

# Common Chapter Challenges: An Interview With Katie Ketter, StarChapter Sales Team Lead



Since joining StarChapter, our senior account executive and sales team lead, Katie Ketter, has spoken with people from more than 4,000 chapters. Her conversations have covered all sorts of topics, including a chapter that lost its physical space, and its paper documentation, in a fire, and a chapter that was doing so well financially they started a foundation to funnel some of their extra revenue.



Inevitably, Katie says, even in well-performing chapters, conversations touch on the challenges they face and ideas for getting past them.

Since many of the same challenges seem to be highlighted in these conversations, we asked Katie to share some of what she's heard.

## **What are some of the biggest challenges chapters face? How have they overcome them?**

No matter the size, location or industry, chapter stumbling blocks are similar, like ideas for removing board members who stay in their roles much longer than they should, and ways to strengthen the skills of board members who are in roles simply because no one else wanted the job.

Membership is another big issue. Everyone is looking for ways to increase chapter membership by bringing in more and younger members. Chapters spend a lot of time thinking about how to evolve



and give people more of what they need to join. Because it can be difficult for people to think outside of the box, they tend to stick to what they know.

Some of the chapters that have done the best at engagement and membership have taken time, sometimes a year, to try new things. In one case that longer timeframe upset some longer-term board members, but they continued to push forward and explore what would work and what their community wanted. Other chapters have tried to improve chapter engagement through activities including brewery and juice bar nights, activities a little outside of the norm to make it worth the time spent away from their partners or kids.

The Tulsa Area Human Resources Association, for example, tasked their board members with finding a new approach to their programming and a new format for meetings. It took a while to figure out what would work, and reinvigorating the chapter required them to replace their entire board. The result was worth it, with increased participation and engagement from the board and members.

### **How do chapters manage member retention? What strategies have or haven't worked?**

Most of the chapters I speak to that have their national organization manage their membership have lost their expired members. This is because they don't have access to the membership lists to follow up before they go, or after they've left. I've also learned the value of keeping chapter nonmember or expired member lists as clean as possible to make it easier to stay in touch with these groups.

Also important is asking questions to learn why people didn't renew and making changes around that information. Ask questions through surveys of expired members or in chapter exit interviews done by board members. Both help clarify the challenges these groups had, which could be something as simple as the day of the week meetings were held.

### **What kinds of events or programs tend to draw the most participation?**

Chapter golf events are successful, and themed events are great for networking and socializing. Katie says, "Younger people are gravitating to anything that involves a costume maybe try your hand at a themed Halloween party." Trivia nights have become increasingly popular and offer a lot of sponsor opportunities. Date night and family friendly events can make a difference to turnout by being more inclusive.



## **Do chapters struggle with volunteer recruitment for leadership or committees?**

Many of the chapters I speak with struggle with volunteer recruitment . I think it's something that starts from Day 1. Volunteering is part of membership. This is another area where asking questions is important, as is sharing information about chapter volunteer opportunities and the chapter volunteer process.

When a new member joins, ask them what they would like to support. Position it as we expect you to volunteer not it would be nice if you did, ask in new member questionnaires and volunteer applications, both which can be sent with new member welcome emails. "People want to help they just don't know how."

Another thing that works is starting with micro volunteering opportunities and getting people to take on larger roles from there.

In addition to creating board job descriptions, two other things that help people take on board roles are board member term limits and the inability to be voted back in. Both stave off stagnation and push people to step up.

## **What operational or administrative tasks consume the most time or resources? What kinds of solutions work for chapters?**

The name badge process comes up repeatedly. Chapters often have entire committees to handle organizing and executing name badges; it is extremely time- and labor-intensive. When you are doing this task manually it can be such a hassle. The mail merge with Word and Excel can take hours and it just shouldn't.

Our name badge generator always gets the biggest response because it makes that process seamless and often makes committees unnecessary. When your board needs a committee and still has a hard time creating name badges for the hundreds of people who attend your annual conference, there is a huge problem. Using the StarChapter name badge function, you can eliminate the name badge committee, because you streamline that process considerably. Now your volunteers can put their efforts into other initiatives.

Other time-consuming tasks include creating dynamic, focused email lists with membership status, event registration status and other specific criteria. The StarChapter recipient list includes filters based



off of data in the system to make this as efficient as possible.

Volunteers get involved because they want to give back. Oftentimes they reflect on the connections and education they received when they first joined, Yet when they join the board giving back means time sorting through name badges, members and endless excel spreadsheets. When these challenges get solved and the management of the chapter becomes more turnkey, they are relieved to have the bandwidth to continue the cycle of value they received when they joined.

### **What emerging trends or threats do chapters see impacting them in the next 3-5 years?**

Many chapters say that current pressures to their organizations are due to the changes in legislation or federal funding that have resulted in changes to their industries. This is the time when associations are becoming even more valuable, allowing members to learn from and lean on each other; there is power in numbers and the ability to crowdsource strategies allows members and organizations to quickly pivot if they need to.

### **What advice would you give to a struggling chapter trying to reinvigorate its membership or impact?**

Take a step back and look at chapter emails , event schedules, your website, etc., but do it from the perspective of a non-board member or even a friend or family member. This review can give you a view you might not have thought of, and show how an outsider sees your chapter, allowing you to learn how to make things even more accessible and engaging.

We need to change the mindset that it has to be hard to manage association chapter membership and the operational tasks of chapter management. This would allow boards to streamline in a variety of areas and open up opportunities to do more for members.

One thing that stood out in this conversation with Katie was the importance of connecting with other chapters. Have a question or concern about that meeting you want to hold? Not sure if you should get on the bandwagon of that social media or virtual event trend? Thinking about trying a hybrid meeting? Before you jump in with both feet, look to a sibling chapter, or a chapter in a related industry. There is a chance they have already tried to do what you're thinking of – learn from their experiences.

“There is camaraderie,” Katie says, “all you need to do is ask.”

