

EXPERTS CORNER: Talk to Your Members, Don't Just Sell to Them



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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Association #1:

Joe decides to join a national association. He was on their website and found that they do some things that will help him and his career, so he mails in his dues. One week passes, then two, then three, then four. Joe starts to wonder if they got his check.

About five weeks after he sent in his check, he gets a copy of the association's quarterly journal. Shortly after that, Joe starts to receive promotional emails from the association because he provided his email address on his membership application. The emails are from various staff members and are all about different things that he can purchase from the association. He can buy books or pay to attend a conference or sign up for an association branded credit card.

Over the next eight months of his membership, Joe continues to receive the journal and a monthly e-newsletter that has some editorial, but mostly news about what the association is up to and the things he can take advantage

of as a member. He also receives lots and lots of emails about why he should buy products, attend meetings or purchase other things the association provides.

Joe is now nine months into his membership, and out of the blue he receives a renewal notice in his mailbox. He knows that his membership doesn't expire for another ninety days, so he waits. Thirty days before his membership expires, he receives another renewal notice. Finally he receives another direct mail piece at the time his membership expires.

Joe thinks back to what he got for his money during the past 12 months and nothing really stands out, so he decides not to renew. He never hears from the association again.

Association #2:

Mary decides to join a national association. She was on their website and found that they do some things that will help her and her career, so she mails in her dues. One week after she sent in her dues she receives

an email from Fred in Membership welcoming her to the association and telling her about three things she needs to take advantage of now that she is a member. Fred also very nicely tells her that if there is ever anything she needs to contact him directly. A day later Mary gets a call from one of the Board members or the association welcoming her to the organization. The female Board member she speaks with is incredibly friendly, and also tells her to contact her if she ever needs anything.

Thirty days into her membership, Mary has already received a copy of the quarterly journal, and she receives a letter from the Executive Director of the association reminding her about some benefits that she personally would value and benefit from.

Ninety days into her membership, Mary receives a call from Fred in Membership just checking in with her to see how her membership is going and to see if she has any questions or any needs that aren't being fulfilled.

Three months later, Mary gets an email from a member of the Board. During this time she is also receiving some sales pieces, but they are not overly aggressive or too frequent.

Ninety days before her membership expires, Mary receives a direct mail piece asking her to renew. The letter is short, sweet and targeted and gets her attention. Mary knows her membership is not up for another 3 months, so she decides not to renew.

Sixty days before her membership's expiration date, Mary receives an email reminding her that her membership expires in 60 days. Mary still does not renew.

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Thirty days before her membership expires, Mary receives another direct mail letter which tells her of the urgency of renewing her membership if she wants to maintain the benefits she values. She decides to be risky and still not renew.

Finally, at the time her membership expires, Mary receives a letter in the mail, as well as an email, informing her that all benefits are going to cease unless she pays for her membership immediately. She still totally forgets to renew her membership, so she receives a phone call from a member reminding her that her benefits have ceased as she has not renewed. Mary finally renews her membership at this time, and within a week she receives a welcome back email from Fred in Membership.

Which association would you have rather paid your dues to and been a member of?

I don't think there is any question that Association #2 is more likely to engage their members and retain them long-term. Here are just a few reasons why:

1. **Members like instant gratification.** Association #2 contacts new members almost immediately upon receipt of their dues payment. This is critical as it lets the new member know that their check was received while also showing them that they are important enough to deserve a quick response.
2. **Members are not important just because of their check-books.** Over time many associations get very comfortable primarily communicating with their members when they wanted them to purchase something. We all want members to pay to attend our big conferences and meetings. We all want members to purchase our publications and research studies. That said, **we cannot communicate with members only when we offer them something for purchase** or they become immune to our marketing messages, and even more importantly, may start to question if we value them as individuals or just for the money they can put in our pockets. By having a consistent stream of communications that goes far beyond suggesting things that are available for purchase, Association #2 will have more opportunities to show their members how valuable their association truly is.
3. **Not every member responds to the same method of communication.** We all have different preferences as to how we want to receive information. Personally, I like email. I know many people who like telephone, and others who still prefer direct mail. Association #2 has a much higher likelihood of their communications being received and responded to because they are not a one trick pony--**they are using multiple methods of communication.**
4. **Members like to interact with volunteers as well as staff members.** Members tend to like knowing they are being heard by staff and key volunteers. By varying who communicates with members, Association #2 is able to spread the workload across multiple people, while also allowing members to form relationships with staff and volunteers.
5. **Members sometimes forget to pay their dues, so they need to be reminded, even after their memberships have expired.** It is a proven fact that marketing membership to former members is always productive. Unlike Association #1, Association #2 does not give up on Mary even though her membership has lapsed. They give it one more try and end up bringing her back to the organization.

I realize you may be reading this thinking that you don't have the resources (financial or human) to do what Association #2 is able to do. If you are creative and smartly use the resources you do have, I am confident that you can alter your member communications strategy and end up with more engaged readers and a higher retention rate.

March 5th Luncheon Evaluation Survey Prize Winner

Congratulations to Gail Phillips, CAE,

Senior Vice President of the Organization Management Group, who was the March 5th Meeting Evaluation Prize Winner.

Her prize was a Colonial Williamsburg Bottle Birdhouse and 2 Combination Tickets to Jamestown/Yorktown donated by the Greater Williamsburg Chamber & Tourism Alliance.

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