

Want to Know What Your Association Means to Your Members? Ask Them.

Marketing Insights, May 2010

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Making an emotional connection with your members can lead to some surprising rewards. Here's a simple technique that can lead to some big changes in how you reach out to your membership.

We sometimes overlook one of the greatest benefits of being an association marketer: we know who our customer is. There can be no doubts; they're right there in our database. We have the names of thousands of people who are our target market. In the past few years I have found a unique way to tap into this golden resource: I asked them questions.

This is by no means groundbreaking. But in a world where we are tracking our members' tweets to learn what they want, sometimes it can all come back to the simplicity of a pure conversation. So in preparation for starting two new campaigns, my directors suggested that I contact a few of the members.

But what to ask them? What could benefit me more than the multiple years of membership survey data? What's more insightful than the feedback from the annual meeting? Turns out, there's a lot.

I started with the basics. My directors recommended a few members to contact, making sure to cover many different areas of the association—academia, industry, and government; professional, early career, and student; individuals from around the world. I set up phone interviews that lasted about 20 minutes. And for my 20-minute investment, I got a lot of return.

Some of the questions were pretty easy: "Why did you join? Why do you stay a member?" As I asked these questions of many different people, I was surprised and delighted to get just as many different answers.

When I went a little more in-depth—"What one benefit is most relevant to you?"—the answers weren't necessarily what I expected based on membership survey results. I tried to pry a little more and get the right words that would help me paint a picture of what the association truly means: "What emotion do you feel when you think of the association?" The answers there were truly powerful.

I asked, "What about being a member makes you most proud?" Some of those answers moved me deeply (and sure made me proud to be a small part of the association). Many interviews turned into good conversations, and I learned about members' lives, their educations, their careers, their aspirations, and more. I made some friends and important contacts.

These types of interviews are easy enough to do. Perform them over the phone or during the annual meeting. Take diligent notes, type up the transcripts, and share them with other important parties on the project, such as directors and graphic designers. Keep in mind though, that an easy way to fail here would be to take that information, put it in a file along with all your other due diligence market research, and write what you've always written. The only way this information, this new understanding of what it means to be a member, will be helpful to your marketing is if you use it.

I had done these interviews before even choosing my direction, so I could base my concept on their words. After the concept was in place, I took all these beautiful, emotional words, stuck them on a giant poster-sized post-it, and hung it in my office. Every day I looked at those words. They resonated in my head. By the time I started typing out the body copy for the brochure, they were ingrained. When I got

stuck writing copy, I would peer over and take a look. What's more powerful than the popular association buzzword *networking*? What's another way to say *awards*, and what do honors like that truly mean to the members? What's no longer a feature but a benefit? And what's not necessarily a physical benefit but an intangible one that can make your association preferred? The answers were all there.

As a result, we have brochures and campaigns that contrast past efforts. We have strong emotional appeals. In response to the conversations I had with members, we have started to have a little fun with our campaigns, which has frankly made my job a little more fun. And of greatest importance to me, my understanding of the membership and my connection with them has increased tremendously. It's a resource I never stop using; I've been here five years, and I still have the giant poster-sized post-it hanging in my cube.

The answers truly are all there. And the right people to ask are sitting on your committees, boards, and right in your database. I would highly recommend you ask the questions.

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