

Members *for* Keeps

Get serious about member retention. Here's how.

BY ARLENE FARBER SIRKIN AND MICHAEL P. McDERMOTT

What is membership retention? Some consider it a synonym for the annual invoicing of membership dues. Others think of it as the secondary part of recruitment and retention, where recruitment often gets the lion's share of resources.

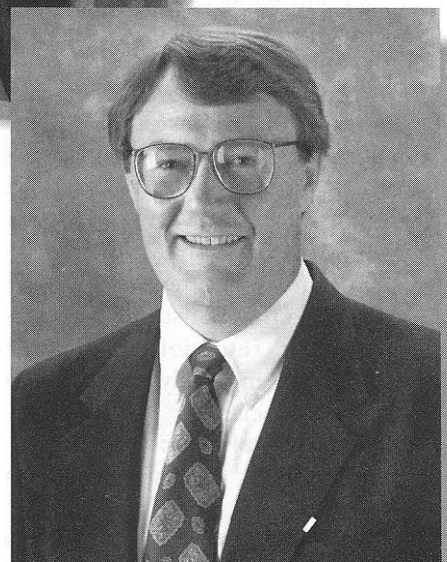
In fact, successful retention goes far beyond these functions. Research we conducted on behalf of the ASAE Foundation points to membership retention as a strategic process that is implemented daily. In that context, membership retention ties together all the elements of an association's strategic and operating plans, and is essential to overall success.

To ensure that your association is implementing membership retention as a strategic process, you can conduct a strategic retention audit. This audit provides a systematic analysis of your association from the membership's perspective. Rather than apply a model from the corporate world, the audit is based on five concepts of strategic membership retention identified through our research in associations:

1. Strategic retention is a process that is implemented daily throughout every level of the organization.
2. Leadership by the chief executive officer, supported by the staff and volunteers, is critical to successful implementation of a strategic retention process.
3. Any communication between an association staffer or volunteer and a member influences the member's retention decision.
4. The value of a member is seen across an entire membership lifetime and includes the contribution of time as well as income and the expenditure of money, both dues and nondues.
5. The association must "deliver the goods"-fulfill a member's expectation-every day and at every opportunity



Retention affects every aspect of an association's operation, submit Arlene Farber Sirkin and Michael P. McDermott.



Asking the tough questions

The results of the strategic retention audit should not be used to develop a separate retention plan. Rather, the results will point to ways in which you can integrate retention into your association's existing strategic plan and the operational plans of each functional area. Retention planning is "strategic" because it affects every aspect of an association's operation.

You can conduct the audit internally or externally. Each approach has its benefits and drawbacks. Doing the audit internally, for example, means it's handled by staff, who already have a detailed knowledge of association operations. The risk is that bias may creep in. The in-house approach is also cheaper in the short run, although you are directing staff time away from your association's primary activities. If you do the audit externally, the consultant will probably have to learn about your association, but can eliminate the bias. The cost is primarily in dollars, rather than staff time. With either option, conducting a strategic retention audit represents an investment of both time and money in the future of your association.

The audit first looks at general issues that affect your association and, in particular, your members' relationship to it. The audit next focuses on core issues such as retention patterns, then moves to specific areas including association communication, membership category structures, products and services, and planning.

Following are samples of the 100-plus questions we developed from our research that constitute an effective strategic retention audit. The questions systematically address each area of an association.

1. Environmental scan:

- What business is your association in?
- Who spearheads your association's strategic retention planning?

HIGHLIGHTS

- THE PROCESS of member retention involves more than simply sending an annual dues invoice.
- THE RESULTS of a strategic retention audit will help you identify ways to integrate retention into daily operations, which is a must-do.
- THE AUDIT asks questions about every area of your association, recognizing that every one of them affects retention efforts.

2. Core issues:

- Is retention an integrated, associationwide responsibility?
- How do you ensure that your association is recruiting for keeps and not only for one year?
- What is the average lifetime value of a member? (Include lifetime income, cost, and noneconomic con-

tributions such as volunteer time and recruiting.)

3. Numbers, trends, and issues:

- Does your association include the key organizations or individuals in your industry, profession, or cause? If not, why?
- Do segments of your membership have different retention rates than the association as a whole? Why?
- Who pays your members' dues? Is this changing?

4. Member satisfaction and service:

- How does your association identify member expectations?
- How do staff members and volunteers deal with dissatisfied customers? Do you offer a money-back guarantee, or have service standards?
- Are staff and volunteers trained in member satisfaction techniques? Is member feedback shared with staff and volunteers?

5. Products and services:

- Which association products and services do you bundle into the basic membership? When did you last analyze the package? How does your association evaluate how much members value these products?
- How have your members' needs changed during the past year?
- How have you modified existing products and developed new products to meet these needs?

6. Research:

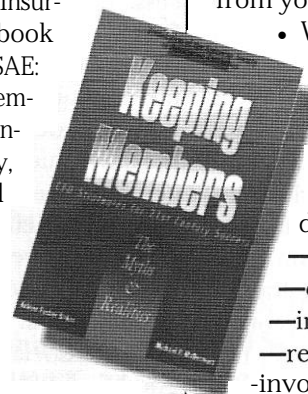
- What kind of retention research has your association conducted in the past year?
- What are some of the key findings from your most recent research?
 - What benefits do your members value most? How do you know?

7. Communication:

- Evaluate how well your communication program does the following:
 - identify needs
 - establish contact
 - inform
 - respond
 - involve members
- How does your association coordinate communication with your

For More Information . . .

This article is adapted from *Keeping Members: The Myths & Realities* an ASAE Foundation publication underwritten by Seabury & Smith, Insurance Brokers. The book is available from ASAE: \$22.95 for ASAE members, \$27.95 for non-members. For a copy, contact ASAE and request catalog item AMR213551. Telephone: (202) 626-2748. Fax: (202) 408-9634. Internet e-mail: books@asae.asaenet.org.



membership (for example, mailings from different departments)?

8. Segmentation and targeting:

- What member categories, segments, or special populations does your association include? How do you meet the needs of these subgroups?
- Which segments represent the greatest retention risks? How do you know?

9. New and second-year members:


- How does your association encourage recruiting for retention rather than for one year?
- Do you track first-year retention rates based on how members were recruited? Which method is the most effective for retention?
- What is the retention rate of your association's first-year members? Second-year members? How do these rates compare to your average retention rate for the association overall?

10. Responsibilities:

- If your association is multilevel, how do you enhance the partnership among levels?
- How does the CEO set the tone for the retention effort?
- Does staff understand what business your members are in?

11. Retention:

- How do you integrate retention efforts and initiatives into your operational planning?
- How do you ensure that all staff and volunteer leaders understand the importance of retention to the future of your association?

Membership retention, properly evaluated, is a key indicator of how well your association is responding to the changes in the world that affect your members. By conducting a strategic retention audit, you'll see how your association can improve its handling of a member's most important decision: whether or not to renew. 

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