


Modern Practices for Member Recruitment and Retention

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The basic idea of associations dates back as far as humans themselves, when people mutually gathered for reasons as simple as hunting or gathering or safety. The concept of trade or work-related associations took root as early as medieval times, when craftsmen formed guilds and merchants assembled trading groups.

Today, the ascent of technology into every facet of our lives has prompted a pace of change and evolution hereto unrivaled in the history of business. Associations and nonprofit groups are not immune to this speed train of change and face a greater array of challenges and competition than ever before. Organizations of today must keep a keen eye on an unknown and rapidly approaching future.

Still, a recent study of MultiView partner associations confirmed the primary pain points at many membership organizations are the same that have troubled them for years. Further, it's probable that no matter what form associations take or what model associations are shaped into going forward, these few key dilemmas will always remain. Perhaps the most obvious is recruiting and retaining members.

RECRUITING

Obviously, there is no association without members, so it's not surprising that member recruitment and retention are always top concerns for membership organizations. More than 85 percent of MultiView's partner associations cited "desire to grow membership" as a top goal for 2016.

The top three goals for associations were increasing member engagement, increasing member retention and increasing membership acquisition.

- Marketing General Incorporated's 2015 Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report

The challenge of recruitment and retention was magnified during the Great Recession, but even as economic conditions improved, new competition for associations began to emerge. Social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn provide online avenues for groups to assemble. These newer platforms are easily appealing to an emerging generation of professionals (e.g. millennials/digital natives).

But it isn't just the changing demographic shift in the workforce causing potential members to look elsewhere. Groups like niche executive networks are cropping up as larger associations find it difficult to meet more focused or specific needs of certain portions of their memberships. And of course, so much information is now easily found online that potential members start to question the necessity or value of belonging to an association.

Competition to membership associations has never been more widespread and readily accessible. So how can membership organizations attract new members?

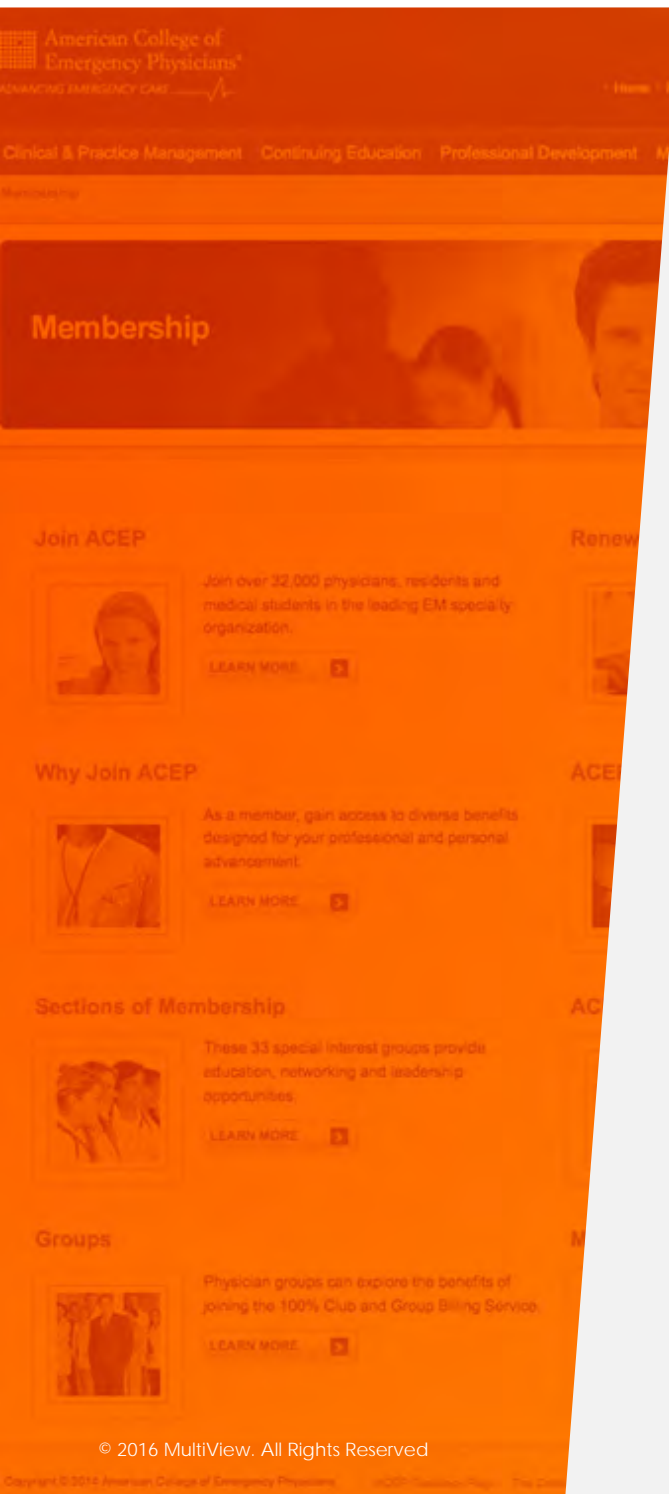
First Things First: Membership Options

The best recruitment marketing ever invented won't be fully effective if your association's membership options aren't appealing. Some of the basic tenets of membership recruitment are no-brainers, yet bear repeating because occasionally they can seem so simple they get lost.

For example, make the process to join your association a simple one. This can be especially important for potential members who may be on the fence about committing. Requiring them to jump through hoops in a cumbersome registration process could easily send them the other direction. Routinely analyze your membership application process and see what steps could be eliminated or streamlined.

