



Member marketing is all we do!

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In a global sense, everything we do in our associations affects their desirability to current and prospective members. This desirability--and hence the way we market the association--is affected by a variety of factors, including:

1. The image of the association's market presence through its logo, publications, Web site, products, etc.;
2. The responsiveness of the association's staff and volunteers to members'/nonmembers' requests;
3. The professionalism of the association's staff and volunteers;
4. The experience that participants have at the association's meetings, workshops, seminars, etc.;
5. The relevance of the association's services and activities to the members of the selected profession/industry;
6. The quality of its services;
7. The desirability of the services offered to members and nonmembers; and
8. The perceived and real value that members and nonmembers assign to membership in the association and the pricing strategies used to create that value.

A professional image

Associations should develop a professional image to its members as well as its prospects. There should be a consistency to the image throughout all the association's communication venues, products, services and marketing pieces. Members and nonmembers alike should be able to recognize the products and services of the association and, hopefully, assign a positive value to that recognition.

There is very little that can do more to motivate members to retain membership and nonmembers to join than to give them a positive experience over the

telephone, in a personal interaction at a meeting or other event, through e-mail or other communications. Of course, the converse of that is also true. There is nothing that can more quickly cause a member to resign or a prospect not to join than to give them a negative experience.

The organization I work for is working currently with a client that has had a poor track record of customer service over the last two to three years, and not surprisingly, its membership has dropped more than 34 percent. Do you think a slick, expensive marketing campaign will bring back those members? We believe the answer to that is "no." The delivery of consistent and superior customer service has been the first step in the turnaround of this association. If your society does not have a solid track record in this area, you may from time-to-time through a special campaign have a temporary increase in total members, but typically--in the long run--the association will experience a steady decline in membership through attrition and resignations.

The measure of the relevance or desirability of the services the association offers to its members is not something that should be done around the membership committee table through the discussion of anecdotal stories of how *everybody* loves or hates a service offered by the association. Quality research can help you identify desirable services and activities, weed out those services that do not seem important to your members/prospects and identify services which, while important to your market, are services with which your customers are not satisfied.

I would strongly suggest that if member marketing research is done appropriately, the benefits will be enormous in terms of more focused marketing efforts for the association and much more cost-efficient results (the "bang for your association's buck") in terms of return on your investment.

Proof positive

Here is an example. A large association had lost 1200 members in a particular constituency the previous year, and we were charged with helping turn that loss

around. We understood that, in order to produce the highest return on the modest budget assigned to this project, we needed to develop a quick understanding of what the constituency (both members and nonmembers) desired and how it felt about the current product/service mix. In order to do that, we developed a member needs assessment/satisfaction survey for the group. The purpose of the survey was to identify for both members and nonmembers, programs and services that were important to the constituency and identify the relative satisfaction of these two groups with the existing program mix.

The statistical significance of the survey results was evaluated, and the programs/services were prioritized based on the desirability of the services expressed in the collected data. The top two to three programs that the association could afford at the time were continued/instituted, and some relatively simple operating policies based on the survey results were changed. The marketing of the association was then based in the communication of these services through a constituency newsletter.

Approximately one year after this project began, the membership loss of 1200 was turned into a membership gain of 1400. An important factor in this turnaround was that the association was able to use the assigned, modest budget in the most effective way possible by the use of quality data that were collected about the target constituency. Without that data and the prioritization that was allowed by it, the association could never have had a gross turnaround of 2600 members in a single year.

Customize your efforts

A concept directly related to a quality research effort is mass customization. With today's powerful desktop publishing and database tools, association executives can identify unique hot buttons or prioritize them differently for separate markets within their communities, and customize the marketing materials to those different markets. This might entail changing the order of presentation of benefits of the association, identifying different benefits for different segments or using different marketing media and venues for different segments.

Focused marketing based on a genuine understanding of the target segment should help improve the cost efficiency of your marketing efforts, and ultimately should benefit the association by increasing the number of new members or improving the retention rate of current members.

A concept that is integral to the concept of marketing an association is what the literature refers to as a binding member benefit. My organization is a big believer in this concept. A binding member benefit is created by providing two different levels of service for members or nonmembers, or by creating different fees in the delivery of these service to the members and nonmembers. By providing different levels of access, or costs, to these two populations, the association creates value to the members for their dues dollars. In many situations, this is a concept that has not been adopted truly as an operating principle for the association.

This article serves only to present a "macro" view of member marketing. There are a whole host of additional considerations that contribute to the development of a marketing plan for the association. It is important, however, not to lose sight of the big picture. The association can affect virtually every factor to which we alluded above. If proper attention is given to each area, you can improve retention of your current membership, and to the extent that the market can be expanded to other groups, you should be able to make inroads in increasing your membership from year-to-year.

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