

Measuring the Drop in Engagement Among Former Volunteers

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Overview

A meta-analysis of 11 member studies of professional associations representing more than 230,000 members was conducted to determine how the level of engagement differs among three groups of members – current volunteers, former volunteers and non-volunteers.

Individual member studies have consistently shown that former volunteers do not have the same level of participation nor rate their association experiences as highly as current volunteers. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine engagement among former volunteers at a more macro level.

A current volunteer is anyone who is currently holding an elected or appointed position with an association at any level (e.g. international, national, regional, state, chapter, etc.) or who is currently serving the association in a non-elected or non-appointed role (e.g. committee, task force, etc.).

A former volunteer is anyone who has served the association in some capacity, but was not a volunteer at the time he/she completed the member survey. Individuals who indicated that they are a current volunteer in one position and a former volunteer in another (e.g. current state volunteer and former chapter volunteer) are classified as a current volunteer overall. However, in this case, he/she would be considered a current volunteer in the analysis of state volunteers and a former volunteer in the analysis of chapter volunteers.

A non-volunteer is any member who has never held a volunteer position for the association.

There are a number of ways associations have defined engagement. Rather than combining all of the usual components of engagement to arrive at an engagement index which may be applicable to some associations and not applicable to others, this report examines all of the various components (e.g. annual conference attendance, continuing education purchases, benefits usage, website visits, etc.) and reports on them individually.

Why Volunteers and Non-Volunteers Belong to an Association

While some studies examine reasons why individuals join an association, this study focuses on why individuals belong to an association. The reasons why an individual may have initially joined an association are not as relevant today as the reasons why they continue to maintain their membership. Members' renewal decisions involve a mental assessment of the value of their membership (i.e. what they get out of being a member compared to the time and money invested to maintain their membership), an evaluation of how well the membership is meeting their current needs, and whether or not those needs can be better satisfied somewhere else.

Over the years, we have found that one of the top reasons, if not the number one reason, why individuals belong to a professional membership association is for the information the association disseminates to its members that allows members to stay current in their profession. Other top reasons for belonging vary by association, such as the need to maintain a certification, or to have access to member benefits that are necessary for them to practice in their profession.

In this study, former volunteers are no different from current volunteers in that their need for networking opportunities, and their desire to give back to the profession or association, are significantly higher priorities for belonging to the association than they are for non-volunteers. Even though former volunteers are no longer serving the association in a formal way, they indicate that they still have a stronger need to network and give something back to the professional community compared to non-volunteers.

Loyalty

Every association member has a relationship with the organization, and it varies by individual. The stronger the relationship, the more likely members will be to:

1. renew their membership;
2. recommend the organization to others;
3. provide more non-dues revenue through meeting attendance, the purchase of continuing education, publications, and premium benefits;
4. be understanding when there is a dues increase;
5. be forgiving when there are fluctuations in the quality of service;
6. speak highly of the organization (positive word of mouth);
7. support the organization's mission and initiatives;
8. become more engaged and involved with the organization;
9. donate their time and skills to advance the organization's mission through volunteerism;
10. be an advocate for the organization.

This study utilizes a three question index to determine each individual member’s loyalty classification: (1) likelihood of recommending the association to other professionals, (2) likelihood of renewing their membership, and (3) the value rating of their membership.

Depending on the combination of their responses to these indicator questions, each respondent is classified as either loyal (strong relationship), neutral (moderate relationship) or vulnerable (weak relationship). The percentage of members that fall into each of the three categories is used to quantify the strength of the relationship that an association has with each of its member segments.

The following tables show the percentages of loyal members in each of the various volunteer classifications.

