DIGGING FOR TRUTH:

What Really Drives Membership and Retention

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Article developed from real-time session insights captured by Snapsight

Understanding why members join, stay, or leave has long challenged association leaders. In the MSAE25 session *Digging for Truth: Uncovering the Drivers of Membership & Retention*, Pete Zimek, CAE, explored how combining emotional insight with data science can fundamentally change how associations approach engagement and renewal.

Engagement Is Emotional, Not Transactional

Zimek began by reframing a familiar concept. Quoting engagement researcher Amanda Kaiser, he reminded attendees that true engagement is emotional, not transactional. Kaiser's landmark research–born from interviews with more than 700 association members during the COVID-19 pandemic–revealed that people don't remain members simply because they attend events or open emails. They stay because they feel connected, valued, and understood.

> ## "Member engagement isn't about what people do—it's about how they feel."
>
> - Amanda Kaiser

What Behavioral Science Teaches Us About Bias

Traditional metrics like Net Promoter Score (NPS) can provide useful snapshots, categorizing members as promoters, passives, or detractors based on their likelihood to recommend an organization. But Zimek cautioned that NPS alone is not predictive. At a Minnesota CEO retreat, one leader posed a more pressing question: *How do we know who is likely to renew before we send the invoice–and where should staff focus their limited time?*

To answer that question, Zimek turned to behavioral science and machine learning. Referencing Nobel Prize–winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman, he explained the "illusion of validity"–our tendency to overestimate the accuracy of judgments based on limited data. Neural networks, by contrast, improve predictions by recognizing complex patterns across massive datasets, much like how children learn to identify animals through repeated exposure.

Key Predictors of Renewal

Zimek shared how his team analyzed more than 1.2 million member records, running over 100 trillion calculations to identify what actually predicts renewal. The findings challenged conventional wisdom. Missed emails, lack of company affiliation, and absent shipping addresses were strong indicators of churn. On the positive side, committee service, event attendance–especially in person–and successful first-year renewals significantly increased the likelihood that members would stay.

Human Connection & Community

Human connection emerged as a recurring theme. Zimek used the sport of curling as an analogy: the game itself matters, but the tradition of gathering together afterward is what builds lasting loyalty. Associations, he argued, must create intentional opportunities for members to form authentic relationships–through regional groups, structured volunteer roles, and personal invitations rather than passive "open calls" for involvement.

The data also disrupted assumptions about pricing. Contrary to fears that higher dues drive members away, Zimek shared that higher prices and more frequent transactions actually correlate with stronger retention. Each additional transaction increases renewal odds, while artificially low pricing can strain staff capacity and erode the very experience members value.

Turning Insight into Sustainable Loyalty

Zimek concluded by urging association leaders to balance operational realities with member experience. By pairing emotional insight with predictive analytics–and by prioritizing connection, clarity, and intentional engagement–associations can move from reacting to attrition to proactively shaping loyalty.

> Interested in learning more about data-driven strategies for membership growth and retention? Pete Zimek, CAE, can be reached at pete@noviams.com.

Meet Pete

PETE ZIMEK, CAE, is Founder and CEO at Novi AMS, where he helps associations use data, technology, and human-centered strategy to strengthen engagement and long-term sustainability. He is passionate about turning insight into action that benefits both association members and the professionals who serve them. Pete can be reached at pete@noviams.com.