

10 Strategies

for Association Membership Recruiting and Retention

With more than 180,000 associations in the United States alone, there aren't many common threads uniting them. But here's one: all associations and consortia worry about recruiting new members and retaining the ones they already have. The strategies below—which by no means constitute an exhaustive list—are a good starting point for organizations working on the critical areas of recruitment and retention.

- 1 Make a plan.** The old aphorism is true—there are no planned failures, just failures to plan. Great organizations have clearly articulated membership strategies, programming and follow-up activities. What is equally important, they establish well-defined metrics for membership growth and retention rate, based on the specific objectives the association wants to achieve.
- 2 Create an organization-wide membership effort.** Driving membership can't be a job that is exclusive to the membership committee or your member relations director. Member satisfaction knows no departmental boundaries. No initiative from any committee or department should move forward at an association without a clear plan on how to engage the membership and communicate the association's benefits to each target group.
- 3 Build a customer information system.** Tom Peters wrote that "it used to be 'location, location, location.' Today it's 'database, database, database.'" But your membership database should be more than just an online address list of your membership—databases are a critical tool for business intelligence. Asking questions like "Who hasn't attended a meeting or conference recently?" enables an organization to spot membership problems before they become crises.
- 4 Know your customers, industry and competition.** Many association executives and volunteers know the association business well, but they're not as informed about the things that keep their members up at night. There is no substitute for periodically getting out and meeting your members on their own turf. Such meetings should be part of a systematic routine for staying in touch with the membership, as should regularly reading trade publications and visiting the blogs that your members do.
- 5 Measure. Benchmark. Repeat.** It's not enough to measure your organization against its peer group in general. You need to benchmark against the best. Things like call response time and website usability should be standard metrics for your association. And you can't benchmark once and carve the results in stone—you need to do it periodically, so that you can track progress and alter course if necessary.
- 6 Communicate and congratulate.** It's said that the deepest human need is the need to be appreciated. Whether it's a mention in a newsletter or a quick email note to say "I saw this article about your company—congrats!," it's easy to show appreciation to your members.
- 7 Build the bandwagon.** Public relations campaigns can be an extraordinarily successful way to drive membership. People like to be part of a growing, successful organization. Press releases celebrating growth milestones and other achievements are a great way to tap into this desire.
- 8 Worry about value, not price.** Too often, associations forget that price connotes value—a discount strategy can actually undercut a member's perception of value. Tactics as simple as putting a non-member price on all publications can reinforce perception of the value of membership.
- 9 Take the locks off the doors.** If you go to L.L. Bean's flagship store in Freeport, Maine, you'll find just about anything from kayaks to cardigans. But you won't find locks on the doors—because L.L. Bean has been open 24/7 since 1953. Associations need a similar philosophy. With a global economy and growing demands on people's time, people expect to interact with an association on their own schedules, not yours. Consider this as you plan for event registration, changing contact information and other member activities.
- 10 Never stop selling or serving.** Disney. Nordstrom. Marriott. These organizations get mentioned atop any list of organizations that value customer service for one reason—they never stop working at it. As soon as you forget to tell members the value of your organization—and how much you value them—they'll forget. And once they do, it's going to take a lot more than 10 tips to win them back.

Interested in growing your organization?
At Virtual, we've helped dozens of organizations meet—and exceed—their recruitment and retention goals.
For more information, call Steve O'Neill at 781-876-6204.