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Membership & Volunteers

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Tips for Finding, Engaging and Retaining Your Members

Research finds that 49 percent of association members leave the group because they experience a lack of engagement with the organization. To ensure the longevity of the association, those in a leadership role need a solid plan to grow, engage, and retain their membership base, especially since doing so ultimately gives the association more manpower and capital resources to be able to serve the needs of their membership in even greater ways. Talk about a win-win!



BY JAN HORTON SPENCE
Editor's Note: CalSAE is pleased to welcome Jan Horton Spence as a content leader at ELEVATE 2018 Annual Convention.

However, in today's fast-paced, technology-driven world where the average person checks their phone every 12 minutes¹, actually getting (and keeping) the attention of your members—regardless of whether it's online message or at a live event—is easier said than done. Add in the various communications preferences the different generations have and you've got your work cut out for you! But fear not, for there are several actionable tips and tools you can adopt and implement to more effectively find new members and retain and engage existing members.

Ask! Ask! Ask!

Develop rapport with existing and prospective members—this comes down to doing some digging to more fully understand your membership. Who makes up your membership from a demographic standpoint? Finding this out and examining the data could give you insight into who else might be interested in joining your association. What are their biggest concerns or greatest issues? Are they in search

of professional development or accreditation opportunities? Are they looking for mentorship or to expand their network? Once you know this, then you need to determine if your association is helping to meet those needs. Something as simple as a brief survey at your next monthly meeting could garner invaluable information and help you realize if you need to make adjustments to more fully engage your members.

One more slightly radical option, from Anna Caraveli and Andrea Pellegrino² with The Demand Networks, is to “seek a ‘day in the life’ perspective on their members via ‘participant observation,’ or, in simpler terms, visiting members in their places of work.” John Durst, CEO of the South Carolina Restaurant and Lodging Association, on putting 12,000 miles on his car in his first year while driving around the state to visit members: “It’s been extremely helpful to me not just to discuss how we’re becoming stronger with the members and prospective members, but even more importantly

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Identify where prospective members are and how to best connect with them—there are a number of ways to find and engage with potential new members. Have members bring a guest for free to your next meeting or networking event. Advertise in industry-specific publications. Use social media to interact with people in your specific industry.

to listen to what they have to say and what their suggestions are, many of which we have incorporated into action here in Columbia.”

Plan! Plan! Plan!

Create an integrated membership plan – does your association have a dedicated membership chairperson and/or committee that plans and organizes membership activities? If not, create one STAT! Once you have your committee in place, determine what your recruitment goals for the year are. Find the average attrition rate for associations in your particular market and then set a goal for slightly higher than that number to insure positive growth. While it is important to focus on recruitment of new members, it is equally important to focus on the retention of existing members. Retention efforts should begin the moment a new member joins the group and should never really stop.

While paid association staff may reach out to prospective or new members, it’s often more effective and meaningful when done by a peer – a volunteer member. According to Kimberly Gray, the Events & Communications Coordinator with the Associated General Contractors of Alaska, “Things we address with first-time members is how to keep them engaged,” she said. “Engaged members tend to come back. Unless you can show

them the value of their membership, they can slip through the cracks. That is something that is of concern to us as I’m sure it is with all trade group associations.

“The personal touch is really important,” she said, noting the local chapter member should, “Point out, ‘Here is the value I got. Here is why you want to hang with us.’”³

Connect! Connect! Connect!

Identify where prospective members are and how to best connect with them—there are a number of ways to find and engage with potential new members. Have members bring a guest for free to your next meeting or networking event. Advertise in industry-specific publications. Use social media to interact with people in your specific industry (LinkedIn groups are great for this). Develop an annual membership drive and have a contest to see who can bring in the highest number of new members. Offer potential members a substantial discount for joining on the spot. Ask your current members how they found out about the group and what made them want to join. Reach out to former members and see if they’d like to rejoin the association.

Another option would be to take a page from the Air National Guard’s playbook and create different membership levels. For background,

the Air National Guard was looking to increase membership within an Air National Guard association. They worked with a company called AdLeap to develop a strategy that included a three-tiered promotion. Basically each level of membership had its own reward. Basic membership was awarded with a very nice gift pen imprinted with the association logo. The next level of membership received an imprinted gift pen and premium travel mug. Premium members received a custom gift set including a laser engraved metal key tag, laser engraved pen, and clip on watch as well as an association travel mug⁴.

To grow your association, focus on engaging your current and prospective members by going to the places where they (literally and virtually) congregate, ask them what is most important to them, and start a conversation that begins with them.

Jan Horton Spence is an international speaker, trainer, and consultant. With contagious charisma and a zest for life which make her an excellent motivator and leader, this TEDx speaker has used her vast knowledge in sales, communications, finances, and employee engagement to help numerous clients including Pillsbury, Walmart, and Frito-Lay. Reach her at jan@janspence.com, 904-821-9309 or online at www.janspence.com.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 <https://nypost.com/2017/11/08/americans-check-their-phones-80-times-a-day-study/>
- 2 <https://associationsnow.com/2016/03/day-in-the-life-of-members/>
- 3 <https://info.cq.com/resources/10-tried-and-true-methods-to-increase-new-member-retention/>
- 4 <http://www.adleap.com/case-study-association-membership-drive.html>



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