Also consider the types of memberships you offer. Membership in associations cannot be a one-size-fits-all proposition. Different types of members will have different needs and may have different designs on what they expect to gain from membership. They may also have very different budgets.

Offering different types of memberships isn't necessarily a new idea for associations, but in recent years more associations have started identifying advantages to opening up new and different opportunities for prospective members to join. This idea can be broken out into two similar but separate concepts: member categories and member tiers. Categories are generally dictated by the association and members are fit into respective groups, while tiers offer the members options to choose their own levels of membership.



Categorized Memberships

Membership organizations generally either target individual members or groups, such as agencies or companies. A best practice for any association is to make sure someone who wants to join has an applicable option, regardless of what the primary or typical member may be.

17 percent of responding associations listed “membership too diverse; difficulty meeting needs of different segments” as a top-three challenge to growing membership.

- Marketing General Incorporated’s 2015 Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report

Many associations have traditionally maintained membership categories to accommodate different types of members.

The American College of Emergency Physicians, for example, is an individual membership organization built largely of doctors. Not all doctors are in the same stage of their careers, however, so ACEP offers a few categories. In addition to regular membership, there are reduced-rate options for transitioning physicians who have completed residency within the past three years. There is also an option for Candidate Membership – medical students and interns.

TAPPI, an association focused on the paper industry, also helps transition early career professionals into membership with student memberships as well as a discounted young professional option for members just starting their careers in the industry.



Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) is comprised largely of group members – organizations like DMOs and CVBs that market destinations to tourists and meeting planners. However, DMAI still provides reasonable options for prospective individual members who may not be employed by such an organization, as well as a Partner and Sponsorship option for companies that may not be destination marketing groups themselves, but suppliers and vendors who want access to those groups.

Like many associations, DMAI also provides inexpensive student and educator memberships that afford individuals the opportunity to access resources and network as they begin or teach careers in destination marketing.

“We really just want the students to be a part of the picture and let them know what a destination marketing organization is and what it does,” Director of Member Relations Mitchel Gehrisch said. “The Educator membership allows us to get our information to them so they are able to educate their students.”

Dues for DMAI’s primary membership category – the DMOs themselves – are determined by the member organization’s operating budget. Member groups with the smallest budgets currently pay \$300 annually for membership, while members with the largest budgets pay more than \$7,000.

“Half of our membership has a budget of a million dollars or less,” Gehrisch said. “That system really enables any size DMO [to join] because we didn’t want to leave anybody out.”

Categorized membership structures such as this allow the association to adjust dues and benefits based on criteria such as company size, revenue or career level.

Tiered Memberships

A more progressive trend for associations is a tiered membership approach. MGI's 2015 Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report found that only 12 percent of associations claimed to have a "tiered structure of increasing benefits." Differing slightly from member categories, tiered memberships provide different options – perhaps even among categories – that put more flexibility in the hands of members themselves.

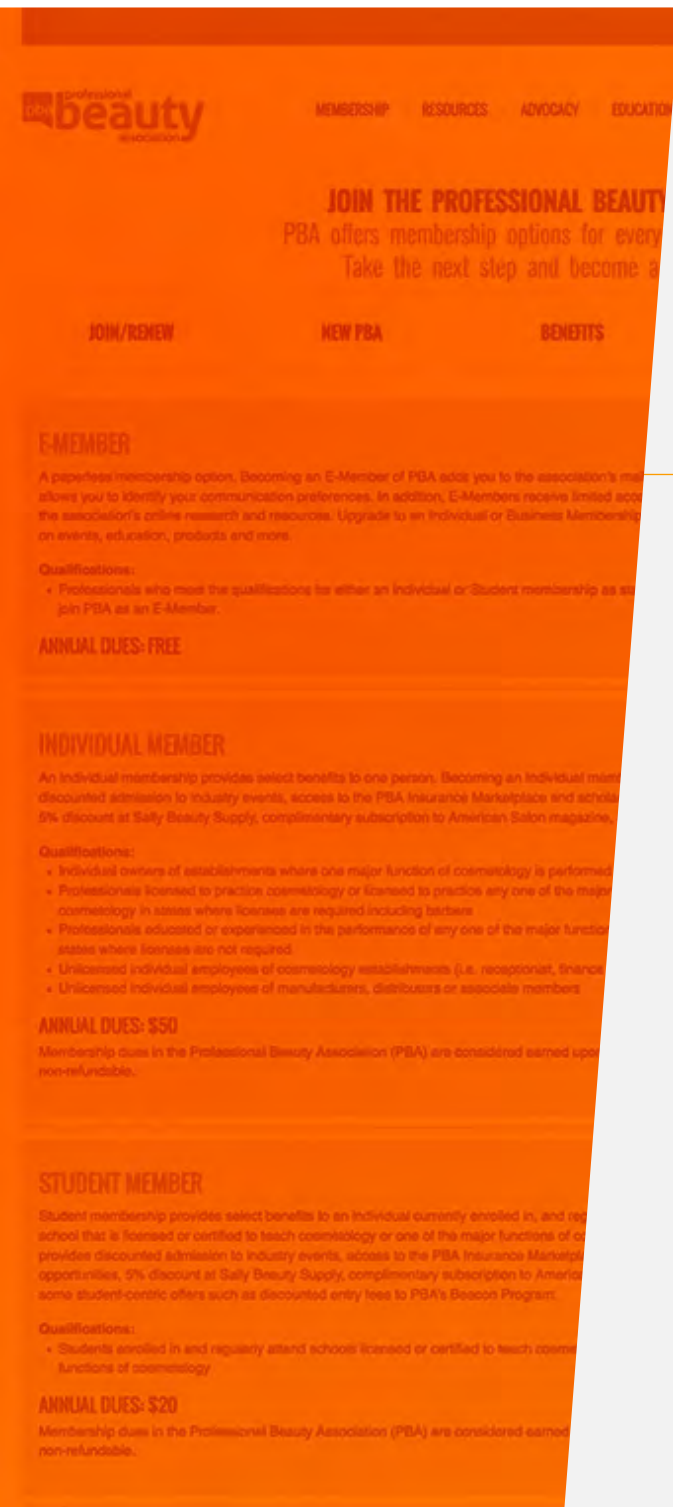
The DMAI Partner and Sponsorship option is an example. It provides different levels of access to members – at increasing costs, of course – that best suit a company's needs, goals and budget.

