

4 Benefits Of A Public Forum On Your Association Chapter Website (And Ideas For Sustaining One!)



You have regular association chapter meetings and events, and you send emails and post on social media. You're doing your part to engage, but that still leaves a fair amount of time you're not actively interacting with your association chapter stakeholders – members, guests, sponsors, vendors, etc.



Online association chapter forums are a great way to enhance and strengthen your chapter community during those “off” times. By facilitating discussion topics related to your chapter, your members and your industry, and by allowing people to respond at times best for them, you can increase loyalty, retention and growth.

What is an association chapter forum?

A forum is an online community where like-minded people share thoughts, content, questions, ideas and more. Your association chapter participants are probably already in online forums, like work-related groups on LinkedIn and neighborhood groups on NextDoor; you can use that same concept in your chapter through your website.

Visitors to an online forum participate by:

1. Posting topics
2. Answering questions



3. Discussing important issues
4. Providing feedback
5. And more.

Four great reasons to start an online association chapter forum

With an active public online forum on your association chapter website, you can give people connections that matter, a place to have an impact and a place they return to regularly. In addition to community building, having an online forum on your association chapter website can:

1. **Boost engagement.** Online forums rely on conversations, which makes them a great way to improve connection to your association chapter website and engagement with your chapter. You can use forum threads to get answers to questions, link to relevant web content, promote chapter events, build your email list, etc.
2. **Develop new ideas.** Forums are a great way to collect information from those you might not connect with otherwise and to crowdsource new ideas. Start an online discussion around topics in your industry and use what you learn to make the right changes for your chapter and your membership. Online forums can also be a great place to discover meeting topics more likely to have higher participation.
3. **Create loyalty and drive referrals.** Those who feel connected to your association chapter and love what you do for them will talk about it, both in your online chapter forum and outside it. And those with this level of loyalty are more likely to refer like-minded people to your organization.
4. **Improve SEO and boost traffic.** If you've set up your online forum correctly and maintain it by continually adding fresh content, they'll include the keywords your audience searches on. This can help improve your search engine rankings and drive additional traffic to your website.

Public forums versus private ones

Previously we've discussed the benefits of association chapter members-only forums, communities where only your members can access content and interact with other members. We're not suggesting replacing members-only forums with public ones. The two work well together, with public forums being those everyone can access and private ones that provide additional membership value.

Cover different topics on the two and use your private forums to highlight another benefit of membership in your association chapter – access to content (and a safe space) that's just for members.



Tips for growing your public chapter forum

There's nothing more discouraging than launching an online association chapter forum...and crickets. If you want your forum to meet the goals you set for it, you need set it up for success and continue to cultivate it. Here are a few ideas for getting people to visit your forum, stick around and bring others with them.

Actively invite people to participate. Your board members have a lot of connections. Have them explore their social media profiles and ask colleagues and connections to visit the forum and get involved. You can also ask the same of members (see below about incentives), and provide everyone talking points to tell the right story, including:

- what it is
- how it works
- the benefits of regular participation.

Get volunteers to start threads and monitor posts. You know how hard it is to get volunteers. But to make your association chapter forum successful, you need people to check on it throughout the day, asking and answering questions, deleting spam, and posting engaging content that encourages people to post.

A chapter forum is a great micro-volunteering opportunity. It's easy to split the responsibilities so people are responsible for smaller tasks, like managing one post or a group of posts, developing discussion topics, etc.

Provide the content people want to read and interact with. You need the engaging content they want to see and respond to. Survey your audience and learn what's important to them, whether advocacy, education, current events or something completely different you may not be aware of. Then, create discussions (and monitor) threads around some of those topics.

Offer incentives. When you're trying to get more people engaged with your association online discussion threads, incentives can help. Offer things like free event attendance, free chapter swag, gift cards, Member of the Month posts, etc., for people who posts a certain number of times in a week, or those who refer a certain number of people to the forum.



Association chapter online forums can help members and those you want to better engage avoid the craziness of social media and see your chapter as the “place to be.” Start by getting a clear understanding of what you want to get out of your forum, and there’s a better chance that when you build it, people will visit and stick around.

