

**Share Your Message the Right Way:**

# **TIPS TO RECRUIT, RETAIN AND KEEP MEMBERS ENGAGED**

**in Your Professional  
or Trade Association**



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Successfully attracting new members and keeping your current members engaged is a challenge shared by many organizations, programs and associations, nonprofit or for-profit, volunteer or otherwise.

To attract new members, you need to use the right tools, the right way. And to retain your existing members, you need to deliver value, providing even more tools to help members grow and succeed.

Use the following best practices to create or adapt your recruitment and retention strategy, which should be updated frequently to keep up with new technology and meet modern expectations.

# Challenges Professional and Trade Associations Face in 2019

People join associations because they want to work together on a common cause or interest, according to the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE). While their roles have changed over time, one common goal remains: bringing people together – be it in person or virtually – to generate positive results.

At the core, associations are informational organizations, and the cost of information has gone down. Outlets to get information have increased. Associations are now faced with the challenge of defining why they should be the number one resource people need to be a part of.

“In the past, people would join because it was the right thing to do,” said Reggie Henry, Chief Information and Engagement Officer at ASAE. “Clearly people have moved passed that.”

“Engagement and what it really means has gone from this place of trying to measure engagement by what people buy from you,” Henry went on to explain. At the end of the day, he said, you’ll know what they paid for, but you won’t know how well you met their needs.

The difference, he said, is the value proposition.

“Every time you interact in the context of *you* instead of the context of *us*, that’s how you create a different value proposition.”

Find out the one thing that will help your members do their jobs better every day. Find out what technology they use the most and what other sources they use to get their information. Find out what your members are talking about, struggling with. What are they interested in? It’s not about selling them a product but providing them with a resource.

Aim to put systems in place to get you that type of information. If you use the technology available to you, you’ll know what your members’ challenges are because they talk about them. “Listen” to all that data with the intent of understanding your members’ needs.



# Make a Strong First Impression

People join activities and organizations they perceive as worthwhile. It's their perception of your association that will attract them initially – so you'll want to put your best foot forward. Don't assume that people know what your association is and what it does. It's important that potential members correlate your association with value.

People may not get involved if they don't know what they'll gain. Clearly articulate the benefits membership will provide to help ensure they have a productive and worthwhile experience. Be specific in your message. Benefits may include the opportunity to share industry information, further develop their careers and access exclusive content.

The benefits of joining your organization need to move beyond networking, Henry explained. Instead, think about the idea of community and how to engender that. Developing a true sense of community involves more of an intentionality for bringing people together. For example, a meeting is not just a chance for people to get together, it's an opportunity for members to come together to solve problems.

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## QuickTip

Recruitment methods may include the following:

- Posting information on your association's website, partner sites and social networking sites, such as Facebook and LinkedIn
- Handing out flyers or other promotional items (e.g., reminder cards, magnets) in places frequented by your target group (e.g., offices, trade shows, industry-specific events)
- Writing online blogs and white papers on the latest industry statistics to increase awareness
- Reaching out to potential members, and asking them to join

Recruitment also involves education and building your public image.



## It might be time to refine your mission

Your mission statement identifies the scope of your association's operations and reflects its values and priorities. It helps you make consistent decisions, motivate others, integrate objectives with goals and enhance communication.

Your mission statement can help you market your organization by succinctly describing its culture and purpose. The more clearly you understand your association's image, the better able you will be to stress the positives, correct misconceptions and target people to join.

This process also gives you and other members the opportunity to renew your commitment and ensures you are prepared to engage and support new members.

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### QuickTip

Identify the key components of your value proposition, i.e., your "elevator pitch" for quickly describing the benefits of joining your association. Once you have their attention, use the other components of your value proposition to secure their support.

## What motivates people to participate?

Understanding what motivates people to get involved can help you target your recruitment strategy. According to McClelland and Atkinson's Motivational Theory, people have three separate motivational needs, with one being predominant:

- 1 Affiliation:** An affiliation-motivated person favors personal interaction, works to make friends, likes to get involved with group projects and wants to be perceived as a good person.
- 2 Achievement:** An achievement-motivated person likes working toward specific goals, seeks responsibility, sticks with a job until it's completed and sees problems as challenges.
- 3 Power:** A power-motivated person likes to impact and influence others, can work alone or in a group, responds to people's or program's needs and keeps an eye on an organization's "big picture" goals.

A successful recruitment program improves your association's image and can help expand services and lead to better fundraising.

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### QuickTip

Current members can help promote your image; they tend to be convincing because they have already committed to your association. Members can speak at recruitment events and distribute recruitment materials at work.

# Meet Them Where They Are

Today, the world is connected in ways that are shattering traditional concepts of communication.

“Pay attention to how people interact with your organization,” said Henry. “Use that interaction the next time.” Get comfortable using different methods and be open to understanding how others prefer to be reached.

“Being digital means a lot more than transforming documents. It’s a mindset change. A structure change,” said Henry. Associations need to be flexible, nimble and understand the mindset of present and potential members. If a member has a problem today, he or she expects a solution tomorrow.

Focus on what information your members need and, just as important, how they acquire that information.

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## Redefining your target is a good first step

Consider who you’re targeting for membership. You can have more than one target with different plans for each. You can then develop an effective marketing plan, make promotional decisions and create value for your members.

If you haven’t already, it’s worth taking the time to put together a basic marketing plan. A marketing plan can help you direct your activities and make the best use of your resources:

- 1** Identify your target market. Some common ways to categorize people include age, gender and location.
- 2** Outline what you want to accomplish. Be specific. For example, you want potential members to attend an event you’re hosting.  
**Goal #1:** Have people register for the event.  
**Goal #2:** After the event, follow up to see if attendees would be interested in joining your association.
- 3** Think about how best to reach your target market. Consider what media they use, how they communicate with one another and what they know about professional and trade associations.
- 4** Work out a budget to determine if you can put your plan into action. You may need to prioritize.
- 5** With your goals and budget in place, plan your approach.

