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Over the years of conducting lapsed member research for associations, it's clear that while there are many reasons why individuals do not renew their membership, the most common reason given is because the association does not provide adequate value in relation to the cost of its dues.

So it is not surprising that when we study current members, we find a positive correlation between their ratings of membership value and their intention to renew their membership. That is, members who say they get excellent or very good value for their membership dues, also indicate that they are extremely likely or very likely to renew their membership. And in fact, a high percentage do renew their membership. Likewise, members who say the value they get for their dues is marginal or poor, also indicate they are unlikely to renew their membership.

This positive correlation between membership value and intention to renew does not hold for 100% of respondents. One group that is particularly interesting, from a research perspective, is the group of respondents who rate their membership value low, but surprisingly indicate that they are extremely likely or very likely to renew their membership. We refer to these members as "captive" members because we believe there is something more than just membership value that would explain their desire to remain a member.

Just as there are switching costs in the for-profit business world that discourages customers from switching to a competitor's product, we believe that associations may also have inherent switching costs that make it more difficult for members to leave the association.

In a recent study, we found almost six percent of an association's member respondents fell into the captive category. Respondents were asked to explain why they are planning to renew their membership. These verbatim comments were content analyzed and placed into the following six categories.

1. Member Benefits The number one reason why members planned to renew their membership, in spite of a low opinion of membership value, was because of the member benefits. Nearly 43% of these respondents indicated that they needed

some of the benefits offered by the association in order to practice in their profession.

2. Lack of Suitable Alternatives Another 26% of comments fell into this category. The comments ranged from members being unaware that other rival associations existed, to believing that no association does a particularly good job of providing value, but this association is better than the others. Members suggested that while other associations may offer similar benefits, some of these captive members were well aware that there was a “preferred” association in the industry, based on longevity, prestige, and the overall image of the association. So even though the current association provided low value, it was still the best one available.
3. Inertia Twenty-two percent (22%) of the comments were in this group. Some people just simply don’t like change, and it surfaced in these comments as well. Members planned to stay with the association because even though the benefits offered by their current association might not be the best, at least they are familiar with them, and they were unwilling to make a change for unfamiliar benefits. Members also commented that they “have been a member since 1993, and didn’t want to break the string”. Some didn’t want their resume to reflect the “instability” that jumping from one association to another over a short period of time would indicate. Others mentioned that it was more convenient to renew their membership than it was to shop for another association.
4. Dues Reimbursement A comment given by some captive members is that they intended to renew their membership because their dues were being reimbursed by their employer. Even though they found little value in the membership, it cost them nothing personally to remain a member.
5. Finish What Was Started A small number of captive members who are currently serving as association volunteers want to stick around long enough to finish their term or to be able to finish the work that they started.
6. Need More Time to Think About it And lastly, a small percentage of captive members indicated that they plan to re-evaluate their membership and may likely not renew in another year. They are not satisfied with the value of their membership and are considering switching, but have been too busy give serious consideration to the decision at this time. Reevaluating their membership is something they plan to do before the next renewal cycle.

Further analysis was conducted to determine if captive members did renew their membership the following year, as they said they would. As the table below shows, 94% of those respondents who gave a low value rating, but said that they intended to renew the following year, did in fact, renew their membership. However, over 20% of captive members were lost at year two, and another 10% were lost at year three.

	1 Year Later	2 Years Later	3 Years Later
Percentage of captive members who are still members of the association	94%	72%	62%

### Key Takeaways

1. Don't rely solely on members' intention to renew their membership as a measure of their relationship with your association. Combining their intent to renew with their value rating provides a more complete picture of which members are at risk of not renewing their membership.
2. Treat captive members the same as you do your other at-risk (vulnerable) members. Identify them and apply your intervention tactics to them before you lose them.
3. The good news is, that because they intend to renew their membership for the next year, it gives you more time to work with them.

Identifying your captive members is a simple exercise that can be accomplished with two or three survey questions. Understanding why they are captive should help you realize the benefits and experiences your association delivers that members value the most.

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#### About the Author

Larry J. Seibert is the President/CEO of Association Metrics. He has an earned Ph.D. from Purdue University in Retail Management and holds an MSBA from Indiana University Northwest with a concentration in Marketing. Dr. Seibert is a member of the American Society of Association Executives and the Indiana Society of Association Executives. He can be reached at [larry@associationmetrics.com](mailto:larry@associationmetrics.com) or by phone at 317-840-2303.