MEMBER SHIFT:

Why Members Leave—and How Organizations Can Bring Them Back

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Article developed from real-time session insights captured by Snapsight

At MSAE25, *Member Shift: Why Members Leave and the Strategies to Bring Them Back* challenged association leaders to confront an uncomfortable reality: membership decline is not a short-term disruption, but a signal of deeper systemic change. Sarah Sladek framed today's challenges as the result of a historic transition—from industrial-era structures built on hierarchy and longevity to post-industrial expectations centered on purpose, participation, and belonging.

"Membership has always been an emotional purchase—when organizations forget that, engagement suffers."

Drawing on research conducted across 59 countries, Sladek emphasized that declining engagement is a global phenomenon, affecting organizations regardless of size, sector, or geography. Economic pressure, rapid technological change, and a demographic shift toward a younger workforce are converging to fundamentally alter what people expect from membership.

Membership Is Emotional—Not Transactional

Sladek reminded attendees that membership has never been a rational purchase alone. People join because they want to belong, contribute, and feel connected to something larger than themselves. Yet many organizations, she noted, have drifted from that foundational purpose–focusing more on revenue preservation than emotional connection.

This "purpose drift" is one of the primary drivers of disengagement. When associations excel at bridging gaps, solving problems, and creating community, membership remains resilient–even during periods of disruption. When those human connections weaken, no amount of benefits or discounts can compensate.

A Generational Shift That Changes Everything

A significant portion of the session focused on generational differences–not as stereotypes, but as lived realities shaped by culture, technology, and social context. Baby boomers, Sladek explained, were raised in an era that valued structure, loyalty, and earning one's place over time. Generation Z, by contrast, has grown up amid constant connectivity, social awareness, and narratives that frame them as problem-solvers for an uncertain future.

This has reshaped the engagement cycle. The traditional path of "join, observe, and eventually lead" no longer resonates. Younger members expect immediate invitation, meaningful participation, and visible impact. Membership, for them, is both a values statement and a personal brand.

Belonging Is Built Through Participation

To underscore this point, Sladek led a collaborative selfie activity during the session—an intentional reminder that shared experiences create connection. Belonging, she argued, is not something organizations can bestow; it is something members feel when they are invited to help build the community itself.

Examples from the field reinforced this lesson. The American Osteopathic Association achieved exponential growth across age groups by intentionally including younger professionals in decision-making, requiring that at least 30 percent of participants in governance bodies be early in their careers. That inclusion didn't just benefit younger members—it strengthened the organization as a whole.

Putting Members First—In Practice, Not Just Principle

Sladek also highlighted Nexstar Network as a model of a true members-first organization. Through its "Membership Monday" initiative and comprehensive support model, Nexstar positions itself as member-owned—celebrating members regularly while providing coaching, training, marketing tools, and workforce development resources tailored to their needs.

These examples illustrated a broader truth: organizations that thrive today do not ask members to adapt to outdated structures. They adapt their structures to serve members where they are—and where they are going.

The Future Still Belongs to Belonging

Sladek closed with a forward-looking reminder. While artificial intelligence and technological acceleration will continue to reshape work and society, the fundamental human need for belonging will not change. Community, empathy, and shared purpose remain the foundation of resilient organizations.

Associations that embrace cognitive diversity, lead with empathy across generations, and stay focused on their future, rather than past traditions, will be best positioned to fulfill their purpose in times of change. By truly putting members first, organizations can respond to today's crisis of connection and emerge stronger on the other side.

Interested in exploring how shifting member expectations are reshaping associations? Sarah Sladek welcomes continued conversation and can be reached at sarah@xyzuniversity.com.

Meet Sarah

SARAH SLADEK is a researcher, author, and speaker who studies generational change, belonging, and the future of membership organizations. As CEO of XYZ University, she helps leaders rethink engagement, leadership, and community in a rapidly evolving world. Contact Sarah at sarah@xyzuniversity.com.