

Know thy audience

Why one size doesn't fit all when it comes to membership campaigns.

Associations come in all shapes and sizes. A membership campaign that works for one will not necessarily be the right fit for another.

When developing your association's campaign, there are several factors that need to be considered. Belinda Moore of Strategic Membership Solutions (SMS) breaks membership campaigns down by type and approach.

1. The size of your potential market

Small prospective member groups, such as those whose total proposed membership numbers less than 500, need a highly targeted, personalised campaign that is supported with comprehensive data on each potential member.

When it comes to growth, starting bigger isn't always better, as associations of this size can leverage their relative flexibility. What they have, essentially, is the benefit of new beginnings. In other words, they can take advantage of the opportunity to cultivate a membership community from the very start of the sales process and make their pitches more personalised.

Large associations, on the other hand, need to think differently. As the number of prospective members increases, so too does the need to implement segmented, leveraged campaigns, prioritising certain segments over others. For high-value members, it is best to use a personalised sales approach similar to that of smaller associations. For lower priority targets this isn't as crucial. So consider options like integrated email, direct mail, and telemarketing programs, supported by other media where appropriate.

2. Individual vs organisational members

For individual members, the person making the buying decision is often the one who will be using the service, which makes the membership sale more straightforward. Although when an employer is paying on behalf of staff it does bring in an additional consideration around communication.

Marketing to an organisational membership can be a lot more complicated. Indeed, in some cases, the people using the membership services may not even be in the same country as the decision-maker.

Your membership marketing campaign needs to consider the different individuals and stakeholders who will impact the purchasing process. These stakeholders could be top-level decision-makers, or junior staff members.

Depending on their seniority, as well as other factors, you will have to tailor your message accordingly.

For both recruitment and retention purposes, penetration into organisational members is critical. Once you understand their motivations and what will influence the membership decision-making process, communications should be targeted to ensure that both the content and delivery methods will inspire the right kind of action from these different stakeholders.

3. Type of Prospective Membership Campaigns

Broadly speaking there are three different types of membership campaigns that can be incorporated into your annual membership strategy:

Past Member Campaigns

Getting past members to return to the fold can be one of the most cost-effective campaigns, especially when it's well targeted. To do this, it's important to understand that past members have a wide range of experiences of your association, and any number of reasons behind why they initially dropped their membership.

Did they become upset over a single issue, or was it a slow decision? Was the decision to let it lapse purposeful or was it just due to a lack of action, like forgetting to renew? Answering these questions will go a long way to making your campaign effective. Remember, these people once found membership valuable – so you need to reactivate that interest.

Because past member campaigns are targeted at past members, the messaging can be simple. Many will renew if just provided the opportunity. So your campaign may consist of nothing but sending all those who haven't extended their membership in the past two years a renewal offer (obviously, you should not include those who have expressly asked to be removed from the database).

Past members already know a lot about your association, so the messaging can usually be simpler. Instead of telling them about the organisation, you can focus on what has changed since they've been a member. You can also use data from previous engagements to inform the campaign. Consider this. When AuSAE (The Australasian Society of Association Executives) sent a renewal notice to all past

members over a three-year period, 17 percent re-joined after this gentle prompt. Simple, yet effective.

Never Member Campaigns

These campaigns are the most difficult, because there is often no prior relationship with the association to draw interest from. There are two types of never member campaigns that each require a unique strategy: those who have had prior contact with the association, such as past event delegates or someone who has purchased your products and services; and those who have no previous experience at all. The former are your best prospects, and should be

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considered high-value members. The latter are lower-priority members due to their lack of awareness and will likely be a more complex sale. Before you can begin to promote membership, you need to raise awareness of the need for the association among this group. An integrated campaign is required that combines different media to work the prospect through the journey to acquiring membership: raise awareness – pique interest – create desire – inspire action.

A professional association created a campaign targeted at past event delegates, who hadn't ever become a member, but attended events regularly. The campaign involved showing this group how much they would have saved if they acquired membership. Those who spent far more on attending events than they would have on membership fees were targeted, and the resulting campaign was very successful.

Member-Get-Member Campaigns

It's often said that the best kind of advertising you can get is word-of-mouth. There can be nothing more effective – and rewarding – than having a membership base that actively engages with their friends and fellows regarding the benefits of their membership. That being said, many member-get-member campaigns fail due to poor development, poor execution or both. But since referral is the number one mechanism for driving new members, it presents a rewarding opportunity for associations to strengthen their numbers. To be effective, these campaigns must:

- be long term and supported by a communications campaign;
- be segmented and engage each segment; and
- use an incentive that inspires the target segment, whether this be a product, discount or appreciation.

There are more than a few great examples of member-get-member campaigns. For instance, the Australian Medical Association Queensland (AMA Queensland) took an approach where all referring members received a discount on their rate, and by using this extrinsic reward they achieved a highly successful outcome.

“It did take a while for people to respond to the offer, at least six months from when I started,” says Leigh Holohan, membership manager at AMA Queensland. “Fast forward, and over the last 12 months 31.5 percent of our new members are referred.”

POINTS TO PONDER

Are your membership campaigns effectively segmented and targeted?

Do they take the size of your association and prospective member type into account?

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