



How Does Your Association Compare to Others?

by

Larry J. Seibert, Ph.D.

Over the past fifteen years of working with our association clients, the one question we always get from senior executives and Board members is “How do our performance metrics compare to what you have seen in your work with other associations?” No matter how the individual areas of the association are performing, or how their ratings have changed over time, there is always an interest in knowing how they compare to other associations.

The purpose of this paper is to share the general statistics that we have compiled over the last decade and a half to address this question and to satisfy that curiosity. The lowest and highest ratings we have seen are presented, as well as the median rating. Due to the number of studies we have conducted, occasional outliers have expanded the ranges of performance ratings. Therefore, we believe the median ratings are the best indicators of what is “typical”.

The methodology used to generate these findings is also presented to provide some contextual background for the ratings.

1. Top Reasons Why Members Belong to a Particular Association

Members belong to an association to satisfy a variety of personal and professional needs. In a typical membership study, we present members with 10-15 reasons why we believe members belong to the association, and ask respondents to select all the reasons why they belong, or why their organization belongs. We do not ask why they joined, because joining occurred only once when the individual or organization initially became a member. However, a member chooses to belong to an association each time he/she makes the decision to renew the membership, and it may or may not involve the same reasons as their initial decision to join.

If your members are typical of the associations we have worked with, only about 5% of your members belong for just one reason. That means that roughly 95% of members belong for an array of reasons. The median number of reasons members give for belonging is three.

We have found that the top four reasons members belong are: (1) to have access to current information in that field, (2) to have access to member benefits, (3) for networking opportunities, and (4) for advocacy.

These reasons will sometimes vary in their order of importance. Additionally, the desire for information may sometimes manifest itself as a desire for continuing education, especially if the association offers certifications.

Other reasons why members belong to an association but are usually only minor reasons include: (1) their dues are reimbursed, (2) to support / give back to the profession, (3) to support the work of the association, (4) to enhance their resume/show their professionalism, (5) prestige associated with association membership, and (6) it is a requirement to work in the profession.

While the top four reasons for belonging to an association may be typical for all members in general, individual member segments can vary widely. For example, even though supporting the profession is typically a minor reason for members in general, altruistic reasons for belonging can be a major reason for older members (e.g. 60 +). We caution against applying the typical results to individual member segments and suggest using segmentation analyses to uncover differences among major member segments.

2. Behavioral Intentions

Member surveys typically ask respondents to indicate how likely they are to recommend the association’s membership to others, and how likely they are to renew their membership. These questions are good indicators of members’ future plans regarding their membership. The scale we use for both questions is:

- 1. Extremely likely
- 2. Very likely
- 3. Somewhat likely
- 4. Not very likely
- 5. Not at all likely

Over the years, among all types of associations in all types of industries, we find a range of Top Two scores for the recommend question to be 64%-97% (extremely likely / very likely) with a median of 86%. The likely to renew question yields slightly higher ratings with a Top Two range of 80%-98%, with a median of 92%.

<i>Behavioral Intentions</i>	Low Top Two	High Top Two	Median Top Two
Likely to recommend your association	64%	97%	86%
Likely to renew their membership	80%	98%	92%

While the range can vary widely because of outliers, the median Top Two is a good indicator of what is typically found. In every study we have conducted, the likelihood to renew one’s membership is equal to or greater than the likelihood of recommending the association’s membership to a colleague or relative.

3. Membership Value

Individuals will continue to renew their membership as long as the benefits of being a member outweigh the costs (time and money) of maintaining their membership. In member surveys, respondents can be asked to provide either an absolute value rating, or a relative value rating (value of your association’s membership compared to the value of another association’s membership).

In our studies, we prefer to ask members to rate the absolute value of their association’s membership using the following five point scale:

- 1. Excellent
- 2. Very good
- 3. Good
- 4. Marginal
- 5. Poor

We find a range of Top Two scores for membership value to be 36%-85% (excellent / very good). While the range of Top Two value ratings is quite large, most of the value ratings we have seen fall within a few points of the 56% median Top Two value.

<i>Value Ratings</i>	Low Top Two	High Top Two	Median Top Two
Value of membership	36%	85%	56%

4. Membership Dues

In our studies, we ask members to rate their perception of their association’s membership dues using the following five point scale:

- 1. Low
- 2. Somewhat low
- 3. Just right
- 4. Somewhat high
- 5. High

The Top Two ratings for membership dues will typically be in the range of 1%-5%. In order to have a sufficient number of respondents to conduct additional analyses of dues perceptions, we use a Top Three rating for dues, which includes the response “just

right.” The table below shows that the median Top Three for dues is 52%. With a Top Three of 52%, it follows that 48% of member respondents typically believe their membership dues are either high or somewhat high.

<i>Membership Dues Ratings</i>	Low Top Three	High Top Three	Median Top Three
Membership dues	31%	79%	52%

We usually include a question in our member surveys to determine if respondents receive reimbursement for their dues, and what impact dues reimbursement has on their perceptions. We have found that individuals who receive reimbursement for their dues rate their dues more favorably than those who receive no reimbursement. Also, those who receive dues reimbursement rate the value of their membership higher, and are less likely to be able to recall the price of their dues.

