



Why Members Belong

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Over the years we have seen research addressing the issue of why members join. Uncovering the reasons why members join an organization helps the organization focus its marketing activities by helping it to understand its target market and develop its messaging. This is well suited for attracting and recruiting new members.

However, looking at why members join, does little to shed the light on what drives engagement and retention of current members. To find out why someone joined your organization twenty years ago provides historical data, but members' needs have changed over time and chances are so have your industry and your organization. One has to look no further than the current literature about the challenges of engaging Millennials.

We believe that the focus needs to shift from why members join to why members belong, and we have devoted the last decade to further that cause. While it may seem like the substitution of only one word for another is simply a matter of semantics, in reality it is a shift in how members think about what they need from your organization.

We are constantly asked by association executives to help them assess their member needs. Members belong to organizations to satisfy a variety of personal and professional needs, and all members do not belong for the same reasons. Nor do they place the same importance on those reasons.

Every time members are faced with the decision to renew their membership, or not, they engage in a deliberate economic evaluation to assess the value of their membership, and what that membership does for them. By asking members why they belong, it enables the organization to determine members' current needs, and what it would take to engage and retain those members. Additionally, segmentation analyses help to understand how some member segments have unique needs that the organization can better satisfy with targeted benefits and services.

Individuals belong to a membership organization for personal gain, for altruistic reasons, and for reasons that are neither personal nor altruistic. The most important reasons for belonging to an organization vary by industry, by profession, by organization, and by member type, but, in general, these are the top reasons why members belong that we have found over the years, in order of importance.

The top personal reasons why members belong are:

1. To network and build professional relationships
2. To stay current on information about the profession and/or industry
3. To have access to member benefits
4. To attain or maintain a certification
5. To generate more business for themselves or their company
6. To attend the organization's events
7. To have access to professional development/continuing education
8. For the prestige of being a member
9. To show that they are a professional in their field

The top altruistic reasons why members belong:

1. To advance/support the profession
2. To support the organization
3. To be involved with the organization
4. To volunteer/give back
5. To participate in committees

Other top reasons why members belong include:

1. Membership is a requirement of the profession
2. Employer reimburses membership dues
3. Supervisor suggested joining
4. Not satisfied with other similar organizations

SEGMENTATION

While it is interesting to understand the top reasons why members belong to your organization in general, the membership population should be examined by all major member segments in order to tailor the benefits, services and experiences to the specific needs of homogeneous groups of members. This will enable members' needs to be better satisfied, thus delivering more value for their membership dollar.

The following differences were uncovered through segmentation analysis.

Age

Over the years we have noticed differences among age groups in the reasons why members belong. The exact age groups where these differences exist vary by organization, but here are some general observations.

Younger members are more likely to belong:

1. to attain or maintain a certification
2. for networking opportunities
3. for professional development
4. to stay current on industry information
5. for access to education resources
6. to improve their employment status
7. to gain more leadership experience

Older members are more likely to belong:

1. for information that keeps them current in their profession
2. to support or advance the profession
3. to support the organization's advocacy efforts
4. to show they are a professional in their field
5. to receive the latest news relevant to the profession
6. for up-to-date information on scientific resources

International vs. American Members

Not all organizations have international members, but here are some general differences we have noticed among some associations who do. The results vary by industry and by the continent of the International member.

International members are more likely to belong:

1. to validate the professionalism that a membership provides
2. to attain or maintain a certification
3. for up-to-date information on scientific research
4. for advice on business practices
5. for the reduced rates on member benefits and services

American members are more likely to belong:

1. to earn continuing education credits
2. to support the advocacy and representation efforts of the organization

Years a Member

Because of the strong correlation between a member's age and the number of years he/she has been a member, there is some overlap in the reasons members belong based on age and based on the number of years they have been a member.

