

Baby, Come Back! How to Win Back Lapsed Members and Why You Should

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Learn common reasons why members leave their associations and creative strategies to pull them back in for the long term.

When a member leaves, it doesn't mean goodbye forever. Members who have walked away may be the easiest ones to get back. Most organizations turn to recruiting new members to fill gaps in enrollment, but since they don't already know you, this group is harder to convert. You have much convincing to do before they're ready to sign on.

Meanwhile, for every four or so new members you get, you lose one existing member who doesn't renew. Let's put it this way—if your retention rate is 75 percent, you need to replace a quarter of your membership with new members every year before you see any growth.

If you want to boost enrollment, your organization's best bet is improving retention. Engaging new members immediately when they join is the key to cultivating an engaged base that renews without a second thought.

Despite your best efforts, some members are bound to leave. The keys to getting them back are how long you offer them opportunities to renew and how well you understand their needs.

It's Not You; It's Me

Ask yourself why members leave. The odds are that it's not personal. Research reveals that the top reason for nonrenewal is usually "I didn't see the value in membership" (followed by "I just forgot to renew.") Lapsed members aren't disgruntled. They're just disinterested—for now.

As often as not, losing a member is not about you. Maybe membership with your organization is a classic case of "right person, wrong time." The best examples of this are recent graduates and young professionals; while they might not need their association right away, they frequently rejoin seven to 10 years later when it makes sense for their career.

Playing the Long Game

But you've already asked, and they said no, right? On average, we've found that the most successful organizations start renewal campaigns 3.9 months before the membership in question expires. Throughout that period, they invite that member to renew 7.1 times.

Even after being offered every opportunity to renew, some members still don't. Why bother to keep trying? Because these same successful organizations *keep asking* for over a year after a member lapses, sending 5.8 more invitations to rejoin. And it works.

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Nonmembers who know you, like lapsed members, are far more likely to respond to your invitations than anyone else. In one of our recent tests, nonmembers who had previously engaged with the organization in any way were six times more likely to respond than those who never had.

Lapsed members know you. At one point, they saw the value in membership, whether they experienced it or not. With lapsed members, you don't to make any introductions. You just need to find the right way to make the ask.

You Know Each Other

This brings us to the next point: You know them, too. If you track member data (and if you don't, you should), you have information about what your lapsed members are interested in. What did they open, download, or attend as members? That information is the key to

bringing them back. Time and again, tests show that the most effective membership messaging is segmented by *interest*. Engage with members on things they care about, and they'll respond.

This is especially true for lapsed members who already know you and need a reminder of the unique value you have to offer them. For example, 75 percent of previous American Lung Association (ALA) donors had not engaged in over year. Initially, ALA thought donors cared about over 30 things. Upon close inspection, they found that their base was focused on three major areas: lung health, clean air, and smoking cessation.

By tailoring their messaging to these three interests, ALA immediately increased email engagement by 50 percent. Although many of their donors had lapsed for over two years, ALA reactivated 7 percent of their file in one year. In two years, they reactivated 300,000 donors and grew their active file by 50 percent.

By understanding what individual members care about and tailoring your messaging accordingly, this massive growth is within reach for your organization.

The Way Forward

But will they stay this time? If you focus on what your members care about, your chances of creating a loyal base that renews repeatedly are strong.

If your association is like most, your audience is not infinite. Only so many people can join, many of whom are already members. Many have never been. In between sit people who were once members but are no more. Treating the middle ground like your best prospects is a winning formula for growth.

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