Several years ago, the Professional Beauty Association (PBA) decided its price points weren't working for members, so the organization overhauled its dues structure into a tiered model that gave more flexibility to prospective members.

For its business members, the PBA scrapped its old structure of dues based on gross sales and introduced a ladder of five options based on how many employees the business wanted to allow access to PBA benefits.

"That's been great," Elizabeth Fantetti, PBA director of membership and association programs said. "We've added probably another 4,000 constituents to our database just as benefit recipients."





The PBA also changed the options for individual members, including addition of a free membership option that allowed PBA access to people who had been hesitant to join in the past for financial reasons.

E-MEMBER

A paperless membership option. Becoming an E-Member of PBA adds you to the association's mailing list and allows you to identify your communication preferences. In addition, E-Members receive limited access to some of the association's online research and resources. Upgrade to an Individual or Business Membership to save money on events, education, products and more.

Qualifications:

- Professionals who meet the qualifications for either an Individual or Student membership as stated below may join PBA as an E-Member.

ANNUAL DUES: FREE

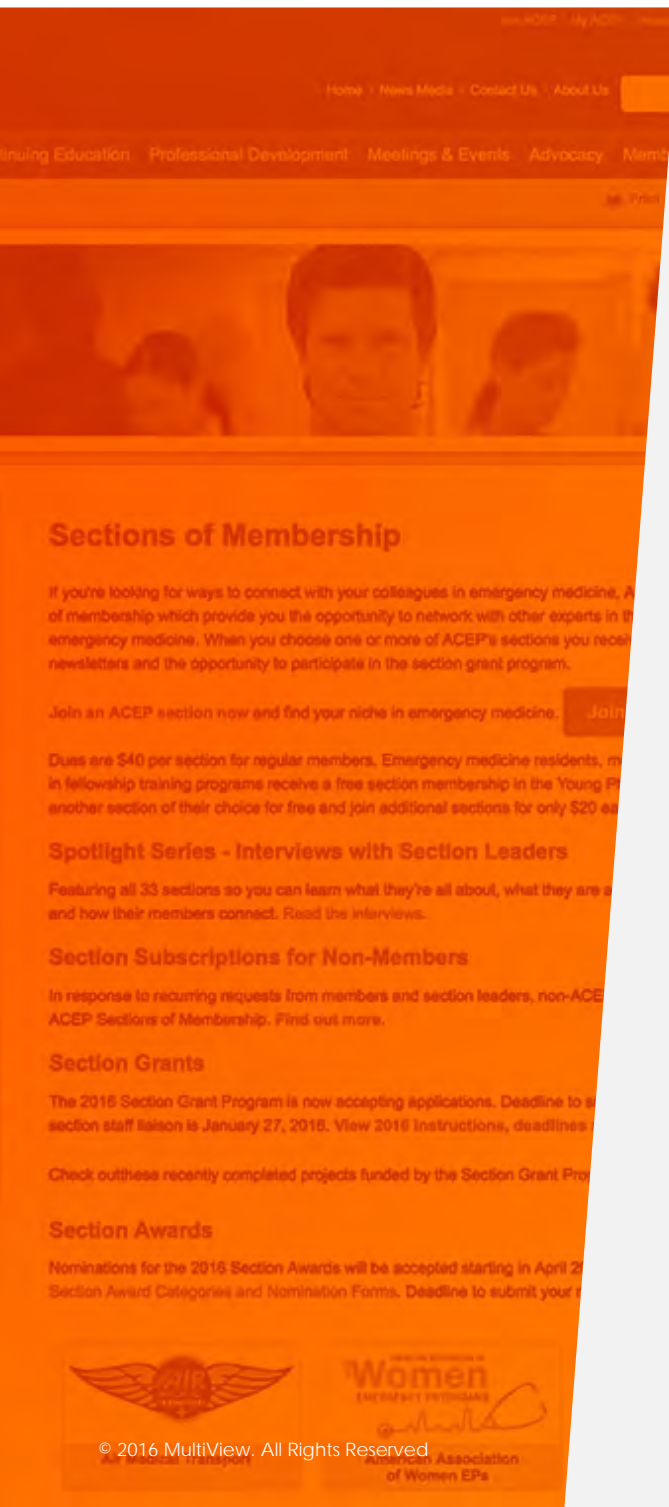
JOIN AS AN E-MEMBER

LEARN MORE

The paid individual membership was reduced from \$115 to \$50, but no longer includes tickets to the association's major event. However, with a half-price event ticket benefit for members, the difference for joining and buying tickets compared to purchasing full-price tickets as a non-member is only \$5, leading many to lean toward the membership route.

