

Does It Matter Why Members Join/Belong?

by

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In a previous paper, we examined the reasons why different types of members (age, years in the profession, areas of specialty, gender, geographic region, formal education, etc.) are motivated to join an organization and continue to renew their membership. (See “Why Members Belong” <http://www.associationmetrics.com/free-resources/>).

In this paper, we examine how membership renewal rates, level of engagement, and member loyalty differ by member needs, i.e. what motivates individuals to join an organization and continue to be a member.

Is there a difference between asking why members “join” and why they “belong”?

Individuals join an organization and continue to renew their membership as long as their personal and professional needs are being satisfied, and they believe they are getting a good value from their membership investment. Asking a person why he/she “joined” is more appropriate when questioning new members or lapsed members.

New members typically have little or no experience with the organization when they decide to join, and their needs and motivations may be different from individuals who are basing their renewal decision on previous experiences with the organization. Asking individuals why they joined as part of the application process is a good way of determining their individual needs from the start.

Since lapsed members are no longer members, it would be confusing to ask them why they belong, so asking them why they originally joined helps to better understand their personal motivations for wanting to be a member. Asking lapsed members why they originally joined can uncover some of the disconnects between what former members expected from the organization’s membership and how those expectations may not have been realized. It is also a good way to determine if the needs of former members differ significantly from current members.

When it comes to the organization’s current membership as a whole, asking members why they belong focuses their attention on their most recent renewal decision, and why they continue to maintain their membership. It allows relatively new members, as well as more seasoned members, to assess what they currently need from the organization.

Asking a twenty year veteran of the organization why he/she initially joined is of relatively little value, other than providing an historical perspective. Understanding why current members belong, provides the organization with useful information for improving retention and increasing engagement by addressing their current needs.

While the survey question may differ between “joining” and “belonging” depending on the target audience for the survey, the reasons that are provided in the survey from which respondents can make their selections should be the same to allow for a comparison among new members, current members, and former members.

What are the typical reasons why members join/belong?

Individuals join/belong to a membership organization for personal gain, for altruistic reasons, and for reasons that are neither personal nor altruistic. The reasons for joining/belonging to an organization vary by industry, by profession, by organization, and by member type, but, in general, these are the top reasons why members belong that we have found over the years.

The top personal reasons why members typically join/belong are:

1. To network with others and to build professional relationships
2. To stay current on information about the profession and/or the industry
3. To have access to member benefits
4. To attain/maintain a certification
5. To generate more business for themselves or their company
6. To attend the organization’s events
7. To have access to professional development/continuing education
8. To show that they are a professional in their field
9. For the prestige of being a member

The top altruistic reasons why members might join/belong:

1. To advance/support the profession
2. To advance/support the organization
3. To be involved with the organization
4. To volunteer/give back to the profession
5. To participate in committees
6. To serve in the organization’s governance

Other top reasons why members join/belong include:

1. Membership is a requirement in their profession
2. Employer reimburses membership dues
3. Supervisor/mentor suggested joining
4. Not satisfied with other similar organizations

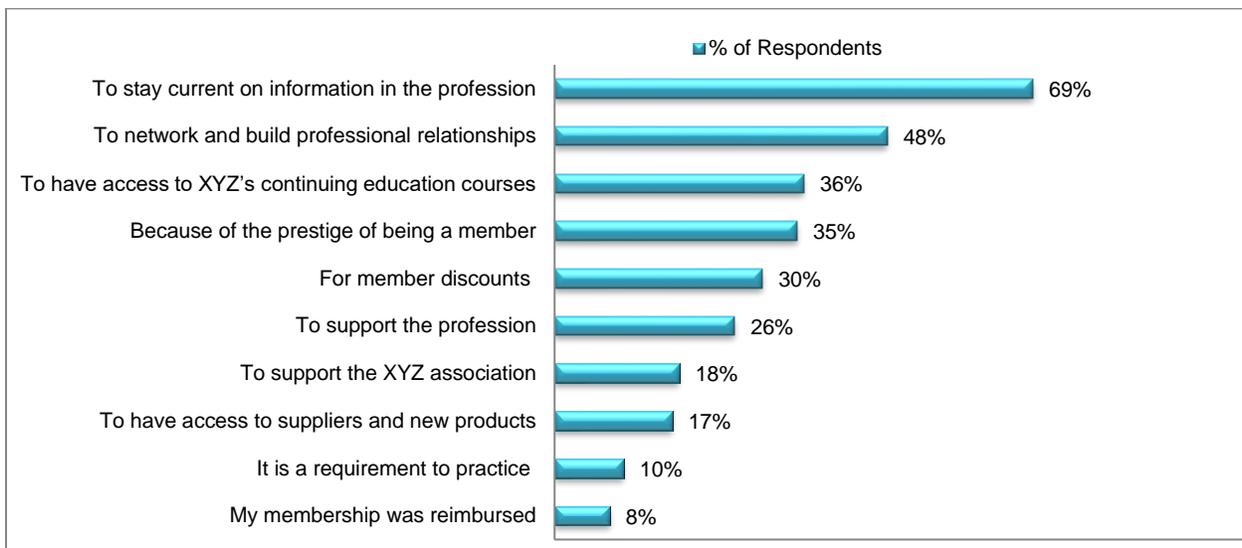
How are the main reasons why members join/belong determined?

