

# 12 Practical Ways to Engage and Retain Members in Today's World

**Which is more valuable to your organization?**

- A) One new member?
- B) One retained member?

The answer is definitely B.

According to Amy Gallo of the Harvard Business Review, "acquiring a new customer is anywhere from five to 25 times more expensive than retaining an existing one."

That's because it costs more to find and convince a new member to join than to keep your current members engaged.

Of course, keeping members engaged can be difficult at times, so here are 12 ways to keep member engagement going.

## 1) Discover why they joined and do more of it

The top two reasons people join an organization are because they want to:

- Network with others in their field
- Access specialized and/or current information

While perhaps 2/3rds of your members joined for these two reasons, what about the rest? You could be losing people if you're not delivering the value they expected when they joined.

Imagine you're a fishing club and someone joined because they love to fish, but all your events are about how to craft lures? This person may become disappointed and end up lapsing.

The sad thing is that 90% of the organizations I talk to do not track the reasons why members joined. Knowing this information and delivering on it is one of the most influential ways to engage your members and keep them from lapsing.

There are two ways to collect this information from your members:

- Ask them in your new member application form.
- Survey all current members (often member expectations change from year to year)

To collect this information in your new membership application form, simply add a field called, "Why did you join?" and include a checklist of your benefits with an additional open ended option.

If you use online application forms, this information will go right into your database and allow you to quickly see the reasons why people are attracted to your organization.

Then, focus on the benefits your new members want.

But, don't forget about your current members. The benefits they seek may have changed since they joined. Once a year, survey your current members to make sure you always know what they want. Use any of the free online survey platforms like SurveyMonkey, or Google Forms.

Here are some sample questions you can use for your current members:

1. What are 3 things that our organization should continue doing
2. What are 3 things that our organization should stop doing?
3. Which benefits do you take the most advantage of? (check all that apply)
4. Would you recommend our organization to a friend? (1- no, 10- definitely)
5. Why did you give that rating in question 4?

Collecting this information from new and current members will ensure you're on the right track to engaging and retaining your members the best you can.

## **2) Refresh your members' memories of the benefits you offer**

What I've seen happen in some organizations is that they don't put enough importance into onboarding and many members aren't even aware of their total benefits.

I'm part of a writing association that didn't send me any onboarding materials. As a result, I only accessed the benefits I could find on their website.

It was only after speaking with one of their admins that I discovered they had a mentorship program and a series of writing workshops. I'd been a member for nearly a year and never accessed any of these benefits!

How many of your members might be in the same situation, and may lapse because they don't feel they're getting their money's worth?

A simple email, or mention in your newsletter with a list of all benefits can easily take care of this. But, as a proactive measure, make sure you've got a scalable and consistent onboarding process for all new members so they're aware of all your benefits right away.

The easiest way to do this is to send your onboarding materials in your new member confirmation email, which leads me to my next point...

## **3) Scale your onboarding in a consistent way**

"A robust, vibrant welcome stream is one of the strongest investments an organization can make in keeping its members," says Lowell Aplebaum, the Senior Director of Membership for The Society for Neuroscience.

It's essential to onboard your members as a proactive measure to retain them. At first they don't know anything about your organization or how to access its benefits, so you'll need to hold their hands through their first few encounters.

The most popular method of onboarding is through email communication. That's because it's easy to personalize emails and scale them to every single member in a consistent way.

The best email to deliver your onboarding materials in is your new member confirmation email. We at Wild Apricot find this email has the highest open rate of any email we send - 56%. That's over 200% higher than our industry average.

And, if you're looking for a way to automate your confirmation emails, you can use software like Membership Management Software to take care of all of this for you.

## **4) Identify who isn't engaging and send them a "win-back" email**

If you can't identify which of your members aren't engaged, you can't do anything to win them back before they end up lapsing.

Your member database should be organized in a way that allows you to easily identify who these people are.

Once you identify these people, send them a “win-back” email - a special offer designed to re-engage someone with your organization.

Take this example of Starbucks’ “win-back” email [here](#).

These emails work. And organizations that are successful at member retention have a plan in place to send these emails out to unengaged members on a regular basis.

The value you offer can be a discount like Starbucks is doing, an invitation to a special event, or simply a request to chat on the phone.

To identify unengaged members, simply filter your database for “Triggers” which may indicate they are unengaged.

Here are some examples of Triggers you can look for:

- Any member who hasn’t attended the last 3 events
- Any member who hasn’t updated their profile in the last year
- Any member who hasn’t read any of your emails in the last 3 months

If you’re using Wild Apricot, you can easily set up Triggers in the advanced search function of your contact database to identify unengaged members and email them.

### **5) Conduct exit interviews with lapsed members**

Have you ever moved on from a job and had to do an exit interview with Human Resources?

The reason is to collect information on how the company can improve its management to reduce turnover.

In the same way, an “exit interview” for every lapsing member can give you a lot of insight on some well needed changes that your organization may need to make.

Sharlyn Lauby of HRBartender suggests to “...include in the process a solid plan to review and act on those results. With solid information, you can incorporate positive change and, hopefully, reduce the need for exit interviews.”

Every time a member lapses, ask them to take fifteen minutes to speak with you on the phone about their experience with your organization. Then, make a plan to change how your organization operates if necessary to prevent more members from lapsing in the same way.

