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Membership renewal and engagement strategies

Membership renewal

The membership renewal process begins as soon as a member joins. Trust us, first impressions last, so it's crucial to engage your members upfront.

When a new member joins your organization, send them a warm welcome email. This step might seem obvious, but you'd be surprised at how many associations get it wrong. Don't just send new members a standard email welcoming them to your organization. Personalize it! Or better yet, have someone give them a call. New members like to be acknowledged, and they'll appreciate the extra effort. After a new member joins your organization, you'll want to keep them engaged along the way.

According to Marketing General Incorporated's (MGI) 2014 Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report, associations that start their renewal efforts three or more months prior to expiration are significantly more likely to have an 80 percent or higher renewal rate. That alone is reason enough to start your renewal efforts early.

But what exactly should you be doing in those 3+ months leading up to expiration? Well, according to MGI, email marketing, direct mail, and staff phone calls generate more membership renewals than any other marketing channels. So if you're looking to boost your membership renewal rates (and who isn't?), consider launching an email marketing campaign one to three months prior to membership expiration. If you're using an association management system (AMS), this process is easy. All you have to do is log in to the system once and create a series of reminder emails. Then, whenever a member gets close to expiration, the AMS will automatically send those emails out for you, without you having to do any extra work. Not to mention, an AMS can integrate with your organization's database, allowing you to personalize your email reminders. Names, dates, prices, etc. You name it, an AMS can pull it. And remember – the more personalized your email is, the more likely your members are to read it.

Below is an example of a personalized dues reminder email:

##First Name##,

We would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your support over the past twelve months. We value all contributions to [Association Name], and memberships make up the lifeblood of our organization. Your involvement is extremely important to us and very much appreciated. We know people have busy lives, so we just wanted to take this opportunity to remind you that your membership with [Association Name] will expire on ##Expiration Date##.

If you're still deciding whether or not to renew, or just haven't gotten around to it yet, please let us remind you of what you will be missing if you do not renew:

[List of Membership Benefits]

We hope that you will take the time to renew your membership and remain part of our community. It couldn't be easier - just click here to renew.



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Your financial contributions truly are vital to our existence, but so is your membership - just knowing that you support what we are doing keeps us going. Please renew by clicking here, or take a moment to let us know why you have chosen not to renew. We really want to know so that we can be better.

Kind regards,

[Sender's Name]

So when and how often should you be sending these emails out? Well, it all depends on your organization, but typically three months out, one month out, and one week out are pretty good time frames.

As your members get closer to expiration, you'll want to send them an automated invoice for dues payment. Again, you can do this with the help of an AMS. All you have to do is log in to the system once and create an invoice template. Then, whenever a member gets close to expiration, the AMS will automatically send that invoice out for you. And just like your reminder emails, an AMS can personalize your invoices with names, dates, prices, etc.

Quick note: When sending out automated invoices, be sure to include suggested PAC or foundation amounts, as well as any add-ons, such as a journal subscription. This is a great way for your organization to generate non-dues revenue without your members having to complete any extra steps.

The more complicated your renewal process, the less likely members are to complete it. Make it easy on your members by allowing for one-click renewals via email, your website, or member profiles. If you're using an AMS, you can pre-populate online renewal fields with information from the year before, making it even easier for members to complete all of the forms they need. MemberClicks is a good example of this. Our platform allows for one-click renewals, so all your members have to do is enter their payment information and go.

Now when it comes to membership renewals, it's important to consider one-time payments versus automated payments. When we talk about automated payments, we're talking about routine payments that are made every year from a bank to your organization. As with anything, there are pros and cons to each, so consider both options carefully. Think about your price point and your member demographic. Take credit card fees into consideration as well. Credit card fees will likely eat into monthly installment plans, so if you do decide to take the automated payment route, it's better to do it on a yearly basis.

If you're already offering automated payments, take a look at how many members are actually signing up and what the installment plans are costing your association. If you're interested in offering an automated payment option, try testing it out using an AMS.

Members don't pay dues for a variety of reasons, but sometimes it's because they're just plain busy. So before you deny them their benefits altogether, consider offering a grace period of some sort. According to MGI's 2014 Marketing Benchmark Report, the most common grace period for associations is two to three months. This time frame is a fairly good balance between trying to bring back graced members and ensuring paying members aren't being short-changed.

In order for grace periods to be effective, it's important to remain in contact with your graced members. Consider using an AMS to send out automated emails reminding your members that they need to renew. Or better yet, try creating customized messages for your graced members and displaying them on their profiles and



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throughout their online communities. That way, whenever users interact with your site, they'll be reminded that they need to renew.

If you need help putting together an automated email reminder for graced members, below is an example:

##First Name##,

This is a reminder that your membership with [Association Name], expired on ##[Expiration Date]##, and you are now within your membership grace period. If you are still deciding whether to renew, or just haven't gotten around to it yet, please let us remind you of what you will be missing if you do not renew:

[List of Membership Benefits]

We hope that you will take the time to renew your membership and remain part of our community. It couldn't be easier - just click here to renew.