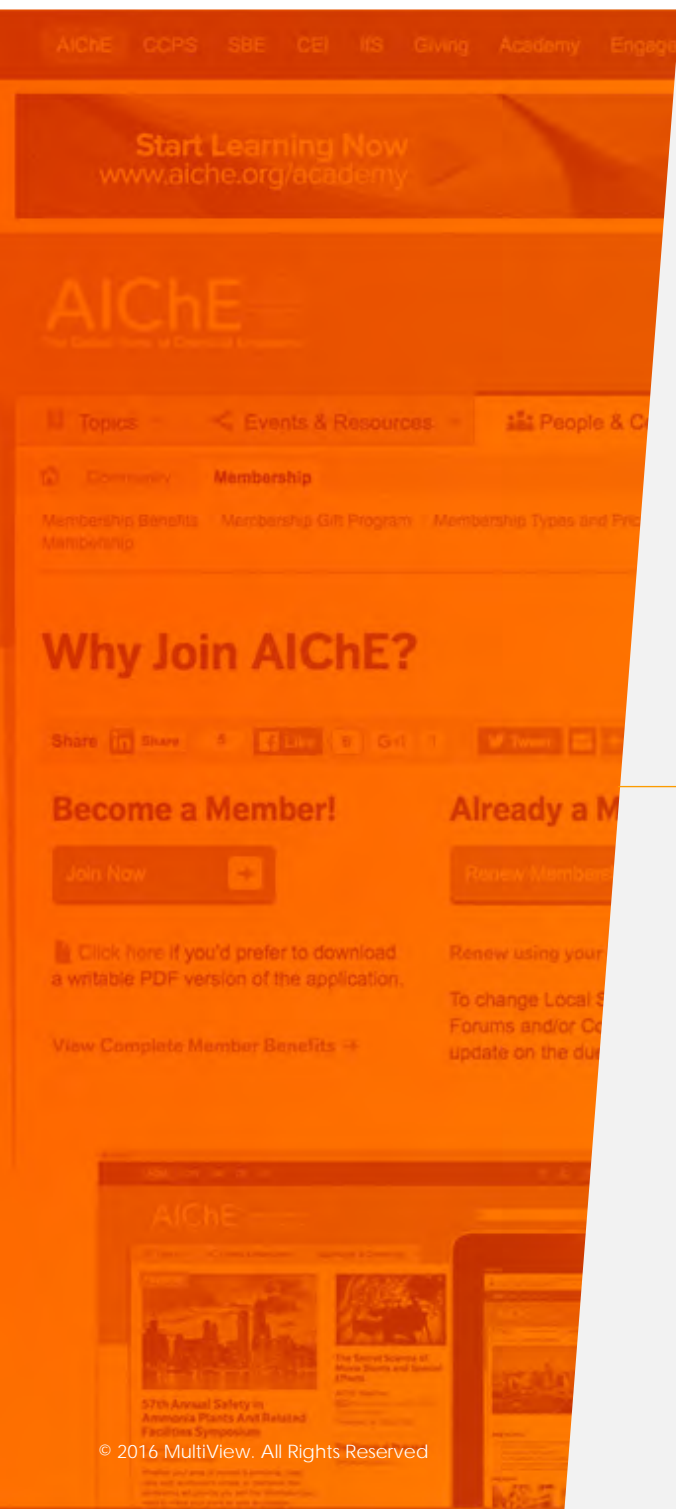
"The free membership has been wildly popular...As for pure membership success, we've definitely moved in the right direction,"

- Elizabeth Fantetti



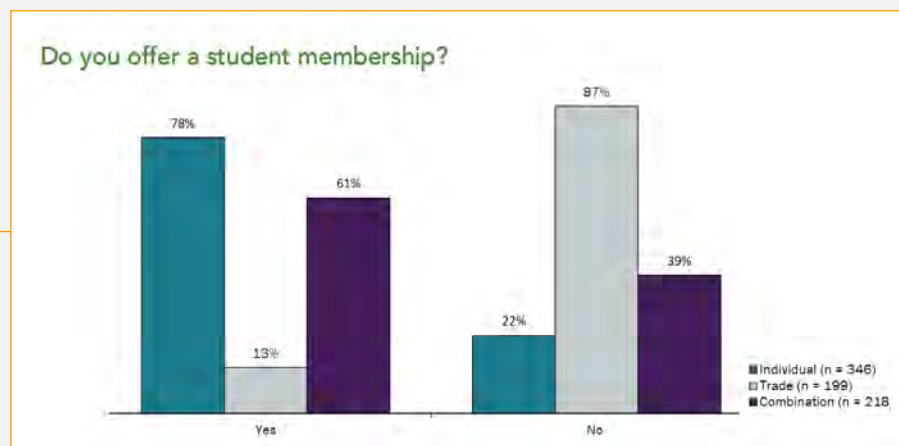
In another approach, ACEP provides additional subcategories for regular members – what it calls “sections.” More than 30 different sections allow physicians to pick as many niche groups (e.g. Cruise Ship Medicine or Medical Humanities or Forensic Medicine) as they like for additional fees. This approach, more akin to la carte tiers, allows member physicians to be part of the larger organization while adding optional focus on their specialized areas if they desire.

Too many membership options can become cumbersome for the association and potentially confusing for the prospective member, but too few membership categories can exclude potential members. Assess where your members and potential members come from, and make sure you have appropriate categories and/or tiers to accommodate.



