Larry J. Seibert, Ph.D.

Many association executives constantly struggle with trying to increase the size of their association's membership, either by recruiting more members, by retaining a larger percentage of existing members, or a combination of the two. Some believe that they can increase member retention by getting their members more involved and more engaged. A typical comment often heard from our clients is, "If we could only find a way to get more members to attend our national conference or to serve on committees, then we could retain more members."

For members who join your association for the networking, camaraderie, volunteerism, continuing education, and everything that goes with attending your association's functions and volunteering, that is a true statement. The reality is, not every member values meetings and conferences – or for that matter, every other member benefit that associations typically offer. Many associations find that while fewer than 50% of their members attend meetings and become involved with the association, more than 80% of their members annually renew their membership.

So why is it that members join your association and continue to be a member?

The primary reason that individuals spend their money to join an association and spend their time to participate in the experiences the association has to offer, is to satisfy their personal needs. The fact is, members join associations for a variety of reasons, and not everyone values the same things. Efforts to satisfy the needs of one group of members are ineffective when applied to individuals who are driven by different needs. Additionally, performing a needs analysis on the entire member base as a single group hides the subtleties of each underlying needs segment in some overall group "average".

Fortunately, there is a straightforward approach for determining the personal needs your members are trying to satisfy with a membership to your association. By knowing what satisfies their needs, and giving them more of what they need, you can not only increase member retention, but can also attract more new members who have similar needs.

Using Allocation Analysis to Determine Members' Needs

For most associations, there are eight to ten basic reasons why members join (e.g. networking, member benefits, continuing education, supporting the profession, etc.) By asking your members one single question in a member survey, you can determine the reason(s) each respondent joined your association, as well as the dominant reasons why all of your members joined.

The responses to this question can be used to uncover major member segments within your membership population. For example, you might discover that your younger members joined for networking opportunities, while your older members remain a member primarily to support the profession. In our research we have found that different needs segments within the membership population can be identified by using demographic characteristics available in the membership database and from demographic questions in a member survey.

"The" Question

To determine why individuals join your association, add the following to your member survey.

> Q.   There are a variety of reasons why individuals join associations. Please tell us the reasons why you joined ABC. *(Please allocate a total of 100 points among the following reasons, assigning more points to the more important reasons.)*

> 1.   To network and build professional relationships
> 2.   To stay current on information about the profession
> 3.   To keep abreast of political issues affecting the profession
> 4.   To have access to suppliers and new products
> 5.   To support the profession
> 6.   I was required to join
> 7.   My membership was reimbursed
> 8.   Because of the prestige of being a member
> 9.   To have access to continuing education courses
> 10.   To have access to the association's member benefits
> 11.   Other reasons (Please specify)

The list above represents most of the commonly found reasons why members join associations, but you may know from experience that there are other reasons that could be added to the list. Be sure to include an "Other - Please specify" alternative to give respondents an opportunity to offer a personal reason that was not presented in the list of alternatives.

(Note: this type of survey is well suited for a paper survey, or an online survey, such as Survey Gizmo that offers a constant sum question type. This question is not appropriate for a telephone survey.)

Analysis

When you have collected all the surveys, add the points given to each "reason" and calculate the percentage of total points that were assigned to each reason. From these percentages, you can rank the dominant reasons why all your members, as a group, join your association. However, more importantly, you can determine if there are differences among different types of members.

As the example below illustrates, you can determine the dominant reasons why various types of members join (e.g. male respondents), thereby enabling you to focus your efforts on member segments, rather than on your membership as a whole. The member characteristics on which the needs analysis can be performed are limited only by the information that is available in the membership database and the information that can be gathered in a member survey.
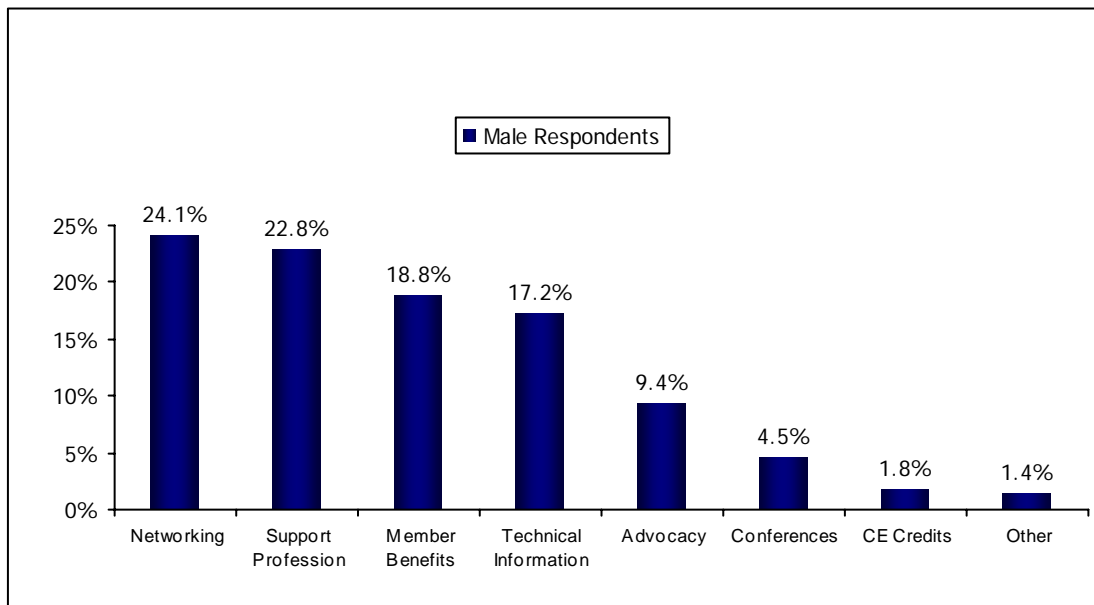
Grouping members by their characteristics gives associations the ability to understand which basic needs members within each group are trying to satisfy through association membership.

Without segmentation, any efforts to recruit or retain members will only resonate with those individuals for whom the strategy is a match.

Summary

This analysis can be accomplished very simply by adding one additional question to your member survey. This will enable you to determine what your association offers that satisfies member needs, and to offer those benefits and experiences in a targeted way to enhance the value of your membership. As our research shows, members will join an association if they believe it will satisfy their needs, and will remain a member as long as the association continues to satisfy their personal needs while delivering a good value.

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 or by phone at 317-840-2303.