

Moving From Wants to Needs: Rethinking Chapter Priorities for Real Impact



We hear from countless association chapter boards that they are busy, holding meetings, events, conferences, education and more. But at the same time, they share that they don't necessarily see the outcomes they expect from all this work, like increased engagement, membership, sponsorship, etc.



Being busy doesn't always equate with being effective.

Board members give their time and energy because they believe in the chapter mission and want to build an engaged community. But often between good intentions and day-to-day operations, they find themselves falling into a familiar trap—prioritizing what they want to do, and what they think members and member guests want, over what they need to do to for the chapter to thrive.

Wants versus needs in association chapter management

While wants aren't necessarily bad, they often crowd out the deeper, more strategic actions that sustain chapters over the long term, the actions that translate into membership, engagement and dollars. The tension is often about comfort versus challenge, tradition versus transformation and short-term satisfaction versus long-term health.

Wants are typically appealing, familiar and easy to execute. They often carry prestige, tradition and comfort, like annual banquets, printed newsletters or following processes because “we’ve always done it this way.”

Needs are those things that ensure chapter sustainability, relevance and long-term growth. Sometimes they may not seem as glamorous as wants, but they are essential. Needs can include member engagement, data-driven decision-making, outreach to students and emerging professionals and intentional efforts to diversify leadership and membership.

As Kyle Sadewhite of Sadewhite Management Group, which provides specialized administrative and management services to associations, explains, “Board members often come in with a strong vision and a lot of wants. However, we have to identify the needs before we can pursue the wants. Some needs are foundational, like a solid membership database, an accessible website, financial health and strong retention. Without those, you can’t really judge success.”

Five ways chapters prioritize wants over needs

Every chapter board faces this balancing act. Here are five common scenarios where board member wants overshadow chapter needs.

- 1. Prestige events over member value.** Lavish awards dinners and high-cost galas may look impressive, but they often serve leadership’s desire for recognition more than members’ priorities. Meanwhile, lower-cost, higher-impact events—think mentorship mixers, career days, skill-building workshops—get sidelined.
- 2. Legacy structures over modern engagement.** Some boards are deeply attached to formalities, like Robert’s Rules of Order, long meetings and hierarchies of titles. But today’s professionals, especially younger ones, don’t care about most of that. They crave efficiency and connection, like digital tools, casual meetups, and fast feedback, which creates more engagement for them than established, traditional systems.
- 3. Recruiting for numbers, not retention.** Chapters sometimes focus on boosting new member sign-ups without ensuring these new members get a meaningful onboarding experience. Many new members join but drift away from the chapter because they never felt connected or valued. As a result, chapter retention suffers and growth stalls.



4. **Outdated communications tactics.** Sending quarterly print newsletters and a single email blast to all audiences was once the gold standard. Many of your members are living on Instagram, LinkedIn and other short-form platforms; they want things from your chapter that meet their specific needs and seem personalized to them, not generalized and apply to the entire chapter. Sadewhite has seen boards default to the wrong fix: Creating an elaborate marketing or communication plan. “But we can’t be successful “he says, “without first understanding what the membership actually needs, whether that’s segmentation by age, preferred communication method or simply event topics they care about.”

5. **Leadership tradition over leadership development.** Too often, the same people rotate through board roles. Without deliberate board mentorship, training and pathways for new leaders and new ideas, chapters risk stagnating. Creating space for younger, more diverse members to take on board roles isn’t just a “nice-to-have”—it’s essential.

Shifting from wants to needs

Here are four shifts chapter boards can make to move beyond focusing on what they want to do versus what their membership needs from them.

1. **Start with data, not assumptions.** Don’t assume you know what members need. Ask them. Send regular surveys, monitor engagement metrics and track attendance trends. Data often tells a different story than assumptions. If only 10 percent of members attended your yearly chapter gala, but 70 percent engage regularly with your professional development content, what does that tell you?

2. **Focus on first-year member experiences.** The first year of membership sets the tone for a person’s trajectory with your chapter. Set them up for success with structured onboarding, welcome events and a system to connect them with seasoned members. When the first year of membership feels meaningful, retention rates rise—and so does overall satisfaction.

3. **Invest in member-centered programming.** Every chapter program should pass one test: does it solve a real problem for members? Think about holding programs around career advancement, networking, work-life balance and industry-specific challenges. Members are more likely to stay engaged when programming meets their current needs rather than simply celebrating the chapter’s traditions.



4. **Empower, don't just involve.** Getting new people to join committees is great; but it only works if they have the skills to lead and do the job you need. Empowering members with the right technical and interpersonal skills help to build skillsets and commitment and keeps leadership fresh. Offer leadership development programs, mentorship opportunities and clear pathways into board roles.

A new litmus test: is it a want or need?

Before launching a new initiative, ask a few simple yes/no questions:

- Does this serve current member priorities or just leadership preferences?
- Are we using data to support this decision?
- Are we doing this because it worked 10 years ago or because it's working now?
- Will this investment deliver value to members who don't already feel deeply connected to the chapter?

This quick "Want versus Need" test can serve as a reality check and keep chapters focused on delivering sustainable impact.

Time for some chapter honesty

Doing what feels comfortable can create an illusion of productivity. But chapters need meaningful action and outcomes to survive. Growth and engagement can only happen when boards take the time to ask the hard questions, let go of outdated traditions and commit to meeting the real needs of today's members.

To keep progress like this moving forward, it's important to celebrate it, no matter how small. "If you improve retention or attendance by even a few percentage points," says Kyle Sadewhite, "highlight it. Recognizing small wins keeps momentum alive."

During your next planning session, try a Want versus Need Audit. What's adding genuine value? What's just filling the calendar? What could you shift to better serve your members right now—and prepare your chapter to continue to meet their evolving needs?

Busy is easy. Effective is harder. But it's also far more rewarding—for your members, your leaders and the mission you serve.

