The Member Feedback Cycle: Getting Meaningful Information From Members

Many boards aren't clear on what their members want to get from being a member in their chapter. Instead of setting chapter priorities based on what they know members value and are looking for, they based benefits and programming on what they think people want. When you know the topics, formats and schedules that best fit your members, it is much easier to hold events they'll attend and deliver content they'll find valuable and actually use — rather than taking a stab in the dark and wondering why turnout is low, web pages aren't being visited and webinars are being avoided.

Members who aren't happy with what they're getting from your chapter may not complain; instead, they'll just quietly disappear. Regular member feedback helps you see gaps and catch issues early by highlighting what might be driving them away, like the absence of things they value, unmet needs, volunteer burnout, etc., while you still have the chance to turn things around.

How can member feedback drive chapter improvement and engagement?

People are much more likely to stay involved with an organization when they feel the organization hears them. Asking for feedback shows you value their opinion, which in turn builds engagement and member loyalty. (And that loyalty will show itself even when you do things they may not 100% agree with, like something as simple as changing your food vendor.)

Knowing what they care about and are looking for can help you prioritize chapter activities and deliver those things that will have the largest impact, like holding more virtual continuing education sessions over chapter and industry advocacy events, if that's what your feedback shows. This can be incredibly helpful if, like many chapters, you're dealing with time and money constraints as well as a cap on the capacity of your chapter volunteers.

5 tips for collecting relevant member feedback

Feedback activities like surveys, town halls, advisory boards, round tables, etc., can help you gather more relevant information and make changes based on the needs and wants of members. However, constantly responding to "how are we doing?" can be exhausting to chapter members and may, in the long run, provide you with less reliable information and less feedback overall, when members stop responding to your "we just need two minutes of your time" chapter emails.

Here are five things you can do to make your members more likely to respond to your requests for feedback:

Use a variety of question types. Members tend to respond best when you use a combination of question types. The best feedback is often received by asking for information in a variety of ways, including yes/no questions, questions that use a scale and questions requiring a detailed response (also called open-ended questions).

Explain what you'll do with what you learn. Will you use the information to make changes to programming? Add or change some chapter benefits? Get a speaker that you learn members are interested in? Tell them how you'll use what they tell you; share this in the survey materials or ahead of time as well as when you roll out changes. And, since there is a chance some members won't want their names associated with feedback they provide, share how they can remain anonymous, if that's an option.

Make your request timely. It should be in an attendee's inbox by the time they get to their car or log off the virtual session, not three weeks later; by then they'll have forgotten what they were upset about or loved and wanted to be sure to share. For quicker responses, create a card for people to complete as they're leaving an in-person event or a QR code to scan and complete an online survey before they disconnect from the virtual call. Rather than trying to learn everything, ask questions about those things that you really want to know about, like the quality of the speaker and their content, length of the presentation, quality of the food, cost of the event versus the value they think they received, etc.

Gather better insights through small group discussions. Round tables are a great way to collect honest input, especially when you use outside, neutral facilitators to manage them. Members are often more open when they're not sharing their thoughts with their board members. These small group discussions can help you dig deeper into specific issues and get real-time feedback on something you're thinking of doing, like discussing complex topics with member, expanding membership or testing ideas for sources of non-dues revenue.

Capture informal feedback. You'll collect some of your most useful feedback when you ask questions the moment, like immediately after a speaker or during a networking event. Encourage board and committee members to talk to attendees during an event (which means you may need to encourage them to attend!); it can be helpful to provide them with questions that will get the information you're looking for. "Did you like the speaker?" will get you a yes or no answer, but asking a question like "what was one takeaway from what you heard?" or "what's one thing that was missing from today's event" will provide information you can act on.

Close the feedback loop...and say thank you

When members see their feedback being used across the chapter, like when you change a program or add a benefit because of something they shared, you're reinforcing the importance of their input, which in turn will drive them to continue to share their thoughts.

Once you build a culture that shows you listen and truly value member feedback, that feedback cycle will grow more meaningful with each question and answer.