Table 1 – Percentage of Loyal Members by Volunteer Level

	Current Volunteers	Former Volunteers	Non-Volunteers
International Volunteers	66%	55%	50%
National Volunteers	79%	66%	54%
Regional/District Volunteers	68%	47%	48%
State Volunteers	70%	53%	48%
Local Volunteers	66%	54%	39%
Student Volunteers	56%	49%	56%

Survey respondents indicated in the survey which volunteer situations applied to them. The percentages of loyal members in Table 1 are averages among all study participants within the same classification. Even though the percentages of loyal members vary by association, this study found that, for every association in the study, current volunteers had the highest percentage of loyal members, and the percentage of former volunteers who are loyal is significantly lower than the percentage for current volunteers.

In most cases, the percentage of loyal members among former volunteers is higher than the percentage of loyal members among non-volunteers. There were exceptions where the group of former volunteers had a lower percentage of loyal members than the group of non-volunteers.

Table 2 – Percentage of Loyal Members by Type of Volunteer

	Current Volunteers	Former Volunteers	Non-Volunteers
Elected Volunteers	79%	63%	56%
Appointed Volunteers	81%	60%	56%
All Other Volunteers	76%	59%	55%

The percentages in Table 2 show the percentages of loyal members segmented by the type of volunteer. These percentages are the averages of all study participants. While the percentages vary by individual association, the percentage of loyal members is significantly higher among current volunteers than former volunteers for all study participants.

Recruiting New Members

In every case in this study, current volunteers were significantly more likely to recommend the association to other professionals and to have already recruited other members, compared to former volunteers and non-volunteers.

In some cases, former volunteers were significantly more likely than non-volunteers to be willing to recommend the association to other professionals, and in some cases, equally likely to recommend the association. No individual cases were found where former volunteers were less likely than non-volunteers to recommend the association.

Membership Renewals

There was some variation in results among associations regarding members' intentions to renew their membership. For some associations, there were no significant differences in their members' intentions to renew among the three groups (current volunteers, former volunteers, non-volunteers). For other associations, a significantly larger percentage of current volunteers than former volunteers intended to renew their membership, with non-volunteers having a significantly lower percentage of members who intended to renew their membership than current or former volunteers.

In one case, a larger percentage of current volunteers indicated that they would be extremely likely or very likely to renew their membership if their dues were no longer reimbursed by their employer, compared to former volunteers and non-volunteers.

Membership Value

In every case, the largest percentage of respondents who rated the value of their membership as excellent or very good, was the group of current volunteers.

In most cases, the percentage of former volunteers who gave high value ratings was statistically the same as for non-volunteers. In one case, there were significantly fewer former volunteers than non-volunteers who rated the value of their membership as excellent or very good.

Dues

In most cases, there were no significant differences among volunteer groups in how they rated their association's dues. In the two cases where there were differences, more current volunteers rated their dues as low or just right compared to former volunteers and non-volunteers. In both of these cases, the percentage of low and just right ratings given by former volunteers was the same as those given by non-volunteers.

Member Benefits

Respondents were presented with the array of benefits offered by their association and were asked to rate each benefit that they had used. For the benefits they had not used, they were asked to indicate if they were aware that their association offered the benefit prior to taking the survey.

Current and former volunteers were more likely to have used each of the association's member benefits and were more likely to be aware of the benefits that the association had to offer than non-volunteers. Whether or not current volunteers used each benefit at a higher rate or the same rate as former volunteers varied by association and by benefit.

A larger percentage of current volunteers rated their association's overall member benefits package, as well as many of the individual benefits, as excellent or very good compared to former volunteers and non-volunteers.

Even though all individual benefits were rated the highest by current volunteers, some benefits were rated higher by former volunteers compared to non-volunteers, and some were rated lower by former volunteers compared to non-volunteers.

When presented with a list of potential benefits being considered by the association, former volunteers were less likely to be interested in trying new benefits than current volunteers, and in some cases, less likely than non-volunteers.

Member Services

In some cases, all three volunteer segments were equally likely to have ever contacted member services, and in some cases, non-volunteers were the least likely to have ever made contact. Former volunteers were as likely as current volunteers, and more likely than non-volunteers, to have contacted member services recently.