Your financial contributions truly are vital to our existence, but so is your membership - just knowing that you support what we are doing keeps us going. Please renew by clicking here, or take a moment to let us know why you have chosen not to renew. We really want to know so that we can be better.

Kind regards,

[Sender's Name]

Remember, at some point you'll need to decide if and when your graced members should be treated as prospects. When this time comes, you should stop sending them reminder emails and consider sending them more recruitment-focused emails instead. If your members don't renew, they'll eventually become lapsed. But if and when that happens, don't give up hope. There are still several things you can do to try and engage them again.

For example, you should:

- Continue to send them information about your organization's events
- Continue to send them your organization's newsletter
- Send them promotional content highlighting member benefits
- Offer them a special discount to rejoin.

By continuing to engage with your lapsed members, you're increasing the likelihood that they'll one day rejoin.

Tips for collecting membership dues

1. Start Early

You know just as well as we do that it often takes a few emails to get people to complete a certain action - and that includes paying for membership dues. That said, the earlier you can start reminding people to pay their dues, the better.

How early should you start? Well, three months prior to expiration is a pretty good timeframe. In fact, according to Marketing General Incorporated's 2016 Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report, three months prior to expiration is the most popular time to begin membership renewal efforts - more than 40 percent of associations start then!



2. Personalize Your Reminders

The chances of someone reading your email are MUCH better if the email is addressed *to* them. Personalized intros help eliminate the notion of spam.

3. Allow Your Members to Pay Online

This day in age, convenience is K-E-Y. Period. The easier it is for people to pay their membership dues, the more likely they are to do so. And what's the easiest way for people to pay? Online!

Tip: When sending out your reminder emails, be sure to include a link directing your members *exactly* where to pay. If you take them to the bank, they're more likely to make a deposit - know what we mean?

4. Be Lenient

Your members are busy, busy, busy, and sometimes, the thought of renewing their membership simply slips their mind. But don't punish them for that. In fact, it's better for everyone (both you and your members) if you offer a grace period of some sort. Members are more likely to renew in the grace period than they are *after* they've lapsed completely. (Note: Two to three months is the standard here.)

Membership engagement

Imagine this: Your membership committee has put together an amazing lineup of activities and events. They're crowd pleasers, a good mix of educational and social, and easily accessible by members and guests. Best of all, people are actually showing up! But will they continue showing up over time? Only one word ensures they will: *engagement*. There are multiple ways to engage your members, and we're here to break them down and help you determine which ones might be a good fit for your association.

Website – Your website is the mothership of online member engagement. This is where members go for information, event registration, and ultimately, membership value. But it takes more than just having a website to encourage member engagement. A little extra TLC is needed. Specifically: Interactive design – Your website should be easily searchable with clean lines of information. And with more and more people accessing the internet via tablets and mobile devices, it's best to utilize responsive templates that are favorable to both desktop and mobile users.

Fresh Content – The primary goal for any membership website is to get members to the site and keep them coming back for more. This means offering fresh, up-to-date content that your members will find valuable. Not sure where to begin? Try incorporating a blog on your site or adding an image gallery to keep pages active.

Built-in Forms – Using forms throughout your website is a great way to collect important information about your members. For example, if you have valuable content on your site, such as fact sheets or white papers, you can require visitors to answer a few pre-determined questions in order to receive those materials. If you don't have much content to offer, consider posting a survey on your site to collect similar information. The more information you have, the more you can tailor your website to your members' wants and needs.

Blog – It goes without saying that blogs are a vital component of member engagement. Not only do they display your association's personality, but they also encourage members to revisit your site on a regular basis.

Social Communities – These are more great ways to encourage membership engagement. It's important to note that social communities do not try to compete with traditional social media like Facebook and Twitter, but



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rather they often offer a members-only forum for discussions, pictures, and sharing. Some common components of social communities include:

Member Profiles – Just like traditional social media, social communities allow members to create personalized profiles with pictures and bios.

Messaging Capabilities – In the spirit of networking, social communities typically allow for one-on-one messaging between members.

Online Forums – Think of online forums as a members-only discussion page. Again, these allow for members to easily communicate and share information with each other.

In order to get your social community up and running, consider selecting a few people from within your organization to act as Engagement Ambassadors. These individuals should post several times per day within your social community and seed various questions to get members talking. Using Engagement Ambassadors to populate your social community will create a lively vibe to entice hesitant members.

