be used as a discussion guide to create internal dialogue on the specific issues affecting engagement in order to develop specific strategies to improve engagement in a logical, methodical fashion.

Key questions include the following:

1. Who are the primary, secondary, and tertiary audiences essential to the Mission and market success of the association?
2. What are the leading economic and business or professional environmental influences facing the association's members and what are the implications of these forces on their attitudes and behaviors relative to engagement?
3. What is the historical culture of engagement within the industry and profession and what are the implications for our association?
4. What benefits and goals of engagement are sought by key audiences and how are those benefits reflected in their choices relative to the association?
5. How should we define and measure engagement and modify our strategies based on performance?

Appendix 1: What is Engagement?

Defining and Measuring Engagement

Why has engagement become important?

Associations do not measure engagement for fun; they do it because they hope to accomplish something. This “something” could be a purchase or it could be a call to a local congressman, but without a link to desired behavior measuring engagement becomes simply an intellectual exercise.

The marketing or purchase funnel was traditionally a very linear process leading prospective customers from awareness through purchase.

Unfortunately, social media tools and other communication technologies have disrupted this linear and, relatively speaking, controlled and predictable process.

These tools have allowed for a much more fluid and real-time relationship between a person and the organization, and thus, the traditional way of looking at this relationship is *insufficiently robust*.

As a result, the concept of “engagement” has been introduced as a potential model to describe this more complex relationship and predict how business activities change this relationship.

Engagement can be used to achieve the following benefits:

- Identifying the nature of the interaction(s) between individuals/markets and the association.
- Understanding the strength of the relationship between a person/market and the association.
- Understanding how to serve a person’s or market’s needs more effectively.
- Identifying the needs of the person/market relative to what the association produces.
- Understanding how to allocate resources.

If used properly, engagement can be a powerful marketing tool helping associations create sustainable business strategy.

How do we define engagement?

In order to use engagement in decision making, we must measure it; in order to measure it, we must define it. [Forrester Research](#) developed a definition of engagement as early as 2007. This definition posited that engagement consisted of four important components:

Involvement – the “touches” between a person and the organization

This component of engagement is the basic approach of a person to the association. Common measurements would be web page views or requests for information. At this point there is no “back and forth” or purchase transaction.

Interaction – the contributions or back and forth between the person and the organization

Interactions represent the common “transactions” between a member and the association. Interactions would include becoming a member, purchasing a book, or registering for a conference. Interactions go both ways though, so this area also includes volunteering or writing an article for the newsletter. Interaction is not only when the person requests and receives something from the association but also begins to contribute to the association.

Intimacy – the sentiment (likes or dislikes) of the person regarding the organization

Intimacy represents how the person “feels” about the association. Potential measures might include satisfaction or net promoter scores or “likes” on the association’s Facebook page. Intimacy is indicative of a person’s emotional commitment to the association.

Influence – the likelihood and strength of a person’s promotion or advocacy for the organization

The influence stage is when the member (or other stakeholder) begins to actively promote the association, for example, through a member-get-a-member campaign.

When taken together, these four components represent a model of engagement that can be measured, tracked and used to guide business strategy.

Engagement is a new way of looking at the relationship between a person or business and the association. It offers associations an important tool to improve this relationship and use it to influence outcomes.

It is important to note that our understanding of the concept of engagement is still in flux, without a clear right or wrong way of using it to inform decisions. The association community will need to continue experimenting with engagement and discover what works and does not work regarding association strategy.

6 Essential Aspects of an Engagement Metric

Defining engagement metrics enables association executives to make better decisions about membership commitment, loyalty, marketing, attrition, volunteer activity, and other contemplated business goals.

Engagement is a consolidating metric that identifies the link between desired member behaviors and desired association outcomes over time. Without a link between behavior and outcome, measuring engagement is just an interesting intellectual exercise.

Engagement is difficult to measure because it tracks the relationship between two moving points: the *member's relationship as defined through behaviors* and the *association's business goals*.

Member behaviors and association goals are both dynamic over time.

Transactions do not equal engagement. Engagement is a personal relationship not a transactional relationship. If you limit the definition of a person's engagement to purchases or meeting attendance, you create an artificially limiting definition of engagement that ignores the individual's feelings of commitment to the organization and the emotional connection to the Mission and people of the association.

6 Essential Attributes of an Engagement Metric

To develop a successful and useful engagement metric, it is necessary to determine the most important association objectives and the member behaviors the association seeks to influence that are most closely linked to these objectives.

