

What attracts members to your association?

How individuals feel about trade and professional associations and their ability to assist members varies significantly by generation. Younger generations of workers, for example, are more likely to demonstrate interest in association membership when their specific needs are met. These are among the conclusions of a study performed by the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE).

Survey says: Value grows with age

The 2007 study, *The Decision to Join: How Individuals Determine Value and Why They Choose to Belong*, is an update of research first completed in 1981. It was conducted jointly by the ASAE and the Center for Association Leadership.

According to the results, when respondents were asked, “What is your overall attitude toward associations?” the older the respondent, the higher the score. Some 30% of those under 30 years old responded “very favorable” (the highest rating in the 5-point scale). That number climbed slightly to 31.5% in the 30 to 42 age group, grew to almost 37% among those age 43 to 59 and peaked at nearly 43% for the age category of 60 or older.

When asked if “associations are capable of addressing the practical needs of individual members,” age disparities were even greater. Only 18.5% of respondents under age 30 answered “definitely yes” (the highest rating), compared to more than 36% of respondents age 60 or older.

Challenging conventional wisdom

For some time, conventional wisdom has held that, when the baby boomers retire in droves and leave their association memberships behind, Generation X will be too small and noncommittal to fill the void. This line of thinking further assumes that the Millennial generation will be even less engaged — preferring online networking over traditional association membership.

The study, however, shows that even younger respondents regard trade and professional associations as having value. The key to harnessing this interest lies in a simple idea that is anything but simple to deliver: Give the people what they want. According to the William E. Smith Institute for Association Research, younger workers are likely to look for tangible member benefits such as:

- Networking opportunities,
- Access to leadership roles,
- Learning opportunities, and
- Other activities that will help them advance their careers.

How can this information help your association? It's simple. View all your current programs and offerings through the eyes of a younger member to test for relevance. Is there a clear and well-defined benefit? Could someone at the beginning or middle of his or her career make use of the information you offer?

Ask your career members for input on your current programming and where they see gaps. If you uncover an area of opportunity, consider creating a committee of young professionals that can help define and deliver the needs of this segment of your association.

Don't close the door on older members

Workers at or near retirement age, on the other hand, have different needs. They may be looking for a continued connection to their profession if they've left the work force; strategies for re-energizing and increasing their work satisfaction if they're still on the job; or semiretirement career options if they're somewhere in between.

Senior members also potentially offer valuable gifts for your association, including extensive knowledge about the industry and the association itself. Find ways to tap your "elder statesmen" for their input and insights as a way of keeping them engaged and active in your organization.

Engage at all levels

While addressing the needs of particular age groups, balance those of *all* your members. You can't cater too much to one end of the generational spectrum without the risk of alienating another group. In fact, you need to work to build connections among the various segments of your constituency.

Older members, for example, can act as professional mentors to younger members. And technology-savvy younger members can help older members with Web site management, podcasts and social networking. Keeping everyone's needs and abilities at the forefront can help minimize any "us vs. them" thinking.

Something for everyone

Remain aware of and focused on generational differences among your members while also reinforcing what all members have in common — their avocation. You'll be more likely to bridge the age gap and keep your association vibrant and diverse.