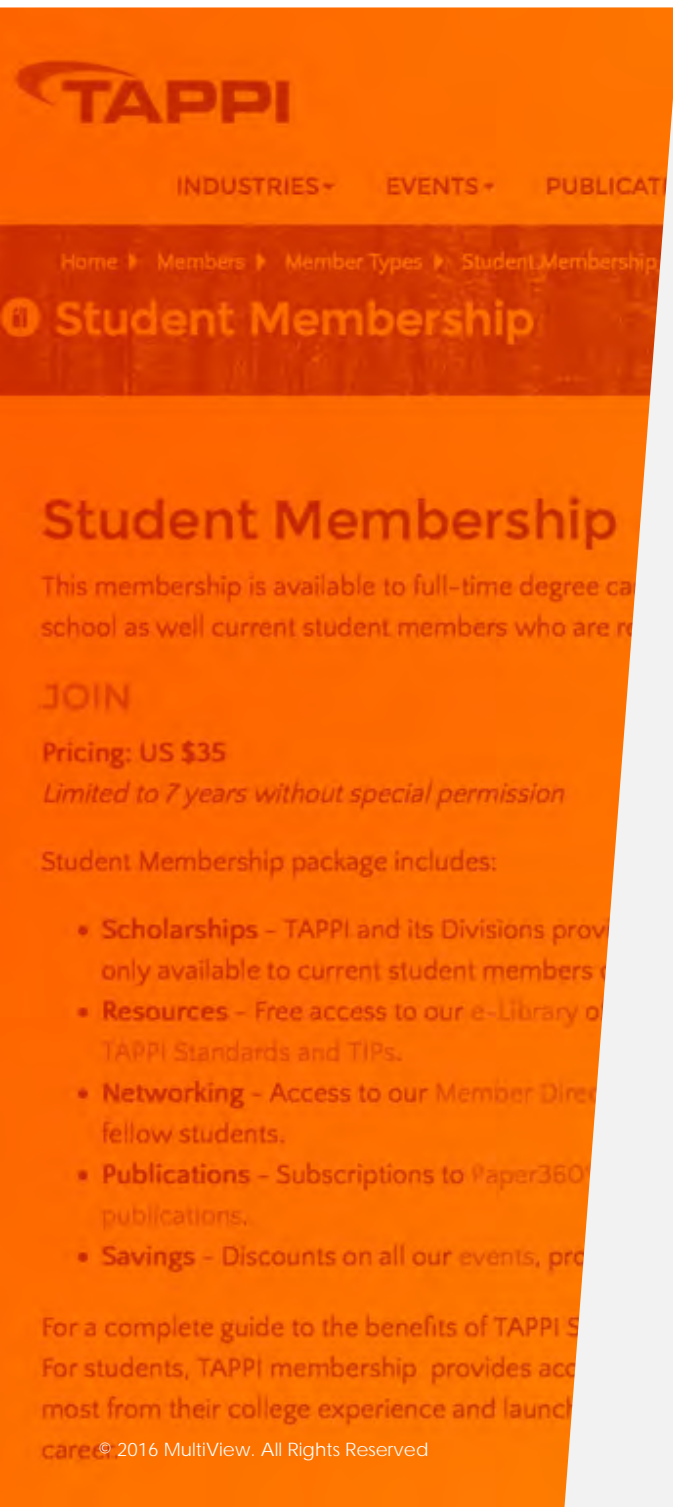
Sponsored Memberships

MGI's benchmarking report also found that 78 percent of individual associations offer student memberships, whereas only 13 percent of trade associations do. Sixty-one percent of "combination" associations offer student memberships. These can be a valuable recruiting tool for future members, as the same report found on average 38 percent of student members joined individual associations as full-time members. One approach to the student membership that has gained favor lately is the sponsored membership.



- Marketing General Incorporated's 2015 Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report

An interesting case study on the potential value of sponsored memberships comes from the American Institute of Chemical Engineers (AIChE), which started a sponsored member program in 2007. Since then, student membership has skyrocketed from 3,000 to over 22,000.



The intriguing, and perhaps most telling, part of the story is that the student membership only cost \$15. It can be inferred that even this small amount was a significant deterrent to thousands of potential young members.

Finding a sponsor to cover the costs of young or student members can provide associations an audience full of potential future members.

In the AIChE model, the memberships are funded by corporate sponsors. Similarly, paper industry association TAPPI taps into corporate sponsors and vendor members to help fund student memberships. Sponsors cover the \$35 cost to support a student member for a year.

“Our student membership has grown exponentially since the sponsorship program started,” noted Mary Beth Cornell, CAE, Membership & Global Development Director of TAPPI. “A lot of them, if they go into the industry, they convert into full-time members.”

While the benefits to the association are obvious, the corporate and vendor sponsors also benefit from the relationship.

“Our relationship with TAPPI has expanded beyond our publishing partnership by providing 75 student memberships to the future leaders in the Pulp and Paper industry. Students and young professionals are the next generation of experts in their fields and are an invaluable asset to their industry.”

