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# The Future of Membership Growth: Why Associations Must Become More Intelligent

By: Aubie Knight

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## The Future of Membership Growth: Why Associations Must Become More Intelligent

Over the last few weeks, I've spent a lot of time thinking about what "best practices" membership recruitment will look like over the next three to five years.

Not what it looked like ten years ago.

Not even what it looks like today.

What it *needs* to become.

Ironically, this reflection started with something pretty simple: reviewing a prospect spreadsheet.

As I looked through the data, it became obvious that the list had grown organically over time and lacked the level of validation, consistency, and structure needed to truly power modern membership recruitment. Duplicate entries, incomplete records, inconsistent naming conventions, outdated contact information, missing websites. The kinds of things that happen quietly over years in many organizations.

And honestly, it made me realize something important:

Many associations are trying to build sophisticated membership growth strategies on top of weak data foundations.

That is not sustainable in the age of AI.

At IIANC, we've spent time building some really interesting AI scoring models and experimenting with ways to better segment and prioritize membership prospects. The tools themselves are exciting and show real promise. But as we began thinking about deploying those tools at scale, we ran into an uncomfortable realization:

Our underlying data infrastructure was not where it needed to be.

The models were only as good as the prospect data sitting underneath them.

That was an important moment for me personally because it reinforced a lesson that applies far beyond AI: sophisticated strategy cannot overcome weak foundational systems.

### The New Foundation: Clean, Trusted Prospect Data

The future of membership recruitment starts with something very unglamorous:

A clean, trusted, continuously maintained prospect database.

Not just a spreadsheet.

Not just "contacts in the AMS."

A living prospect intelligence system.

Associations need confidence in:

- who exists
- who is active
- who is growing
- who fits their mission
- who is likely to engage
- who is likely to join
- who is likely to renew

Without that foundation, AI tools and scoring models become little more than "cool demos." AI is only as good as the underlying data.

### The Membership Model Is Changing

Historically, membership recruitment was often relationship driven and somewhat reactive:

- Networking
- Referrals

- inbound inquiries
- conference interactions
- broad email campaigns

And to be clear, relationships will always matter.

But the organizations that thrive moving forward will become much more intentional and data-driven in how they approach growth.

The future membership organization will understand:

- ideal member profiles
- engagement patterns
- behavioral segments
- organizational maturity
- technology adoption
- growth signals

And instead of generic outreach, associations will increasingly deliver highly personalized engagement based on the actual needs and characteristics of the prospect.

## **AI Will Change Membership Operations**

There is a lot of discussion right now about AI, but much of it focuses on surface-level use cases.

The real transformation will happen operationally.

Future-facing associations will use AI to:

- validate and enrich prospect data
- identify duplicate or outdated records
- detect growth signals
- segment prospects intelligently
- personalize outreach
- prioritize high-fit organizations
- automate portions of workflow management

Membership recruitment will become less about mass communication and more about precision engagement.

The organizations that embrace this shift will dramatically outperform those that continue operating with outdated systems and incomplete data.

## **The Membership Team of the Future**

I also believe membership roles themselves are evolving.

The traditional membership model often focused heavily on:

- inquiry follow-up
- renewals
- event participation
- relationship maintenance
- transactional recruiting

The future role will increasingly involve:

- pipeline strategy
- segmentation logic
- operational intelligence
- workflow optimization
- campaign analysis
- AI-assisted targeting
- data stewardship

In other words, membership departments will begin functioning more like modern growth organizations.

That is a major shift for the association world.

## **Human Relationships Will Matter More, Not Less**

One important point: AI will not replace relationships.

In fact, I believe it will make high-quality human interaction even more valuable.

The goal is not to automate relationships.

The goal is to eliminate wasted effort, improve timing, improve targeting, and allow staff to spend more time building meaningful connections with the right organizations.

The best membership professionals in the future will spend less time searching, sorting, and guessing, and more time advising, connecting, and creating value.

## A Huge Opportunity for Associations

I believe associations have a tremendous opportunity right now.

Many organizations across our industry are struggling with:

- stagnant membership growth
- weak prospect data
- low engagement
- generic outreach
- unclear value propositions

At the same time, AI and operational technology are creating opportunities that simply did not exist a few years ago.

Associations that modernize their membership operations now may build significant long-term advantages.

And the organizations that figure this out first may ultimately help shape the future operating model for the broader association community.

The future of membership growth will not belong to the organizations with the biggest spreadsheets.

It will belong to the organizations with the best intelligence, the cleanest data, the clearest strategy, and the strongest relationships.

### About the Author:

Aubie Knight, CIC, CRM is the Chief Executive Officer of the [Independent Insurance Agents of North Carolina](#).

Aubie works with the IIANC Board of Directors to help set the strategic direction and vision of the association. He is then responsible for leading the staff in the implementation of the tactics needed to move the organization towards those goals.

Aubie is known throughout both the association world and the insurance industry for his bold visions, creative approaches to problem solving and a constant desire for growth and evolution. He takes great pride in the fact that IIANC has been listed as a top employer in North Carolina for three consecutive years and that the IIANC team has an office culture and engagement score ranked in the top 1% of US employers.

As a result of his vision and leadership skills, Aubie has served on numerous Boards in both the association and insurance industries. He is constantly challenging himself and any organization that he is affiliated with to “get better”!

During his free time, Aubie loves spending time with his family, smoking meats, listening to live music and visiting craft beer breweries. Aubie is a graduate of the University of Georgia and a huge Bulldog fan (and season ticket holder). Go Dawgs!

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