Social Media Engagement – This is all about meeting members where they already are. If you find that most of your members are on Twitter, meet them there! Create an association hashtag and encourage members to tweet during meetings or events. If you find that most of your members are on Facebook, start a group! Share pictures or post regular conversation starters. There's no rule for what social media outlets you have to use, so do what makes sense for your organization. That being said, while there aren't any specific instructions for what social media outlets to use, there are a few best practices to consider when managing social media:

80/20 Rule – To keep members engaged, it's best to maintain an 80/20 split of posts (80 percent information sharing, 20 percent promotion). If you focus too much on yourself, members will begin to tune you out. However, if you concentrate on what your audience is really interested in, you'll be able to maintain a consistent and engaging online social media presence.

Designate an Admin – In order to effectively engage members, it's best to dedicate at least one person to check in often. This will ensure that messages are returned and conversations remain fluid.

Email Marketing – This is extremely popular with associations and, if done right, can be your secret weapon to online member engagement. For small staff associations, there are two primary ways to capitalize on email communications:

Newsletters – Newsletters are a great way to build relationships and maintain regular contact with your members. They're also a great way to increase awareness and communicate all of the cool happenings within your association.

Automated Member Renewal Notices – Members disengage with associations for a variety of reasons, but sometimes it's simply because they forget to pay their dues. To prevent this from happening, try sending out automated member renewal notices when members get close to expiration. This is especially easy to do with the help of an association management system.

Remember, no matter what types of emails you're sending out, make sure they're sent in moderation. If members receive 10 emails a week from you, they'll start to tune you out and miss important information.



Tips for maximizing your membership renewals

Often, you'll hear association professionals and their boards sharing stories of frustration regarding membership renewal rates. Does any of this sound familiar to you?

- *"We have a revolving door of members. New members in = members out."*
- *"Members try us out, but they just don't stay."*
- *"We put so much time and effort into recruiting new members that we pay less attention to our current members."*

Studies show that **it is less costly to keep the members you have than to bring new members in**. So here are six tips to refocus your energy around keeping the members you have and getting the renewal rate you've been dreaming of.

Know your Value Proposition

If you don't know or can't clearly articulate the problem you solve or the need you fulfill for your members, don't bother reading the rest of these tips. *You need to get clarity on this first.*

Onboard New Members to Get Their Buy-In

Develop a timeline of touch points that your association will have with new members. From the point of application throughout the first year of membership, be sure that your new members feel connected to your association through multiple modes of contact. From new member welcome emails and phone calls to mentoring programs and orientation webinars or videos, you want to create a connection with members and help them maximize all that your association can offer them.

Establish a Renewal Process Designed for Success

I've heard associations say they don't mail renewal notices anymore because it's too costly. I would challenge them to look at how much more costly it will be when they send out an email that never reaches that member's inbox and the member never renews. Don't be penny wise and pound foolish. **Research shows that paper mailings are still the number one method of success for soliciting membership renewals.** A member won't renew if they aren't asked. Utilize a variety of communication methods including mailings, personal e-mail, e-blasts and phone calls and map out when and how these communications will be sent.

Think of your Renewal Communication as a Marketing Campaign

Take a marketing approach to your renewals communication. Our members are busy people just like us - focusing on their businesses, professional development and personal lives. The association and its benefits are not always top of mind to members, so remind them at every opportunity. When they get that renewal dues invoice, they have a choice to make. Help them make that choice by clearly and succinctly reminding them what the return on investment is for their membership. And, whenever possible, quantify that ROI.

Make it Easy for Your Members to Pay Their Renewal Dues

When is the last time you looked at the renewal process from the member's point of view? How many steps do they have to take in order to renew? Is it difficult for them to log in, upload Continuing Education Credits, pay their dues and get a receipt? Do you give them the opportunity to use a variety of payment methods or payment plans? Does your staff provide top notch customer support and are they accessible to help your members renew over the phone? Make time to walk through the renewal process from beginning to end to experience it as your members do so you can head off points of frustration and inefficiency. Automate as much of the process as you can for a smooth member experience. A cumbersome process, inept database or difficult to navigate association website can be just enough to make that member choose not to renew. And don't forget that as association



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professionals we are in the people business. Accessibility of friendly staff to answer questions and assist members is a must.

Stick to Renewal Deadlines

It's likely that your association bylaws or policies & procedures outline requirements for membership including time frame for renewals and procedures for handling non-renewed members. If you don't...you should. Don't be afraid to follow these guidelines and terminate members for non-renewal in a timely manner in accordance with your policies & procedures. As association professionals, we sometimes are afraid to put parameters and timeframes on renewals for fear that we won't reach our target renewal rates.

Associations might allow non-renewing members to continue receiving member benefits well after the renewal deadline, or may never terminate those non-renewed members at all. This is a mistake. When you do this, you devalue the benefits of membership in your association and send a message that renewal is not a priority. And let's face it, without a clear deadline for renewing that is actually enforced, we take away any sense of urgency on the part of the member to renew. Enforce your policies and terminate non-renewed in a timely manner.