



Retaining members during uncertain times

Some commentators are already signalling the end of the recession while others take a more cautious view. The coalition government is still in its first year, economic recovery is patchy and many costs for consumers and businesses are rising.

This advice sheet looks at how membership organisations and associations can continue to improve retention during uncertain times

As a result of the current economic climate some membership organisations and associations are experiencing pressure on member renewals. In a recession people cut costs and it's often easier to do this by cutting what many consider to be discretionary spending, including subscriptions to membership organisations. While it's only natural for any organisation to wish to conserve cash in uncertain times, membership organisations must respond by nurturing member loyalty and focus on delivering value.

So here is a set of practical steps that you can follow to address the challenges of loyalty and value. Many of you will undoubtedly be doing some or all of this already.

Delivering real and improved value to your members to cement their loyalty

1. First you must understand what your members (and lapsed members) want and split the results into what you do and do not currently offer members.
2. Find out what the competition or similar organisations are offering and see if you can expand your member offering and communicate what you do offer more clearly.
3. You need to measure member satisfaction with the items you do offer.
4. Use your member insight from steps 1 to 3 to unlock value for members, especially through improved member communications on all platforms.

1. Understanding what your members want

Carrying out regular focus groups with members enables you to gather in-depth insight into their behaviour, their needs and their opinions. This type of qualitative research is hugely valuable when developing products, services and communications. You can set up focus groups on an ad hoc basis, asking a sample of members (usually up to eight per focus group) to take part. You can also set up a wider group of members from which you select for focus group or online survey participants. This type of member survey panel is useful if you wish to carry out regular focus groups. It also gives you an opportunity to promote member involvement in organisational developments.

2. Understanding your competition

Many organisations have competitors, either direct or indirect. Keeping a close eye on your competitors' membership offerings, marketing communications and performance metrics (financial and otherwise), will give you an edge when dealing with and responding to competitive threats and opportunities. You can do this informally, from time to time, or you can set up a benchmarking project to compare your organisation with your competitors in a systematic way.

3. Measuring member satisfaction

To find out what your members think of your offering and your services and operations in general, you will need to ask them. Here are a few tips on preparing questionnaires and member surveys.

- Your results will only be as good as your sample, so make sure it is representative of your membership.
- When developing questionnaires, structure and layout are crucial. Make sure your questions are short and unambiguous.
- Keep the number of questions to a minimum.
- Include one or two free text answers.
- Choose your survey technique carefully – for quantitative surveys, i.e. those where the answers are presented numerically, this usually means an interviewer-administered telephone (CATI) survey or a respondent (self)-administered postal or (preferably) online questionnaire.



4. Unlocking value for members

Once you have considered loyalty and satisfaction levels and you are aware of any changes to your member needs, you may decide intervention is needed to address certain issues. An intervention may be a short or long-term response to a particular need or issue, such as training, the dissemination of information or a reduction in fees. The success of these interventions can be measured, and therefore tested, in subsequent market research.

Sometimes an organisation is offering exactly what its members want but is not communicating this effectively – the information is difficult to find on the web, it is overly complicated or simply not communicated at all. You do not necessarily need to increase your cost base to deliver improved value to your members. You may only need to tweak your member packages to unlock value. Here are some tips on how to unlock value cost-effectively:

- a) Improve your customer service – loyal members need to feel loved.
- b) Share the industry knowledge you have with your members – your team will often be experts.
- c) Consider social media, including Facebook and Twitter, to engage with members.
- d) Encourage member participation by setting up a development panel, research/survey panel or other group.
- e) Remind members why they joined in the first place, focussing on your core competences and differentiating factors – why can only your organisation offer certain added value to your members.

Summary

In uncertain times, member organisations need to foster loyalty and deliver real value to members. To do this you need to be very clear about your members' needs and expectations and whether they are being met. Understanding your competitive landscape will help, as will measuring member satisfaction. Ultimately you need to know whether your member offer matches what your members want, develop your value proposition if necessary and communicate this effectively.

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