There was quite a bit of variation in how members rated the quality of the service they got from member services, with some cases where the quality rating was the same for all three groups, to those where non-volunteers gave the lowest rating. In one case, former volunteers gave the lowest rating.

Involvement With Community Service Projects

Based on the results of one particular association in which involvement in community service projects was measured, current and former volunteers were equally likely to be involved in community service projects. This is consistent with the need that current and former volunteers have for networking and giving back to the professional community.

Website

In some cases, all three volunteer groups were equally likely to have visited the website, but in other cases, former volunteers were less likely to have visited the website than current volunteers.

In most cases, current and former volunteers visited the website more frequently than non-volunteers. The number of times the website was visited by volunteers is higher when committee information is disseminated through the website. In one case, former volunteers visited the website less frequently than non-volunteers.

In most cases, current volunteers gave the highest ratings for the website and non-volunteers gave the lowest ratings, with a couple of exceptions. In some cases, former volunteers rated the website lower than non-volunteers.

Communications and Social Media

In all cases, current volunteers were the most likely to participate in the association's social media, and in some cases, former volunteers were less likely than non-volunteers to keep up with the association's activities and announcements through its social media.

Former volunteers were just as likely as current volunteers to open the association's electronic newsletter, but, in some cases, former volunteers and non-volunteers were less likely to read the association's communications. For some associations, the same percentage of members in all three volunteer groups reported reading the association's publications.

A higher percentage of current volunteers rated the overall quality of their association's publications as excellent or very good, compared to former volunteers.

Continuing Education

In all cases, current volunteers were significantly more likely to get 100% of their continuing education from the association. Generally, former volunteers got more of their CE from the association than non-volunteers. However, in one case, former volunteers got less of their CE from the association than the other two groups.

Current volunteers were the most likely to rate the quality of their association's CE as excellent or very good. In some cases, former volunteers gave higher quality ratings than non-volunteers, and in other cases the ratings given by former volunteers was the same as non-volunteers.

Advocacy

Current volunteers and former volunteers were equally likely to be aware of the association's advocacy efforts and to stay abreast of the results of those efforts. Non-volunteers were significantly less likely to be aware of the association's advocacy efforts and to follow those efforts.

For some associations, current volunteers were the most likely to be satisfied with the results of their association's advocacy efforts, and for other associations, all three groups were equally satisfied.

Annual Convention

In most cases, current volunteers were the most likely to have attended a recent annual convention, while in other cases current volunteers and former volunteers were equally likely to have recently attended. In all cases, non-volunteers were the least likely to have attended an annual convention at any time.

Current volunteers gave higher quality ratings for the annual convention's networking opportunities than former volunteers or non-volunteers.

Local Chapter

Former volunteers, particularly former chapter volunteers, were less likely to attend chapter meetings than current volunteers, but were more likely to attend local meetings than non-volunteers. For one association, the percentage of former international volunteers who attended chapter meetings was the same as for current international volunteers.

In some cases, former chapter volunteers rated their chapter meetings and other chapter offerings (e.g. CE, networking, etc.) the same as non-volunteers, and below non-volunteers in other cases. In all cases, current volunteers, at every level, rated the chapter offerings the highest.

Summary

In general, all volunteers appear to have a need for networking and giving back to the profession whether they are currently serving or not, and an association membership gives them opportunities to satisfy those needs.

Current volunteers are more engaged in all aspects of the association, and give the highest quality ratings for their experiences. Even though the level of engagement among former volunteers is significantly below that of current volunteers, it is as high or higher than for non-volunteers in most cases. There are some isolated cases in which engagement and quality ratings given by former volunteers drop below that of non-volunteers.

The focus of this study was on measuring the drop in engagement among former volunteers. The next step is to understand why the drop exists and how it can be prevented from occurring.

The actual levels of engagement for current volunteers, former volunteers and non-volunteers vary by individual association, and may not be the same for your association. Measuring the various components of engagement can be beneficial in understanding where differences exist, which can be then used as the basis for managing and improving overall member engagement.

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