When asked to consider the hypothetical situation of their dues reimbursement being discontinued, roughly two-thirds of reimbursed members (67%) indicated that they are extremely likely or very likely to renew their membership if their dues were no longer reimbursed.

5. Performance Ratings

In member surveys, individuals are asked to rate each aspect of their association (e.g. member benefits, publications, advocacy, website, conferences, member services, etc.), to determine how well each area is currently performing, and how it impacts members’ perception of the value of their membership.

Members are asked to provide an overall rating for each area of the association in which they have experience, using the following five point scale:

1. Excellent
2. Very good
3. Good
4. Fair
5. Poor

The table on the following page shows the highest and lowest Top Two ratings we have seen over the years, as well as the median Top Two rating.

Performance Ratings	Low Top Two	High Top Two	Median Top Two
Advocacy	49%	83%	59%
Annual Conference	44%	85%	69%
Continuing Education	46%	83%	63%
Member Benefits	34%	74%	59%
Member Services Representatives	57%	88%	77%
Publications	48%	87%	68%
Website	36%	82%	55%

It is typical to find that member benefits has the greatest impact on members' perception of membership value, compared to all other areas of the association.

We have found that in nearly every case, member services representatives in the association's call center receive the highest performance ratings of all areas of the association.

In general, we also find that the association's website receives some of the lowest performance ratings and is rarely a strong driver of membership value. In those rare instances where the website has a strong impact on value, the website is used extensively by members to conduct their membership business, e.g. tracking continuing education credits, registering for classes, accessing social networking, downloading minutes/conference proceedings, etc.

The impact that other areas of the association have on members' perception of membership value vary by association.

6. Member Loyalty

In order to measure the strength of the relationships that the association has with its members, all individuals who participate in our member research studies are classified as either loyal, neutral or vulnerable, depending on their responses to three survey questions: (1) likely to recommend the association to others, (2) likely to renew their membership, and (3) overall membership value rating.

Individuals who give Top Two ratings to all three questions are classified as loyal. Those who do not give all Top Two responses, and give no Bottom Two responses, are classified as neutral. Respondents who give at least one Bottom Two response are classified as vulnerable.

The percentages in the table on the following page represent the distribution of loyal, neutral, and vulnerable members we have found in our studies over the years.

Member Loyalty Ratings	Low Percentage	High Percentage	Median Percentage
Loyal	33%	82%	58%
Neutral	16%	43%	32%
Vulnerable	1%	25%	8%

By definition, members who are classified as loyal provide higher intentions for recommending the association and renewing their membership, as well as provide higher ratings for the value of their membership. These higher ratings also carry over into other areas, as loyal members give higher performance ratings for each aspect of the association, and rate their membership dues more favorably.

As a group, newest members (< 3 years) usually have the highest percentage of neutral members. We believe these members are likely to be neutral because they have less experience with the association and may not yet be convinced that the association’s membership is a good fit for them. Their lack of experience with the association may also manifest itself as an unwillingness to recommend the association to others, and they may question the value of their membership.

While we see a significant increase in loyalty among the 3-5 year membership category, we typically see a drop in loyalty among the 6-10 year cohort. We believe this drop in loyalty may occur because individuals who have been members for 6-10 years have already experienced all of the benefits designed for new members, have cycled through all the benefits and experiences the association has to offer, and are not finding anything being offered by the association for individuals in their career stage or life stage.

The oldest group of members (60 +) have the highest percentage of loyal members. This is likely the result of attrition over the years of members who did not receive sufficient value for their membership, leaving only those individuals for whom the association’s membership is a good fit.

Individuals who have experienced a recent problem with the association have a larger proportion of vulnerable members than those who have not experienced a problem.

Members whose dues are reimbursed are more likely to be loyal compared to members who pay their own dues. Those who receive no dues reimbursement have a larger proportion of neutral members.

7. Engagement

Over the years we have noticed a correlation between member loyalty and various aspects of member engagement.

- Members who attend the association's meetings, including the annual conference, are significantly more likely to be loyal than those who do not attend meetings. Those who do not attend are more likely to be classified as neutral members.
- Former volunteers, including former Board members, are less likely to be loyal than current volunteers. In a few isolated cases, we have found that former volunteers are less likely to be loyal than members who have never volunteered.
- The frequency of visiting the association's website is positively correlated to loyalty. Infrequent visitors to the website have a smaller proportion of loyal members, and a larger proportion of neutral members, than frequent visitors to the website.
- Members who have had recent contact with the association's member services representatives have a larger percentage of loyal members, and a smaller percentage of neutral members, compared to members who have had no recent contact with member services.

8. Summary

The results provided in this report can be used to address the question of how an individual association's performance may compare to other associations in general. While the range of low and high Top Two ratings presented in this paper may be substantial in some areas, it does provide some guidance on where an association's ratings fall within that range, and compare to the median.

For additional information, please contact the author.

Larry J. Seibert, Ph.D.
President/CEO
Association Metrics, Inc.
info@assoiattonmetrics.com
317.840.2303