Newer members are more likely to belong:

1. for networking and professional development
2. for access to education resources
3. for access to member benefits and discounts
4. because membership is a job requirement
5. to get information to help them do their job

Long time members are more likely to belong:

1. to stay current on industry information
2. to support their profession
3. for continuing education credits
4. to support the advocacy and representation efforts of the organization

Loyalty

Members are classified as either loyal, neutral or vulnerable, depending on the strength of their relationship with the organization. Their loyalty classification is determined by their responses to three survey indicator questions. Loyal members have the strongest relationship with the organization, while vulnerable members are at-risk of leaving the organization.

Loyal members are more likely to belong:

1. to attend conferences
2. for professional development
3. to stay current on industry information
4. for networking opportunities
5. for leadership experience

Vulnerable members are more likely to belong:

1. because they have to (job requirement)
2. to generate more business for themselves or their company
3. to show others that they are a professional in their field
4. to attain or maintain their certification
5. for access to member benefits

Formal Education

Sometimes there are differences in why members belong based upon their highest level of formal education, particularly if membership in the organization is used to validate professionalism for members who have less formal education.

College degreed members are more likely to belong:

1. for networking opportunities
2. for professional development
3. to stay current on industry information

Full Time Employed vs. Part Time Employed

In some professions, practitioner members can be engaged in the profession on either a full time basis or on a part time basis. Full timers and part timers may have different needs, and therefore different priorities in why they belong.

Part time members are more likely to belong:

1. because they have to (job requirement)
2. for networking opportunities and building professional relationships
3. for access to member benefits

Member Type

We use the term Professional members to indicate the members who practice in the profession/industry for which the organization represents and advocates. The term Associate member is a member who is not a practitioner in the profession, but is a supporter of the organization and its members.

Professional members are more likely to belong:

1. to access educational programs
2. to support the profession
3. for the organization's continuing education
4. to keep abreast of the issues
5. for professional development
6. to make themselves more valuable to their employer
7. to stay current on industry information
8. to attain and maintain their certification
9. to improve their employment status
10. to show that they are a professional in their field
11. for access to member benefits

Associate members are more likely to belong:

1. for networking opportunities and building professional relationships
2. to generate more business for themselves or their company

Volunteerism

Members who volunteer, belong for many of the same reasons as non-volunteers, but with a few exceptions. In general, members who volunteer tend to give a higher priority to the group of altruistic reasons for belonging than non-volunteers. For this reason, we find that members who have never volunteered and give relatively higher priority for altruistic reasons for belonging are good candidates for serving in the governance of the organization, for mentoring, and for other volunteering roles, if asked.

Volunteer members are more likely to belong:

1. for networking opportunities and building professional relationships
2. to support the industry
3. to support the organization

Certification

Some organizations provide a certification for professionals in its industry. Attaining and maintaining the coveted industry certification affects why members belong to the organization. For those who are not certified and have no desire to be certified, their priorities for belonging are different.

Certified members are more likely to belong:

1. for professional development

Non-certified members:

1. for networking opportunities and building professional relationships
2. to stay current on industry information
3. to support the industry

The methodology used to determine why members belong is included in the next section of this report to enable the organization's researchers to discover the reasons why various segments of members belong to their specific organization.

METHODOLOGY – QUESTION FORMAT

The best way to determine the reasons why members belong to an organization is to ask the question in a member survey. There are three basic ways/formats in which the question can be asked: (1) check all the reasons why you belong to the organization (good), (2) rank the following reasons why you belong to the organization in order of importance to you, (better), and (3) allocate 100 points to the reasons why you belong to the organization (best). The pros and cons of each of these formats are presented as well as the information each provides.

