

# THE PSYCHOLOGY of Membership Engagement

TONY ROSSELL | Senior Vice President, Marketing General Incorporated

**E**ngaging members is one of the top objectives that associations strive to accomplish. The goal makes a lot of sense. According to the 2024 edition of the Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report, lack of engagement remains the number-one reason members lapse.

So, why don't members engage with an association, and how can engagement be improved?

First, let's look at the problem of new members. Statistically, once the heavy lifting of getting a prospect to join your association is accomplished, they immediately become the most likely candidate to discontinue membership. Our benchmarking data confirms the vulnerability of these new members. The data shows the median renewal rates for first-year members with an individual membership association stand at 64 percent compared to overall renewal rates of 82 percent. Here's an actual example from one organization that further demonstrates this tendency. Members who join this association pay their dues through an automatic monthly installment credit card option. Their retention data highlights the precariousness

of these new members. For this group, 21 percent of new members cancel their membership in the first three months. This figure drops to 7 percent in the second three months and continues to decline until the membership's annual reauthorization occurs.

Psychologists provide insights that help to explain this behavior through *Cognitive Dissonance Theory*. The theory outlines what happens psychologically during a decision process. When making any decision, we are confronted with some level of mental conflict because there is not a perfectly right choice. Should I eat that ice cream sundae or not? Which car should I buy? Should I join my professional association? The conflict leads to a decision. As it applies to membership, a prospect decides to join.

However, after deciding, psychologists say we experience *Cognitive Dissonance*. We question the decision we made. We all share this tendency to second-guess a decision. For example, even a year after buying my last car, I still looked at automotive reviews to confirm that I made a good decision. In this post-decision stage, engagement efforts need to step in using *Dissonance Reduction* methods. Once they join, a new member will look for confirming information. They want proof that they made the right choice. So, one critical function is to provide an onboarding program with mail, email, or phone calls to welcome them and thank them for their decision to join, as well as instructions on accessing the benefits available to members.

Engagement does not end with new members. All members continue to need the association's efforts to remain engaged. Once again, our research shows that associations maintaining an ongoing membership engagement program see a positive correlation with higher renewal rates.

As you build an engagement program, the two primary components that psychologically drive successful engagement efforts are encouraging frequency of contact and delivering relevant solutions.

Associations that analyze member behavior data see a positive correlation between how often a member interacts with the association and retention. This interaction can come from attending events, participating in the association's private social network, opening and clicking on emails, visiting the website, volunteering, getting certified, or other similar actions. Each interaction builds the relationship. The engagement goal is to get a member to do something with your organization.

Secondly, providing relevant resources to address members' pain points drives engagement. When members see the association as a source of solutions that positively impact their professional or personal lives, they become loyal and engaged. Fundamentally, this opportunity comes down to understanding and presenting the value you offer to meet member needs.

Increasing interaction and providing relevant solutions form the psychological lever for increasing engagement. However, each association must define its unique methods to support these goals. Often, this knowledge comes from marketing research. It can also come from conducting marketing tests and



observing current members' behaviors and trends. Where is participation increasing? What content are members reading on your website? What are members purchasing? Gathering this information helps to define engagement opportunities. By developing engagement efforts around these strategies, associations can sustain long-term relationships with their members, strengthen loyalty, and achieve membership success.

Would you like to learn more about membership or Marketing General Incorporated? Email Tony at [tony@marketinggeneral.com](mailto:tony@marketinggeneral.com).



### Meet Tony

Tony Rossell is Senior Vice President at Marketing General Incorporated and directs the annual Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report. His book *Membership Recruitment: How to Grow Recurring Revenue, Reach New Markets, and Advance Your Mission*, available on Amazon, provides additional membership guidance.