### **6) Pick up the phone and start creating personal connections**

Nothing engages a member more than a personal connection. It’s a smart strategy that a lot of membership organizations have also used to grow. In fact, Sarah Rintamaki, the Founder and Executive Director of Connecting for Kids used personal connections to help grow her organization over 300% in just the first year.

“Personal contacts are invaluable. Nobody joins our organization without getting a personal phone call from me,” says Sarah, “and I don’t think that will ever change. Whether it’s business, or nonprofit, or whatever, everything truly is a personal relationship. Whether its a donor, or a family, or a professional, they need to have a conversation with somebody.”

Sarah's organization has well over 1,000 members now and each one of them received a personal phone call from her. This may sound daunting, but it's worked.

If it works for new members, try it with unengaged members too. I bet they'd love a phone call, or at the least a personalized email. It may be the thing that keeps them engaged so that they don't lapse. Give it a try. Make a commitment to reach out to one unengaged or even lost member every single week. Put it in your calendar right now. Friday afternoon at 3pm, schedule your first call.

### **7) Begin facilitating online participation**

Events are one of the best ways to engage your members. But, events aren't for everyone. Some of your members have never come to an event and you've never spoken personally with them. You're not even sure if they're reading your emails (unless you're using Wild Apricot \*wink\*). To you, they're just a name in your database.

So how are you supposed to engage these people?

The first place to start with these members is online. Back in 2012, we wrote a comprehensive guide on how to increase membership engagement online and a lot of what we said still rings true:

- Engage members through your website by committing to creating fresh content
- Enable two-way communication and alert members of your content in online communities (blog, forum, social media)
- Use Social Media as a tool to talk with your members and share your latest work and benefits

Even if these people don't come out to your events, you're still creating a way for them to participate in the community of your organization.

Plus, encouraging online participation will increase engagement with all your members, so really it's a win-win scenario.

### **8) Ask lapsed members to rejoin with an appreciation letter**

Patty Foley, the past membership chair of Friends of Lucy Robbins Welles Library created a mail campaign to lapsed members that gained her organization a retention rate of over 90%.

Every September, she identified a list of members that had lapsed. She then sent these people an envelope in the mail, which included:

- Their renewal statement
- A letter explaining how their contributions made an impact on the organization with a request to renew their membership
- A return envelope to make it easier for these people to send in their dues.

From those that still didn't renew, she sent them another letter to arrive on the first of December. "The letter is key," says Patty. "We enjoyed at the peak a 90+% renewal."

As Patty's story shows, sometimes an extra nudge with a letter in the mail is all that's needed to win back a member.

### **9) Diversify your events**

I'm part of a writing association with many senior members, some of them are in their 80's.

The first event I attended was a workshop on transferring the copyrights of your work to a successor in your will.

I'm 28. And a will is the last thing on my mind. I don't even have any copyrights yet to transfer! I'm looking to network with new writers and learn about how to get my first agent. But those types of events wouldn't attract an older crowd.

So who should my writing association create events for? The older generation, or the younger one? How about both?

If your organization has a diverse membership, you'll need to hold diverse events. Doing this will help increase engagement with your members and prevent some from lapsing.

You can easily find out what types of events your members want simply by asking them. Just like in tip number one, email your members with a survey using any of the free online platforms like SurveyMonkey, or Google Forms.

### **10) Trash your paper renewal forms and automate renewals online**

No one likes completing paperwork and payments by check is drastically decreasing.

People like simple processes and automated online renewals are the simplest. That's why recurring online payments have risen in the last few years.

Members simply enter their payment information once and never have to worry about it again. And neither do you.

Not only will automating renewals save you a ton of administrative work, but you'll also experience increased cash flow from your on-time payments and the percent of members you retain will go up.

### **11) Send automated reminders**

One of the top five reasons why people don't renew their memberships is because they forgot. How ridiculous is that? All that hard work you put into obtaining and engaging a member and they don't renew, because they forgot?

Reminders are mandatory for every member who doesn't have automated renewals set up. But, figuring out whose dues are coming up and sending each of these people a reminder can be a lot of manual work.

With a Membership Management Software like Wild Apricot, you can easily set up 3 personalized email reminders to be sent out automatically before each member's dues are due, regardless of when they're due (I bet you never read a sentence with so many dues in it).

### **12) Realize it's okay**

There can be a million different reasons why someone doesn't renew and sometimes there's just nothing you can do about it. In fact, you can't do anything about three of the top five reasons why people don't renew (bolded below):

- Left the field, industry, profession
- Employer stopped paying dues
- Lack of engagement
- Can't justify cost
- Forgot

(well, maybe you can change the cost)

And there are many other reasons you can't do anything about: they left the city, they don't have the time anymore, their interests change.

Whatever the reason, just realizing that it's okay is all that's needed.

Make sure that every person leaves your organization with a good impression. You never know who they may recommend your organization to, or if they may become a member again in the future.

One simple thing you can do every time you part with a member is to send them a thank you letter personally signed by you for being part of your organization.

Doing this may not have any immediate impact on your membership, but it can help in the long run.

**Source**

This article was originally sourced from [Association Universe](#) and written by Terry Ibele.