

# Does Your Association Chapter Have A Retention Challenge? Or Is It A Member Value Problem?



The last few years have been pretty challenging for association chapters. Yes, the COVID-19 pandemic led to many chapters shutting down or completely overhauling how they served their members. But what we're talking about started even earlier.



Many chapters have been seeing a decline in membership for years. Their members are pulled in multiple directions by work and personal commitments and must choose where they spend their time and money.

If they're not choosing your association chapter, is there a gap between the value you think you're delivering and what's actually important to your members?

You could be holding what you believe are the ideal events and offering what you think are the right services. But if members think your offerings are in the wrong format, held on the wrong days, cost too much for what they're getting, you could be causing the exodus without knowing it.

If you have unintentionally lost sight of what is important to members, it's time for a reset.

Your association chapter members need you, especially in these more difficult times. They want easy access to a community of their peers, to connect with and get (and share) advice and resources. It's up

to you to prove just how vital your chapter is, so they can't imagine not being part of it.

To do this, you first need to find out what they value. Only once you know what's important to them, can you deliver it.

### **Time for More Than Just a Survey**

To be sure you're continuing to meet their needs in the way they want, survey your association chapter members.

Many chapters use yes/no survey questions or offer multiple choice options. Those types of surveys are great for gathering basic information, such as likes and dislikes. But they won't tell the whole story. To find out if you're offering the services they value or if you're missing the mark, you need to get to the heart of your chapter members' goals, responsibilities, aspirations, pain points, challenges, and more.

Here's an example.

Let's say you survey your members, and you learn they value education. But "valuing education" can mean vastly different things to different members.

Gather a random sampling of members, in virtual or in-person focus groups or one-on-one meetings and calls, and ask follow-up questions like:

- Who do you feel you connect with most during our continuing education sessions?
- What part of our association chapter education program do you value? Why?
- Where could we be doing better?
- When do you feel like you're most engaged with our chapter?
- Why do you not attend our CE events?
- How do you like to learn – in person, virtually, by listening to a speaker, by doing something hands on, a combination, etc.?

The more you ask, the more you'll learn.

### **Gathering the Multi-layered Information**

Ask someone on your association chapter board or on a committee to collect this information. Or consider bringing in someone from the outside. Using an outsider can drive your members to be more open, as people are often more honest with people they don't know.



### **Uncover Needs and Plan to Deliver Value**

Once you understand how members define value, match your offerings to their needs. Innovate where it makes sense and eliminate what no longer adds value.

Time your information gathering and analysis to have the outcomes ready to discuss at your association chapter board retreat. That way, you can focus uninterrupted as a group and use what you learned to develop a plan for change. This timing will also allow you to incorporate your decisions into your strategic plan for the coming year.

### **Providing the Value You Discover: an Example**

Let's say you're a chapter of an interior design organization and you've always had a speaker talk to your members about the "colors of the year." You learned in your assessment that education is important to members, but you also learned they prefer learning through doing over listening to a speaker.

Take them to meet a local interior painter. Have them paint swatches to see what the colors look like, wet and dry. Rather than listening to someone describe a color, you're giving them the education they want in the experiential way they prefer.

Once you're comfortable with your changes, market them to your audience in your newsletters and emails and on your website. Let them see that what you're doing is based on what you learned from them. And mention any other changes you'll be making in the longer term.

Most often, members leave because they don't believe that what you're offering is worth the money. Or their time. Give your members the value they want and expect from your chapter, and they'll stick around for the long term.