A good measure of engagement will have the following six characteristics:

- **Objective** – the metric should allow for objective comparisons between members and member audiences.
- **Durable** – the metric should be survivable across time to provide for longitudinal analysis.
- **Valid** – the metric must link relevant member behaviors to desired business outcomes.
- **Comparable** – the metric must identify the increase or decrease in the individual member's engagement relative to previous behavior over time.
- **Relative** - the metric must identify the improvement or decrease in the individual member's engagement relative to other members.
- **Robust** – the metric must act as an index allowing for the identification of changes, not only in overall engagement, but in particular subsets of engagement that are linked to a particular business goal.

Modern associations develop assumptions regarding what behaviors correlate most closely with desired behaviors then develop a model to test these assumptions. Using data mining techniques, you can validate your model using the historical behaviors of your members.

Appendix 2: Definitions and Terminology

The following is a list of definitions of common membership terms and concepts developed initially by the ASAE Membership Council to help inform discussions of membership models.

The goal of these definitions was to support consensus on a common understanding among membership professionals regarding key terms and concepts.

Market Definitions

Market—A market is defined as a group of individuals or companies that meet the following criteria:

- **Identifiable:** the differentiating attributes of the segments must be measurable so that they can be identified.
- **Accessible:** the segments must be reachable through communication and distribution channels.
- **Substantial:** the segments should be sufficiently large to justify the resources required to target them.
- **Unique needs:** to justify separate offerings, the segments must respond differently to the different marketing mixes.
- **Durable:** the segments should be relatively stable to minimize the cost of frequent changes.

Market/Segment Characteristics

- **Market Size**—Market size is defined as the total universe of potential members and customers that are a legitimate target of the association.
- **Market Distribution**--Market distribution describes how evenly members or customers are distributed across a geographic region. Markets can be equally distributed or heavily concentrated within a defined geographic region.
- **Market Segment**—A market segment is defined as a sub-segment of a market that still exhibits all of the characteristics of a market but on a more limited scale.
- **Individual Characteristics**—Individual characteristics are defined as objective, descriptive identifiers of an individual, for example, age, title, or gender.
- **Organizational Characteristics**—Organizational characteristics are defined as objective, descriptive identifiers of an organization, for example, gross revenue or number of employees.

Member Classifications

- **Member**—A member is an individual who has self-selected to join an organization based on the strength of their affiliation with the existing members of the organization.
- **Individual Member**—An individual member is defined as a member where an individual person self identifies to join the association based on the unique needs and interests of the individual and where the interests of the individual are the priority.
- **Organizational Member**—An organizational member is defined as a member where an individual person participates as a representative of an organization and where the representation of the organizational member is the priority.
- **Member organization representative**—A member organization representative is an individual who represents an organization in a trade association and whose primary role is to advocate for the interests of the company within the context of the trade association's activities.
- **Regular member**—A regular member is defined as an organization or individual who is the primary membership market of the association.
- **Student member**—A student member is defined as an individual who is granted preliminary status as a member due to their participation in a relevant, approved course of study by the association.
- **Retired member**—A retired member is an individual granted membership status by the association following their retirement.
- **Supplier member**—A supplier member is an organization or individual who is granted membership status in the organization and who offers well and services for sale to individuals or companies designated as primary members.

Customer Classifications

- **Prospective customers**—Prospective customers are defined as individuals or companies identified by the association as within the Mission, goals, and scope of operation of the association's activities and who can be identified and targeted through marketing strategies.
- **New customers**—New customers are defined as individuals or companies who have been successfully targeted by the association in some manner and made a trial purchase of the association's products or services in some fashion.
- **Repeat customers**—Repeat customers are defined as individuals and companies who have been sufficiently satisfied with their product purchase and continued their participation with the association through an additional or repeat purchase of an association product and service.
- **Prospective members**—Prospective members are defined as individuals and companies who represent potential members because they share both individual and organizational characteristics with existing members that have been linked or otherwise identified as measures

of shared affiliation. A prospective member thus exhibits a greater propensity to join the association.

- **Subscriber**—A subscriber is defined as an individual or company that pays a separate fee in order to receive a publication or be granted access to online content or distance learning products.