There are several ways in which the survey question can be framed in order to determine why current members and former members joined/belong:

1. Check all the reasons that apply;
2. Rank all the reasons from your most important reason to your least important reason;
3. Allocate points to all the reasons you joined (belong), assigning more points to the more important reasons;
4. Indicate whether each reason for joining (belonging) is (was) a major factor, a minor factor, or no factor in your decision to join (belong).

Limiting the number of selections a respondent can make, such as selecting their top reason, or their top three reasons, is not recommended. Our research shows that 85%-95% of members join for more than one reason, while 65%-75% of members join for more than two reasons.

The chart below is a hypothetical example of the information that is provided by tabulating all of the reasons given by respondents. Because members are encouraged to select all applicable reasons, the percentages total more than 100%.



This analysis provides insight into which reasons are the primary reasons for current members or former members. It also provides the relative size of each segment, which enables the organization to prioritize its attention to larger, more important groups of members.

How does this analysis help with member retention?

By examining the renewal rate for each group of members who selected a particular reason for joining/belonging, an organization can determine which group is at a higher risk of not renewing their membership. Those motivating factors that have a lower renewal rate may indicate where their expectations are not currently being satisfied by the organization, or it may signal where members have unrealistic expectations. In the hypothetical example below, the low renewal rate by those who joined/belong because their dues are reimbursed, is typical among members who have little personal investment in their membership.

To calculate the renewal rate for each reason, current members are asked why they belong to the organization in a membership survey. One year later, the percentage of renewals for each reason segment is calculated by comparing the list of survey respondents in each reason segment to the current membership roll, producing a graph similar to the example below.

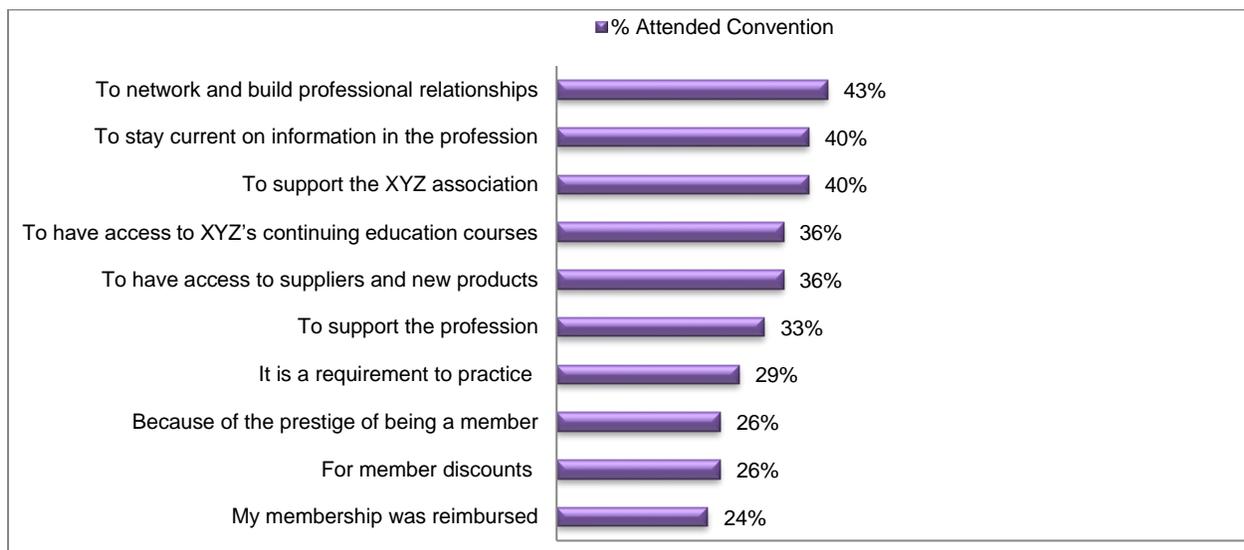


Managers can examine the renewal rates and build on the strength of the organization by continuing to satisfy the needs of the segments with the highest renewal rates, as well as focus on the lowest renewal rate segments for opportunities for improvement.

