

Low Membership Size

by

Norman E. Wallis, Ph.D.

President, PAI Management Corporation

Bethesda, Maryland, USA

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Unless a restricted and limited membership is required by its constitution, a non-commercial organization with a zero or negative annual membership growth is in trouble, just like any for-profit business with an eroding customer base. Building membership requires *both* 'care and feeding' of current members *and* 'marketing' for new members. Elected leaders should be sensitive to the following indicators that an organization is actively driving away current members and purposely keeping out potential members.

Weak membership benefits

Newly-elected leaders of small and emerging associations are often mystified why potential members do not flock to join their organizations. They are even more surprised to learn that a percentage of current members 'vote with their feet' and leave the association annually. Being leaders they know what their organization is trying to do, and why. However, being so close to the 'action' they are unable to see the association from the perspective of the average current or potential member. They frequently forget that a *current* member can become a *former* member if the benefits of membership are not worth the cost of membership to that person. They also can be oblivious to the fact that a *potential* member will only become a *current* member if there is a clear return on the financial investment the member must make to join.

A question that should be raised at every board meeting when the membership status report is given is "Why *should* a colleague in our discipline (or having the same interests) *invest* 'X' dollars in our association?" The answer should be "Because the *value* of the range of *benefits* is worth the *cost* of annual membership". Benefits should not be limited to membership *products*, such as a quarterly newsletter and a membership certificate to hang on a wall, even though many members might judge the value of joining on these alone. True membership benefits enhance the personal and/or professional growth of members. For example, the professional marketing value of being admitted to an elite scientific society; or the personal satisfaction from belonging to an organization which increases skills in a hobby; or the help available from an association to improve operating a business.

An annual review of membership benefits is essential. A useful and low cost exercise is to interview a small sample of 'average' members (selected at random from the membership data base) and ask each of them to place a monetary value on their membership.

Haphazard dues collection

If billing for dues (subscriptions) is infrequent and irregular, the association will suffer from poor cash management and this lack of consistency also will signal to members that the organization is inefficiently operated and not worth their continued investment. After all, if a 'business' cannot be bothered to collect its 'income' in a systematic manner, what else is being done inefficiently? Or, worse yet, what is not being done at all?

The cardinal rule in collecting dues is to keep billing monthly until the total cost of billing a member exceeds the projected dues amount. While at first it may not appear to be cost-effective to use members' dues to get them to renew, remember that members once lost are less likely to rejoin than current members, which are the *least* costly prospects for future (i.e., continued) membership.

Begin billing three months before members' expiration dates, and keep billing monthly until the total cost per unpaid member exceeds the dues amount. Do not fear a negative reaction to repetitive dues billings. The majority of members pay within a reasonable time, so the only people that will be 'bothered' by the monthly bills will be those members who may need seven, eight, or even more, reminders before they pay. Each billing should contain a different letter from the President or Executive Director, emphasizing what the association is doing for its members. As the number of billings increases, the letters should become more direct in urging the member to rejoin to avoid losing membership benefits.

Not communicating with members

For those who do not rejoin, despite repeated efforts, contact a random sample by telephone, and ask them why they have chosen not to rejoin. This exercise will provide key information that might never be obtained otherwise. Do not wait until a significant attrition problem exists to initiate asking members their opinions.

Apart from these spot check using random samples of members for research, regular communication with, and questioning of, *all* current members as part of the subscription billing process and through newsletters (a future article), is important for two reasons. First, this procedure documents what the members believe their association should provide. After all, they are investing money in the association that could be used for some other discretionary purpose, so there must be adequate reasons to continue to do so. Unless the organization is a charity, dues are really *fees for services to be rendered*, and periodic surveys on key issues will help the leadership stay close to members' needs and interests.

Second, asking members their opinions signals that they are vital to the association, and that their support and involvement is critical to the organization's success. The history of associations is full of examples of small groups spinning off from larger organizations, for no reason other than the frustration of a few capable and astute members who were excluded from the decision-making process.

No opportunity for involvement

Approximately 10% of members in a *growing* association will be active, interested and participating volunteers who will work within its structure to attain leadership positions. They enjoy the political and organizational challenges, and the opportunity to exercise their leadership talents to further the mission of their organization.

Members with natural leadership ability who are willing to work can be quickly discouraged if there is no potential for them to express their interest and energy. It can be threatening to the ‘founding fathers’ to have to hand over leadership to new blood, and sometimes a small ‘inside’ group tries to maintain control. A ‘closed’ leadership will dry up eventually, and the organization will have an effective life of no more than one decade. By then, the frustrated leadership potential will have gone on to other opportunities, possibly in competing organizations.

No ongoing marketing for new members

Frequently newly elected leaders of small associations get ‘religion’ and decide to mount a flashy membership drive.

Unfortunately they usually forget to develop a budget (see second article) and expect too much. Membership marketing must be a *continuous* effort, and must become *institutionalized* if it is to be really successful. A consistent, organized and low key approach will cause *net* membership to increase at a steady pace, and in a cost-effective manner.

Marketing for new members is often easier to implement, and more interesting than upgrading an unresponsive membership services program. Prospective members have no ‘inside’ experience, so it is possible to ‘sell’ them on the organization the first time, if the pitch is attractive.

However, it will be necessary to deliver the promised services to keep these new members, so the issue of satisfying current members must still be faced. If not, there will be a high attrition in the second and third years of membership of these ‘newly sold’ members. And the costs of membership marketing will be lost, as the true return on investment is not realized until these new members rejoin for the second year.

So, before ‘selling’ new memberships, make sure that the existing members are satisfied with the return on their subscription investment. Without this, the association will have a ‘revolving door’ membership with no net increase – an inexcusable waste of time and money.

Membership marketing methods include organized personal solicitations by active members, direct mail marketing, and professional telephone recruitment. All efforts to build membership have one cardinal rule: measure the response, and keep measuring. It is foolhardy for any association to undertake a massive marketing effort without first testing the effectiveness of the various methods possible using sample groups of prospects.

Summary

1. Involved and aware leaders should look at their organization ‘as others see it’ and recognize that unless the value of membership is worth the cost of the subscription invested by the average member, membership will decline.
2. Benefits should not be limited to traditional association *products*, but should be services that can directly and effectively help a member professionally or personally.
3. If members are not billed for dues, they cannot be expected to remember to pay. A regular and consistent system of billing for dues is essential for both membership maintenance and cash management.
4. It is imperative to communicate with all members on a regular basis, and to ask their opinions on major issues. This ensures that the services are useful, and lets the members know they are vital to the success of *their* organization.
5. Without opportunities for leadership involvement, fragmentation can occur when capable members are kept out of the decision-making process.
6. Marketing for new members should not be implemented until the *value* of membership has been addressed, and meaningful membership services have been developed. Once begun, however, membership marketing should become continuous and institutionalized, and the effects of various strategies must be *measured*.

An association that is not providing value added services to its members will go the way of any for-profit service company that forgets its most important asset – its clients. Without members, the word ‘association’ is meaningless. So treat all members, current and potential, like gold in the bank!