- Andy Keith, Vice President, Partnership. MultiView

RECRUITMENT MARKETING CHANNELS

	Individual (n = 362)	Trade (n = 211)
Word-of-mouth recommendations	48%	55%
Email	36%	22%
Direct mail	28%	14%
Association website	23%	21%
Cross-sell to non-members who buy your products or attend your conferences	17%	21%
Chapters	16%	5%
Local events/meetings	13%	14%
Promotion to/at your own conferences/trade shows	11%	1%
Association-sponsored events	11%	1%
Association-sponsored social networking websites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn)	9%	
Promotional incentives	9%	
Exhibiting at other conferences	8%	
Free membership offered with a non-member meeting registration	8%	
Content marketing	6%	
Search engines (organic)	4%	
Accreditation promotion	4%	
Personal sales calls	4%	
Advertising in your own publications	2%	
Public relations	2%	
Telemarketing	1%	
Advertising in outside publications	1%	
Search engine ads (paid or pay-per-click)	1%	
Radio or TV	1%	
Paid banners on other websites	0%	
Other	10%	

RECRUITMENT MARKETING

In a perfect world, your association provides such value to members that you don't even need to recruit – members rave to friends and colleagues and the membership sells itself. Our reality tells a different story, though, and membership marketing is a vital component of any association's existence.

Word-of-mouth has always been considered the most valuable marketing, and that remains true for associations.

Just about half (49%) of all associations surveyed in MGI's benchmarking report cited personal recommendations as the most effective channel for recruitment, beating out email, the association website and direct mail as the channels considered most effective. However, outside of member-recruit-a-member programs, it's hard to coordinate a word-of-mouth marketing plan.

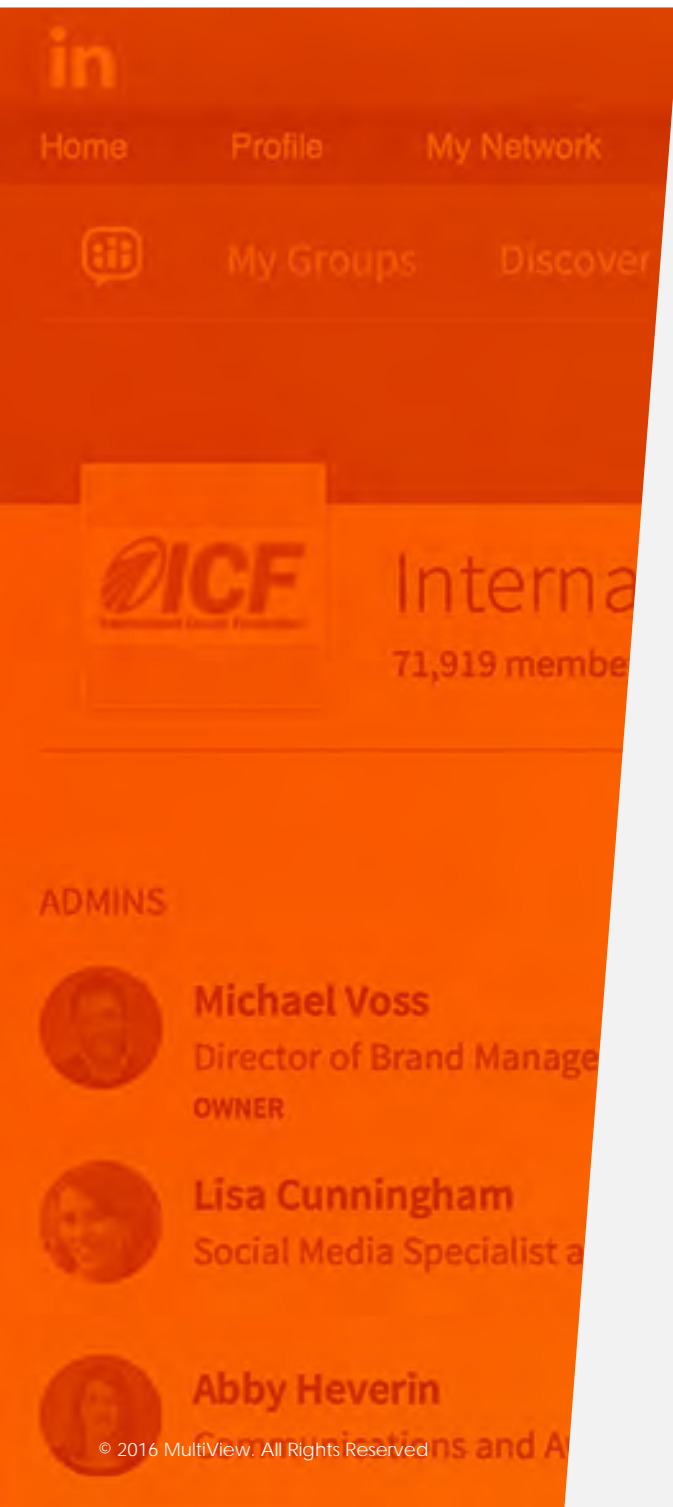
Some good news is that business and communications are growing more digital by the day, which is opening up new opportunities to impact and supplement recruitment marketing. Associations can't stand by with the same tired marketing efforts. It's important to take advantage of new marketing avenues like social media (which can be crucial for reaching a new generation of potential members) while refreshing traditional methods.

Good Old Display

Say “display advertising” and most people probably think banner ad. That may have been true in the past, but these days display is far more than that. Thanks to persistent advances in technology, the life and reach of digital display efforts can be extended. Display advertising is just starting to blossom in the B2B space, and the tactic can prove beneficial for associations when used effectively. The key is getting those display ads in the right places, which can be accomplished more efficiently than ever thanks to data-driven persona and behavioral targeting, and by taking advantage of retargeting.