What does this type of analysis tell us about member engagement?

Similar to the analysis used for membership renewals, the reasons why members choose to join/belong to an organization can be matched up to engagement with the organization's events and experiences.

The chart below shows the percentage of individuals from each reason segment who attended at least one of the organization's annual conventions during the past two years. One can determine at a glance which reasons for belonging generate the most attendees, enabling the organization to better market the event to those more likely to attend, and investigate why other segments have fewer attendees.

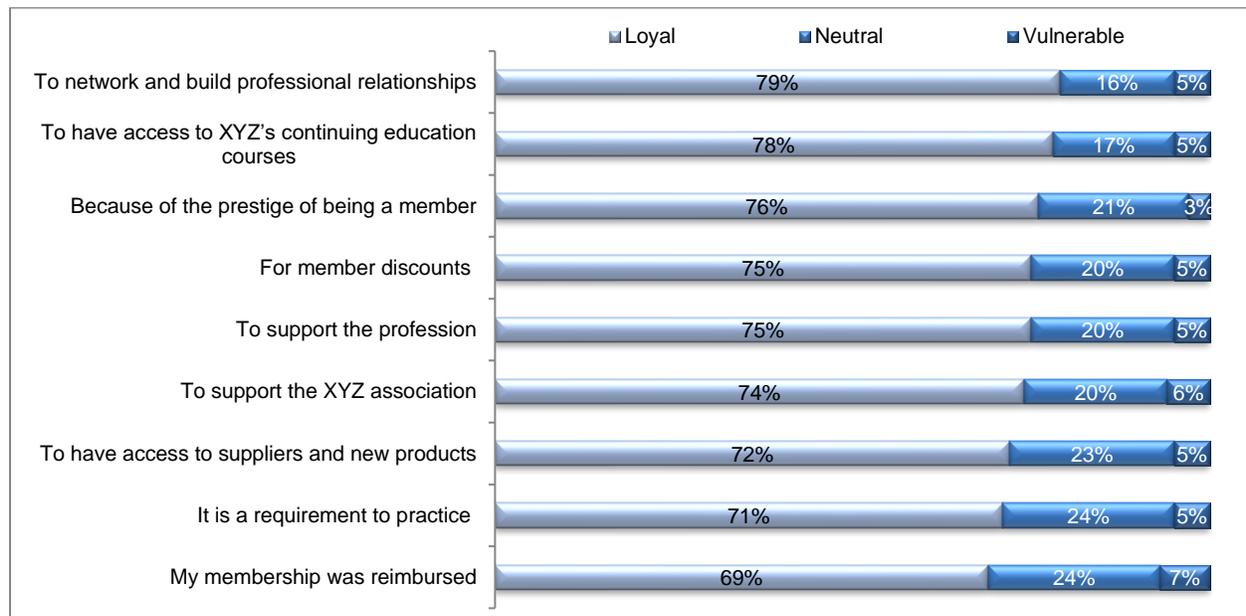


The engagement rate for all of the organization's activities can be calculated for each reason members join/belong, such as:

1. attending your conventions and conferences
2. attaining or maintaining a professional certification
3. attending your continuing education classes
4. participating in your webinars
5. attending your local functions
6. recruiting new members
7. joining your special interest groups/committees
8. using your member benefits
9. visiting your website
10. interacting with your social media
11. donating to your foundation
12. volunteering at the national or local level
13. transitioning from a discounted membership to a full membership.

Does member loyalty differ by their reasons for joining/belonging?

Many organizations maintain a scorecard measure to track how well they are satisfying the needs of their members. Whether this scorecard measure is member loyalty, NPS, engagement, or some other index, you can track how well your organization is meeting the needs of each member needs segment.



By understanding the primary reasons new members have recently joined, the organization can better tailor its marketing efforts to recruit more members and increase its market share. An analysis of current members' needs can uncover the strengths and weaknesses of the organization as it attempts to satisfy the needs of its members and provide outstanding value to its members.

By understanding the primary reasons former members initially joined, organizations have a better idea of which needs are not being adequately met. It may be that the organization is not doing an adequate job of meeting their needs, or perhaps some members have some misunderstandings about what the membership will do for them.

Organizations who conduct this analysis on a regular basis are better equipped to adapt to the changing needs of its membership.

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