Multiple outreach methods work best for both recruitment and retention. Consider using multiple mediums to increase your success. For example, printed materials work well as trade show giveaways, social media posts can advertise events, while apps can push news and updates to existing members.



# Choosing the right medium can be key to making sure your message is accurately received, processed and understood

Different generations prefer different methods of communication, e.g., in-person, email, text messages, social media.

## Baby Boomers

**(Born 1946-1964)**

Baby boomers respond best to a mix of email and face-to-face communications and meetings. They appreciate being asked for advice and feedback.

## Generation X

**(Born 1965-1979)**

Email is their go to communication tool. Meetings should be used only when face-to-face communication is really required.

## Millennials

**(Born 1980-1995)**

Millennials grew up with the internet. They are tech-savvy and rely mostly on electronic means of communication.

## How to reach millennials

Millennials are quickly making up the majority of today's workforce, having surpassed Generation X, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data.

The traditional concept of a top-down, one-way communication strategy is dead. Millennials are a completely new generation. Just like the baby boomers did at that time, millennials are making an impact on society.

- Millennials are used to connecting with people in new ways. Instead of simply telling them your message, facilitate a discussion and give them an opportunity to participate.
- Millennials are reshaping the workforce. Consider creating a mentoring program.
- Millennials expect full communication and information to be available immediately. Engage them in your association's mission by providing a lot of outreach and updates. Foster their belief in collaboration.
- Use social media including video to define and improve your public image and reach your target audience.

### QuickStat III

Roughly 39% of 18- to 29-year-olds now go online almost constantly and 49% go online multiple times per day. More than 92% of millennials own smartphones.



# Keep Members Engaged. With You. With Each Other.

There's no point to working so hard to recruit new members if you don't plan a way to keep them.

Having a viable member retention plan is a key component of any successful program. Communicate with members regularly and take the time to gather their input.

Keep in mind that members represent your association to the public. The more they know and understand, the more they can contribute.

Make membership a positive experience and events exciting enough to keep members coming back.

- **Retention strategies** can include providing members with the opportunity to lead and grow.
- **Retention concepts** can include offering engaging activities, providing incentives and facilitating engagement between members.

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## Deliver your content in innovative ways

Delivering your content in innovative ways can improve its accessibility and shareability. People already live in a digital world, explained Henry. "We have to think how we can fit into their world, not the other way around."

At the same time, your content has to be clearly written, focused and strategy-driven.

When presenting information in print or online, think about your audience, i.e., the people who will be reading the information. Think about the steps and the questions they may have and use your insights as a tool to reflect on how they consume information.

## Mobile apps can increase your association's visibility

An app is a tool you can use to deliver different types of content and share your content in new ways. Apps appear to work much faster than mobile websites and allow for better interactivity with the user. Mobile apps can also perform more sophisticated functions for the user and are easier to personalize.

You can use an app to share news, send out fillable forms (e.g., surveys) and announce upcoming events. An app can work as a hub where your members will want to return to regularly. Providing frequent updates, such as new content, is a great way to engage and retain users. They will see that you are investing and constantly delivering value. Over time, this will entice users to continue to use the app, potentially boosting retention rates and increasing your revenue stream.

While your content should be visually appealing, dynamic and engaging, keep in mind that simply presenting information using an app's latest features doesn't equate with good content.



# 10 tips to create engaging content

It's important to know who you're writing to if you want to create user-friendly content. When you create new content, from news items to promotional materials, always speak to your target audience.

- 1** Use clear, plain language. To help make sure readers understand your message, use the same words they commonly do. Know the expertise and interests of your average readers and write to that person.
- 2** Organize your information using topic sentences so that the information is skimmable. A good topic sentence draws readers in. At the same time, by giving each paragraph a good introduction, readers can get a general idea of what the document is about by skimming just the topic sentences.
- 3** Depending on the medium, be concise. Put the most important information first.
- 4** Make sure the content is designed for reading. For example, break large blocks of text into shorter chunks of related information.
- 5** Organize information using bullets and numbered lists to keep information flowing.
- 6** Speak directly to the person reading the content. Writing to "you" pulls readers in and makes the information relevant.
- 7** Add a lot of useful headings to help readers follow the flow and see how it's organized.
- 8** Use transition words between your paragraphs to tell the audience if the next paragraph expands on the one before it or takes a new direction.
- 9** If needed, address separate audiences separately. Sending mixed message may confuse readers.
- 10** Follow web standards when presenting information online.

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## QuickTip

People read differently online than they do in print. It's estimated that users read only 20% of the words during an average visit. Make your words count.





# 5 Key Takeaways

1

To be effective, your association must successfully recruit and retain members, and keep them actively involved with your association. Engaged members are recurring members. Growing your membership enhances your association's general profile, which can attract more members.

2

Recruitment involves knowing who your potential members are and how best to reach them. Tailor your recruitment message to your target audience and make it inviting to encourage people to become involved. Don't think of recruitment as a one-time deal.

3

An internal review can help you learn how existing members and the public perceives your organization.

4

Look for better ways to connect people with the information they need. Don't focus on how many clicks your website's getting; instead, pay attention to what members are looking for.

5

Retention describes your efforts to keep members in your association. A retention plan involves creating a sense of community. The more connected members feel, the more likely they are to feel a sense of commitment to your association.

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