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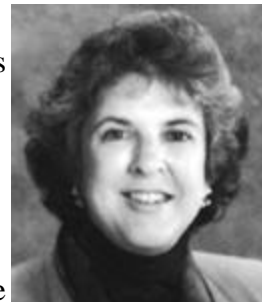
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# Unlocking Your Association's Global Potential Through International Market Research, Part I

By Arlene Farber Sirkin  
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The key to unlocking your association's international potential ultimately depends on your knowledge about potential markets abroad. Whether your goal is to increase membership or sales of products and services, gain industry intelligence or information that may be helpful to U.S. members, or enhance the brand name of your association, research provides you with the facts you need.



Part one of this two-part article will focus on getting the most out of what you already have done--research at your fingertips through internal resources.

The place to start in market research is where you already have a foothold. Find out how many of your members are international and track and trend this figure. Depending on your database, track information from the time international members apply, making sure different departments are aware of your association's global priorities.

Here are some key questions to ask concerning your current and prospective international members.

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**1. Where are they located? Where is the highest density of involvement?** The goal is to analyze the existing information so that you know how international members use key programs you offer, such as certification. Through internal analysis, for example, one organization found that up to 25 percent of its attendees in one topic area were from abroad.

Another aspect of segmentation is by rank or title. In some countries, only higher-ups are allowed to join international professional societies, a factor that could limit your initial outreach. Also, be aware that your international counterparts may not have chapters, so the density of participation in your association's events by people from a particular country or region may take time to develop.

**2. What products and services are they buying?** In this area in particular, having a fact base to determine what the value of your products and services is to current or prospective international members is of critical importance. I recommend a product versus benefit grid, by country or region, to analyze what benefits you are offering your international members.

For example, insurance programs (which may not be available overseas), U.S. salary surveys, or lobbying, which could be a big chunk of your services, may rank low as items of interest for international members. This type of information leads some organizations to consider reducing their fees for international members or adding benefits for international members.

Logistics, as well, can make participation by people in other countries problematic. For example, if you are hosting a live audio event, think about how accessible it is from the perspective of someone living 13 time zones away. Find out if your international members or prospective members consider your organization too U.S.-focused and, if so, what you can do to change this.

**3. Why are they joining your association, dropping out, or rejecting membership?** In many cases, it is not the big value items but the little things that matter, such as getting cash converted in certain countries where you can't pay by credit card.

One of my favorite stories is about an association that had only a 30 percent retention rate with its international members. We asked the association to go back five years to track operationally how it handled these members. As it turns out, this organization had an internal glitch: The only information

their international members were getting was their dues invoice, because that was the only item the association was sending out by first-class mail. Only first-class mail had the fourth line printed--the country code. Clearly, this was an administrative glitch that was easily solvable, but it had been undetected for years.

There might be some very basic economic reasons why people in other countries do not join your association or drop their memberships, such as unfavorable exchange rates against the dollar in Canada or Asia. In one case, 80 percent of an organization's members are in Asia. Even though there had been no dues increase in five years, devaluation of currencies in that part of the world had led to the real cost of the dues going through the roof.

Try to evaluate the cost (of membership or services) relative to salary. Don't assume, for example, that certain occupations, such as doctors, have the same salary in real dollar terms as their U.S. counterparts. Two Web resources for learning more about currency exchanges are [Oanda.com](http://Oanda.com) and the [Interactive Currency Table](#).

On the other hand, less tangible reasons may influence the thinking of your international counterparts. For example, too much staff turnover in your international contact position or lack of leadership positions on your board for non-U.S. members may mean that some prospective members overseas are receiving mixed signals from your global outreach efforts.

### **Potential growth areas**

Many associations have found that there is great potential for international growth in sales, products, and services, which is driven, in some cases, by a need to look for new prospects due to downsizing and consolidation in various industries. As you begin to define and refine your organizational and research goals, look, first and foremost, at fully tapping into internal research sources and setting up a system to track future data to give you the facts that will help you succeed in the global arena.

*Arlene Farber Sirkin, president of Washington Resource Consulting Group, Inc., Bethesda, Maryland, is a member of the International Section. Copyright 2000 Arlene Farber Sirkin. All rights reserved.*

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