Membership Status

- **Member Type**—A member type is defined as a subcategory of membership within the overall membership of an association that has a distinct designation within the association, for example, CEO member or supplier member.
- **New members**—New members are defined as individuals and companies that share both individual and organizational characteristics with existing members who have made a trial purchase of membership and have been a member for less than 1 calendar year.
- **Retained members**—Retained members are defined as individuals and companies that share both individual and organizational characteristics with existing members and who have been sufficiently satisfied with their membership participation with the association that they retain their membership and continue to participate as members for more than 1 year.
- **Lapsed member**—A lapsed member is a former member of an association that has not paid dues within 1 year of the anniversary date of the initial dues invoice.
- **Dropped member**—A dropped member is defined as a member that has been specifically removed from the association's membership due to failure to pay or otherwise fulfill stated obligations of membership.
- **Non-member**—A non-member is an individual or organization that has not self-identified to become a member of an association.
- **Non-market**—A non-market is defined as individuals and companies outside the scope of the association's Mission and goals and who will never be of interest to the association.

Strategies

- **Membership marketing strategy**—Membership marketing strategies are defined as strategies that leverage the existence of a sense of shared affiliation among members of a group.
- **Product marketing strategy**—Non-dues marketing strategies are defined as strategies that leverage a particular target audience's shared desire for the attributes of a particular product or service designed to meet a specific need or problem.
- **Bundled marketing strategy**—A bundled marketing strategy is a product marketing strategy that promotes the aggregate savings or ease of access to multiple products or services as a membership in the organization.

Descriptors of Individual Constituents

- **Attendee**—An attendee is an individual who registers and physically attends a face to face activity sponsored or produced by an association.
- **Participant**—A participant is an individual who registers or logs in or takes part in an activity produced by an association and distributed online or through telephone or videoconferencing.
- **Affiliation**—Affiliation is defined as the extent to which different individuals consider themselves members of the same group of people. Affiliation can be identified by assessing the extent to which a group of people share specific individual and organizational characteristics that are important to their decision to self-organize into a community.

Organizational Characteristics

- **Geographic Scope**—Geographic scope is defined as the extent of the geographic distribution of members within an association. Geographic scope in order of ascending geographic size is:
 - Municipal, County, State/Provincial, Regional/Multi-State, National, International, Global
- **Formality**—Formality is defined as the level of defined organizational and/or staff structure necessary for the development and ongoing existence of a group of members.

Definitions of Common Metrics

The following definitions of common metrics were provided by [Marketing General Inc.](#)

- **Promotion Response Rate (PRR)**—PRR is defined as the percentage of people who responded to a promotion. $\text{Total number of responses} / \text{Total number of prospects contacted} \times 100$.
- **Renewal Rate (RR)**—The RR is defined as the average percentage of membership that remains in a 12 month period. $(\text{Total Number of Members Today} - 12 \text{ month new members}) / \text{Total Number of Members in Previous Year}$
- **Membership Tenure (MT)**—The MT is defined as the average time a member stays a member. $1 / \text{Reciprocal of Renewal Rate} = .10$
- **Lifetime Value (LTV)**—The LTV is defined as the economic value produced by a typical member. $(\text{Dues} + \text{Non-Dues Revenue}) \times \text{MT}$
- **Maximum Acquisition Cost (MAC)**—The MAC is defined as an estimate of the maximum investment that can be made to acquire a member or customer at a profit. $((\text{Dues} + \text{Non-Dues Revenue}) - (\text{Total Servicing Costs})) \times \text{MT}$

Appendix 3: Research Process

Process

Association Laboratory produced this white paper using the following process:

1. Review of historical research conducted by the company, specifically research involving environmental scanning, strategic planning, and membership value proposition development. Studies from 2008 through 2013 were reviewed. Specific data thought particularly relevant to key points was highlighted in this paper.
2. Review of *Looking Forward 2012* and *2013* environmental scanning research.
3. Review of the *Looking Forward 2014* Association Environmental Scanning Study conducted in December 2013.
4. Development and facilitation of two online bulletin boards of association chief staff officers and senior association staff.

Association Laboratory facilitated online bulletin boards for 17 professional association and 8 trade association staff officers in November 2013.

5. Modified [Delphi](#) review process among bulletin board participants to review and comment on the draft whitepaper.

The draft of the white paper was distributed to the bulletin board participants for review in December 2013 and their comments were incorporated into the final version of the white paper.

6. Association Laboratory developed this final white paper based on the review by participants and an internal analysis of potential implications for associations.
7. Association Laboratory inserted supporting commentary, quotes, secondary research sources, and primary research from relevant studies to support specific points.

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Appendix 4: About Association Laboratory

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About Association Laboratory

Association Laboratory is one of the nation’s leading strategic consulting firms specializing in the research and development of business strategy for associations. The award winning company serves a national client base of leading trade, professional associations through staff in Chicago, IL and Washington, DC through qualitative and quantitative research and strategic planning and business modeling.

The company produces a variety of strategic white papers on issues related to association business strategy. More information on the company can be found at www.associationlaboratory.com.