



YOUR MEMBERS: KEEPING THEM, FINDING MORE

IT IS EVIDENT THAT AN ASSOCIATION NEEDS TO KEEP ITS MEMBERS AND ALSO TO FIND NEW CANDIDATES: BOTH ASPECTS REQUIRE EFFORT. THINK ABOUT THE VALUE OF YOUR ASSOCIATION TO THE CURRENT MEMBERS, MAINTAIN THE ADVANTAGES OF MEMBERSHIP, SO THAT YOU CAN DELIVER ALL YOU OFFERED, AND MORE.

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For new activities, apply two tests: one is whether the activity fits with the basic goal of the association, the other is to consider how the members will view the new proposal.

RETENTION

Retaining the members already on your list should be your first preoccupation: they joined through interest in your association's objectives, you know who and where they are. Members have a right to expect the services offered when they joined, with stability and continuity, and natural extension of your current programme, still pursuing your stated mission.

With time, the means of working towards those goals changes; a wide range of ideas for new products or services can be generated by brainstorming, networking, reading. The association leader must judge the usefulness and impact of each new proposal, accepting only those which fit with the objectives.

How can an association tell whether it is on the right lines, as far as its members are concerned? A classic method is to conduct a survey. Careful design is essential, not only imagining the potential replies, but also whether the association will realistically be capable of providing services if the members

favour them. A short list of alternatives is more likely to produce a response and a choice among projects, whereas leaving a blank space open to all suggestions is unwise, since members whose ideas are not implemented will be disappointed. It should be sent out at a period of the year when your staff have time and opportunity to analyse the results and to make practical and detailed preparations for projects selected. Be sure to tell your members about the results and how you are responding; if they feel that they spent time on their response but you ignored it, they will be much less likely to reply in future.

On a day-to-day basis, information on the views of members should be collected by diligent association staff listening to them and reading their messages, not just during a survey but on every possible occasion. Collating information rather than filing notes as soon as they have been dealt with will mean that you notice trends as they emerge, when the same topic arises repeatedly, either as a

positive inquiry or request or negatively as a complaint.

It is also significant when a product is not mentioned for a while: are members no longer interested? Perhaps you are putting effort into an outdated item which should be withdrawn, but before stopping, you should warn members, so that they can indicate whether they really do not care for this particular feature or whether they are taking its supply for granted. For both traditional and new events, review thoughtfully to try to understand why one event was fully booked before the deadline, another had to be moved to larger premises, while a third made a loss because numbers were lower than you expected: take note, learn from experience.

After all efforts to satisfy your members, there will always be some who leave. If members resign, and especially if they simply fail to renew their membership, attempt to find out the reasons why. When a company has sold its interests in the relevant industry, or a professional has retired from an active career, such members cannot be retained. Wish them well for the future and part on good terms. But members who left because they were unhappy with your association will probably tell others, which is not good for your reputation, hence it is worth your while to know why they reached their decision and counter it. If you cannot persuade these members to stay, at least you can prevent others leaving on similar grounds.

RECRUITMENT

In addition to keeping current members, an association needs new ones, and should make a specific effort to welcome new people. Finding new members depends in some respects on the nature of the membership. The approach to individuals for a professional society is different from a trade association serving industry, for example.

For personal memberships, doctors or lawyers, say, there is a natural turnover as the older members retire, so you need to address

their younger replacements. You can encourage their older colleagues to bring them along as 'guests' at a special low fee, and you can extend an invitation addressed personally to each newly qualified professional, scanning published results of appropriate colleges or institutes.

For a trade association, member companies can be encouraged to bring in their clients or suppliers as new members, but cannot be expected to bring their competitors, not wishing their rivals to benefit from networking, statistics and industry news as they do.

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But you can find these potential members through trade journals or registers, and inform them of the advantages of your association.

Employ opportunism, too. If guests from non-member companies attend your events, you can hand out a neatly presented package, including application form, inviting them to join, so that they can act immediately. Equally, if you have assisted a non-member with information or guidance, take the chance to offer a membership application while the inquirer is feeling that yours is a useful organisation.

Nevertheless new members should be admitted in accordance with the association's statutes and regulations; it is not a good idea to short circuit the proper procedure, for instance, to admit members randomly throughout the year if the rule is that new members must be elected formally by the annual assembly. Instead, accept the applica-

tion on the basis that service will be provided as though the applicant were already a member until official approval can be given, effectively giving a free gift but one which will engage the applicant until the right moment comes.

Simply increasing numbers is not necessarily an advantage: a membership roll which your staff and resources can serve well is preferable to having a number too large to manage. If it appears that all suitably qualified candidates are already your members, modifying the mission just to add numbers will not

be a success in the long run. Putting your energy into improving your offer of services or products is a better way to improving your association.

When your events are listed in the UIA Calendar, and your association is included in the UIA Yearbook, interested new members can find you.

www.uia.org