Many associations cite LinkedIn as, at minimum, indirect competition. The popular networking site offers professionals a place to meet and exchange resources and information, potentially mitigating some of the leading reasons for investing to join an association. The International Coach Federation saw it a little differently.

ICF knew from research that 97 percent of its members were active on LinkedIn. Chances are, the association accurately predicted, there are plenty of potential members also in those communities who just need more information or gentle persuasion to join.



“It stood to reason there might be a lot of other people who have similar attributes who were on LinkedIn but just weren’t members yet,” Michael Voss, Director of Brand Management at ICF said. “I think that’s how we viewed it. I don’t think we viewed LinkedIn as competition for us.”

Instead, they turned it into fertile recruiting grounds. ICF opted for display advertising on LinkedIn (where it also already had a company page and group), targeting more than two dozen groups with ads, sponsored messages and updates in the LinkedIn news feed. The result was almost 1,900 new members. The marketing effort cost ICF \$25,000, but at \$245 in dues revenue per new paid member (totaling over \$450,000), it’s not hard to see the return on investment.

It also helps to augment your display advertising with custom landing pages. Don’t just point every display ad to your home page. A user clicked on that display ad because something in that ad triggered his or her action. Maintain landing pages that cater to and expand on the information teased in those ads. From that landing page, the prospective member can navigate to other information he or she might want, and of course offer a call to action for membership on the landing page. Even if a visitor to your website doesn’t join on that visit, you’ve still gained another valuable asset for recruiting – a person who showed interest in your association. Now you can retarget them.

Retargeting with Display

You may be familiar with the concept of retargeting and not even know it. If you've ever shopped for a specific product on a website, and then later noticed an ad in your web browser reminding you that you didn't purchase that product, you've been retargeted.

The concept for associations is similar. Many non-members may visit your website for various reasons. Maybe they clicked one of your display ads, maybe they're looking for professional opportunities in your field or industry, or maybe they're taking advantage of your content. Regardless of the reason, you want to convert those visitors into members.

It's now possible to tag your association's website visitors with a retargeting pixel so that, in the event they don't join immediately, you can continue to reach them with targeted display advertising touting your benefits.





Long Live Email

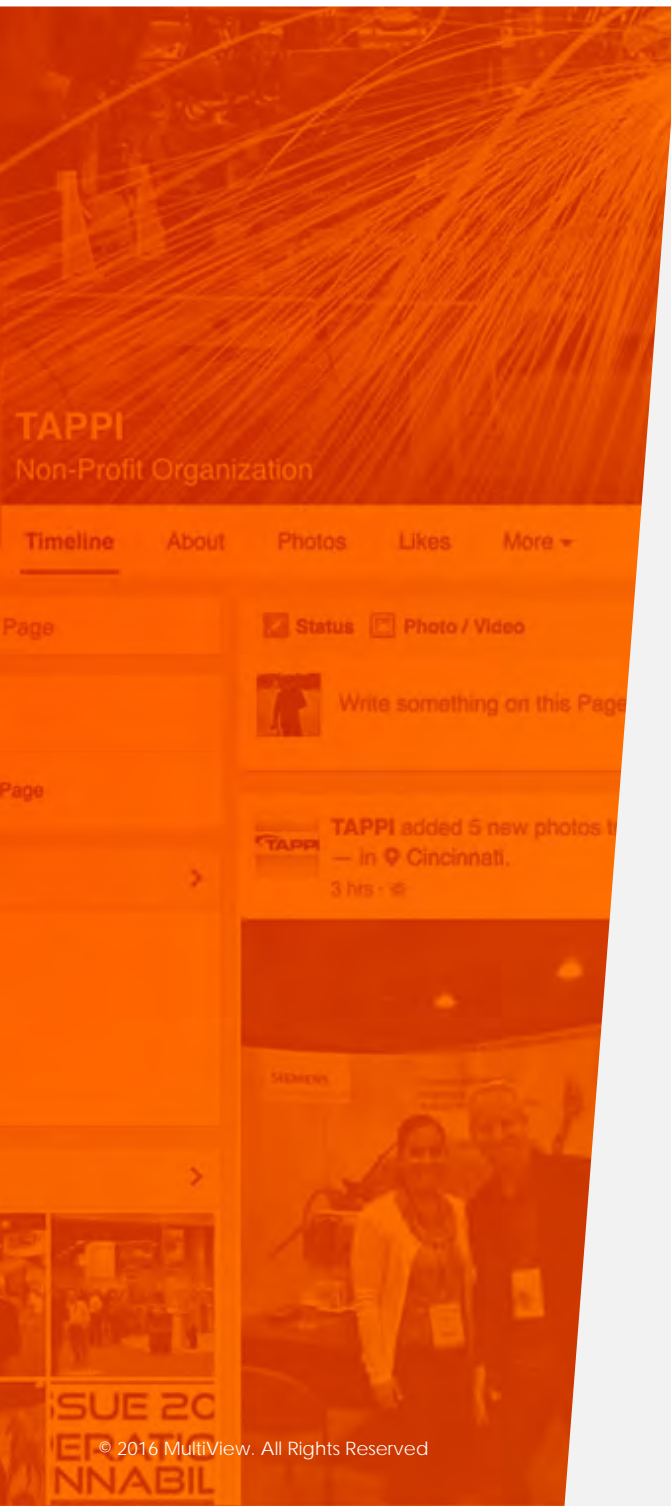
For all the talk about the imminent demise of email, it hasn't happened yet and doesn't appear likely to anytime soon. Email is still the go-to communication tool in business and remains a favorite vehicle for marketers of all kinds.

