

Attracting Younger Members Is Key To Your Association Chapter's Membership Growth Strategy



Start a new career, join an association chapter. Change careers, join an association chapter. Move to a new city, join a new association chapter. For as long as you've known, that's how association chapters have typically gained new members.



However, life and career changes are no longer guaranteed to drive young professionals to join an association chapter, especially with online communities like LinkedIn and all the available social media and learning platforms. They're used to getting everything they need virtually — networking, advocacy and even volunteering — at their convenience. They may not buy into the traditional belief that they need to be a member of a local association chapter to do that.

Knowing all the easy, free and always accessible options competing for their attention, chapters have to try even harder to bring in and keep their younger association chapter members. What are you doing?

Who are your younger members?

For some organizations, the young professionals they're trying to engage are in their 20s and early 30s, in their first jobs after graduating from a trade school or college, and early in their careers. For careers that require advanced training and specialized degrees – doctors, lawyers, physical therapists, etc., younger members could skew a bit older.

Either way, there's a pretty good chance your younger members are Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) or Gen Z'ers (born in 1997 or later). Their view of life, work, and how they connect and use those connections to advance in their careers mean vastly different things to them than it does to your baby boomers (born before 1965) and Gen X'ers (1965-1980).

What do you need to offer younger people to get them to join your chapter?

Don't fall prey to the stereotype that these two groups want special treatment or need their hands held. Millennials and Gen Zs value many of same things as your other members, they just express it differently and expect different things in return.

That means many of the traditional ways you've brought people to your chapter -- networking, in-person continuing education, a static website, etc. -- won't work for them. You might think that to attract these individuals to your chapter, you need a presence on all possible online channels.

But wait – do you have association chapter volunteers available to run strong LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok channels? Social media with poorly done, rarely updated videos and out-of-date content can often be worse for young professionals to see than not doing anything at all. Instead of trying to provide everything, which will only succeed in diluting your message and your offerings, focus on understanding what younger people are most interested in and how they want to receive it.

Think about where younger people are in their lives and their careers and what they need to be successful – a job, career advice and guidance. And then think about how you can provide that. What are the association chapter offerings you can own and execute effectively that will leave the right impression with them?

Here are three options that will provide the personal, personalized experience they want and often can't get through those other channels.

Job board. Make it easy for younger professionals to find the right jobs in your area. LinkedIn has a job board, but positions can be at all levels and spread across the country, and people have to pay to search. Your association chapter job board is included in your association chapter membership.

There's a good chance your members and association chapter sponsors have positions they're looking to fill, and an association chapter job board provides a pool of high-caliber, qualified people ready to



fill them. Check out the job boards of several StarChapter clients for ideas on structuring your own job board:

- Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS) New York
- Maryland Municipal Clerks Association (MD Clerks)
- North Carolina Section of the Institute of Transportation Engineers (NCSITE)

Early career forum. Younger professionals may find answers to their job questions online. But they're asking questions of people across the globe and hoping for answers that apply to their situation. A members-only forum specific to your association chapter members early in their careers lets them ask and answer questions of each other. Have your seasoned association chapter members moderate and answer their questions and you'll provide an even larger benefit.

Mentorship program. More seasoned members are great volunteers for an association chapter mentorship program. Mentorship, from one-on-one engagement to panel sessions and other events between new career employees and more seasoned individuals can be an effective way to share member's stories and help your younger members grow, personally and professionally.

Several StarChapter clients run successful mentorship programs, including Florida Professionals in Infection Control, SMPS-Los Angeles and Sussex-Warren Human Resource Management Association. Recently, we spoke to Project Management Institute (PMI) Calumet president, Daniel Zilai, to learn more about his chapter's mentorship program.

PMI Calumet started their mentorship program in 2020, and it has since tripled in size. "We are hearing a lot of positive feedback from our student members and young professionals," Zilai says.

They began by creating a post describing their program and asking for mentors to share their knowledge and experiences, while having a chance to practice their communication and coaching skills. Once the chapter received a few applications, they began promoting the program to find mentees and then matched mentees to mentors.

Zilai says an informal "Ask the Expert" segment is a great place to start. "You can identify where there may be opportunity for connections within your membership," he explains. "This is something we do at the end of every membership meeting. We open the floor after our presenter's Q & A session and allow members to pose questions to each other. This can naturally develop an informal mentorship relationship between members."



They also reach out to local college students to attend chapter meetings and build a professional network, promoting chapter events through professors they have relationships with as well as through the chapter's social media profiles. And they often hold events and experiences that attract a younger demographic. PMI Calumet will be holding an experience event at a local brewery – the brewery will create a custom brew and give a tour while the chapter provides an opportunity for attendees to have headshots taken. “We had seen other chapters within our network have great success with this approach,” Zilai says, “so, we are excited to see how this impacts our chapter.”

Sussex Warren Human Resources Management Association (HRMA) started a mentorship program recently, along with an initiative to build their student community. We connected with Ken Sterzer, Director of College Relations, and asked him to share some insight into their successes, for other organizations that may want to begin similar programs. “In an effort to engage young professionals, we wanted to create a modern and flexible approach with short-term commitments, positioning the exchange to be not just a mentor sharing their experience with a mentee, but also the mentee being able to impart their expertise to the mentor.”

“A lot of the young professionals,” he added, “are more well versed in some of the technology options available to HR professionals, so we wanted to encourage this exchange of information. We are very fluid with our program and are accepting applications all year long. Every meeting we remind our membership of the opportunities within the mentorship program that are available to them.”

The Sussex Warren HRMA student community is a different initiative but relates to the mentorship program as focuses on engaging younger members. They connect with local universities that have HR programs or certifications to create an informal presence within the campuses. “Our hope, Sterzer says, “is to begin to spark interest in not only getting involved with the chapter but, to also mold the future of HR by developing this college relationships.”

Joining an association chapter may no longer be the first thing young professionals think of when they start their career, change it or move to a new city for a job. But there are a range of things association chapters can do to make membership much more appealing to Millennials and Gen Z'ers.