Associations have long trusted email for marketing and member engagement. As mentioned, respondents to the MGI benchmarking study named email the second-most effective recruitment marketing channel only behind word-of-mouth.

You've probably already read about the movement from reading emails on computers to reading on smartphones and tablets. Multiple studies have verified this trend and some have even found the majority of emails are now opened on mobile devices. As a result, it's imperative that your association emails work well visually on these devices. Mobile responsiveness is no longer a luxury, it's necessity.

Another key trend in email communications is personalization. Software is making it easier than ever to send more personalized emails, making sure the right people see the right messages. The backbone of personalization is data. The more data you have on members and perspective members, the more personal you can make the messages.

Any opportunities you have to customize and personalize recruitment emails should be fully explored. Indicating that you have enough interest in a potential member to get to know something about them shows the organization isn't just interested in taking anyone it can get, and that once they become a member they're a valued individual and not just another member number.



Social Media

When it burst onto the scene, associations were desperate to make social media work for marketing and recruiting. To some end, it's still a work in progress and few would likely boast they've mastered it. One of the best ways social media can aid recruitment is through a content marketing strategy.

Producing new and relevant content helps establish an association as an expert source, and it's likely your organization is already producing that content. Use social media to distribute the content and drive prospective members back to your website. The association website was cited as the third-most important marketing channel, and social media can help drive people there. Once there, prospective members can see all the resources and value you have to offer, and you can also take advantage of aforementioned retargeting capabilities.

Social media in itself may not be a highly effective recruitment tool, but can be a useful supplement for efforts you already have in place.



RETENTION MARKETING

The value provided to members will always be an association's most important retention marketing strategy. Keeping members engaged is a key factor in retention, but there are several other tactics that can help persuade members to stay with your organization when it comes time for renewal.

Email, More Email

We've already established email as a multiple-use tool for associations and mentioned its value in recruitment marketing. When it comes to retention, not all members (or emails) should be treated equally. Just as we discussed personalization for membership recruiting, personalization is important for retention efforts.

Your AMS should allow you to easily segment members into new members, students, long-standing members etc. You should target these groups differently, just as you would target different types of members (e.g. suppliers, individuals) differently. Long-term members likely don't need the hard sell of renewal that first-year members might. Try creating member personas for different types of members and think about what would matter to them most for renewal, and highlight those things in targeted emails.

Report Cards

Another idea to spur renewal is the individual member report card. Make no mistake, this requires time and effort to produce, but it provides members with a quantitative analysis of their membership value compared to the cost of membership. In other words, it gives the members what everyone wants to know – their return on investment.

In order to do so, you'll need data on what benefits your members utilize. If you don't currently keep track of such information, you should probably consider it a necessity moving forward. The data associations can gather and keep on members will be critical in proving value in order to retain those members.

You'll also need to develop a value system for your benefits. Free webinars, for example, have value. Discounts to events or continuing education – those things have value. Determine a market value for such benefits and track it for each member. At the end of the member's cycle, provide them with a breakdown of his or her (or the company's) total benefit value. In theory, it should exceed – and hopefully far exceed – the cost of dues, proving value in maintaining active membership status.




Exit Interviews

Few things can be more valuable in retaining members than knowing the reasons behind those leaving the association. One ideal way is to talk with lapsed members and understand why they decided not to renew.

Before you start asking any questions, have some background information on the lapsed members, such as what benefits they took advantage of, events they attended, etc. Importantly, have a set of questions you want answered, but allow the former member flexibility to speak openly, which may provide you with the individual's strongest feelings about the matter. Sample questions to pose could include whether cost was prohibitive – be that dues or events – or if educational offerings were insufficient. Ask if there was any one thing the association could have done differently to change his or her decision.

At the end, be sure to thank the interviewees for their time and leave the discussions on good terms as often as possible. If the person's final interaction with the association feels positive and constructive, that lapsed member could still prove a valuable word-of-mouth recruiting tool if they feel the relationship ended well.



Membership recruiting and retention is as much a priority at associations as it always has been, perhaps even more so as unique and new competition vies for the attention and participation of potential members. There's no magic bullet and individual organizations will have their own unique opportunities and challenges, but any association would be remiss not to take advantage of developing tools and methods to enhance their membership efforts.

You know the value your organization provides, but conveying that to members and potential members is a never-ending and inexact process. Just as everything must evolve, technology and creativity are allowing associations and nonprofits to develop new and improved methods to supplement and supplant some of the 'old ways' of attracting members, because no matter what an association might look like, it can't exist without members.

Learn more about recruitment and retention, and what it can do for your business.

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About Shawn

Shawn Smajstrla has spent more than five years at MultiView in various editorial roles, developing and producing content for association partners across multiple specialties including business, marketing, leadership and travel. Prior to joining MultiView, he was the editor of a local sports magazine and still covers sports for his hometown newspaper, the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. A graduate of Louisiana State University, Shawn has extensive experience in print, broadcast and digital media and is one of those people who thinks Radiohead is the best band ever.

About Us

We've been doing this a while, for over 15 years in fact. In that time, we've completed more than 1 million ad campaigns and successfully connected potential buyers to advertisers just like you. Our sheer numbers prove it: we've served over 50,000 advertisers and created more than 400,000 custom ads. Identifying and reaching your most qualified potential buyers through behavioral targeting starts by partnering with a company that gets B2B and gets real results through end-to-end service. Simply put, it starts with MultiView.

Social Links To