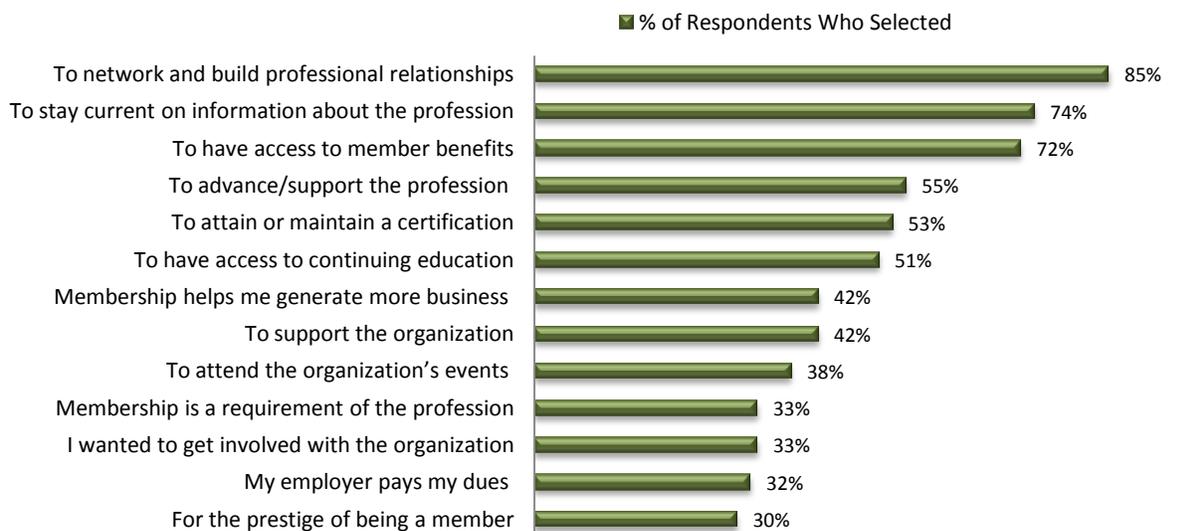
1. Check the reasons why you belong to the organization (good)

Checking all of the relevant reasons from a list of potential reasons is the preferred format for some researchers because it is the easiest of the three formats for members to answer. This format is the best suited format for a paper survey that is administered in person or by postal mail, or for a telephone survey where respondents cannot see the full list of reasons.

By asking members to check all that apply, they can go down the list and simply check each reason that applies to them. The simplicity of this question comes with a tradeoff, and that is it provides less information than the other two question formats. Because members are only checking applicable reasons, all of the reasons checked by each respondent are given equal weight.

The analysis that is appropriate for this question is the percentage of respondents who selected each reason for belonging. An example of the output of the analysis of this format is shown in Graph 1.

Graph 1 – Check All Applicable Reasons For Belonging



A variation of the “check all that apply” format is “check your top three reasons for belonging”. This format is preferred by some researchers as it requires the respondent to select only the most important reasons for belonging, regardless of the number of reasons that were applicable. This format provides a little more information than “check all that apply” in that minor reasons for belonging will be selected less often, and there will usually be a greater separation in the frequencies reported. Although a paper survey cannot force compliance with the requirement of a maximum of three selections, most respondents have no difficulty complying.

2. Rank the reasons why you belong to the organization (better)

Ranking the reasons why members belong provides better information than simply checking the reasons, because the ranking analysis does not treat all selections equally. Some researchers prefer to have members rank all of the reasons provided from most important to least important, while others prefer to have members rank only the applicable reasons.

For the latter variation, some researchers who use an online survey will use a two step process whereby members are first asked to select all applicable reasons for belonging, and are then presented with a follow up question in which the responses from the first question are piped into the second question for ranking. In this way, members are ranking only a subset of the original list of reasons for belonging.

To analyze the responses, weights are assigned to give more importance to higher ranked selections. Typically, points equal to the number of available selections are assigned to a first place rank. For example, if there is a list of 10 possible reasons given in the survey, every first place rank will receive 10 points, every second place rank will receive 9 points, and so on through 1 point for each last place rank. The results can be reported in a bar graph similar to Graph 1 as the total number of points each reason received, or as the percentage of the total points each reason received.

3. Allocate points to the reasons why you belong to the organization (best)

We believe that allocating points to the reasons why the member belongs is the best format, because members are providing a ranking with weights. Not only does the member provide information on which reasons are more important, but also how much more they are important compared to other reasons.

The question is typically worded as follows:

Q. There are a variety of reasons why individuals belong to organizations. Please tell us the reasons why you belong to ABC. *(Please allocate a total of 100 points among the following reasons, assigning more points to the more important reasons.)*

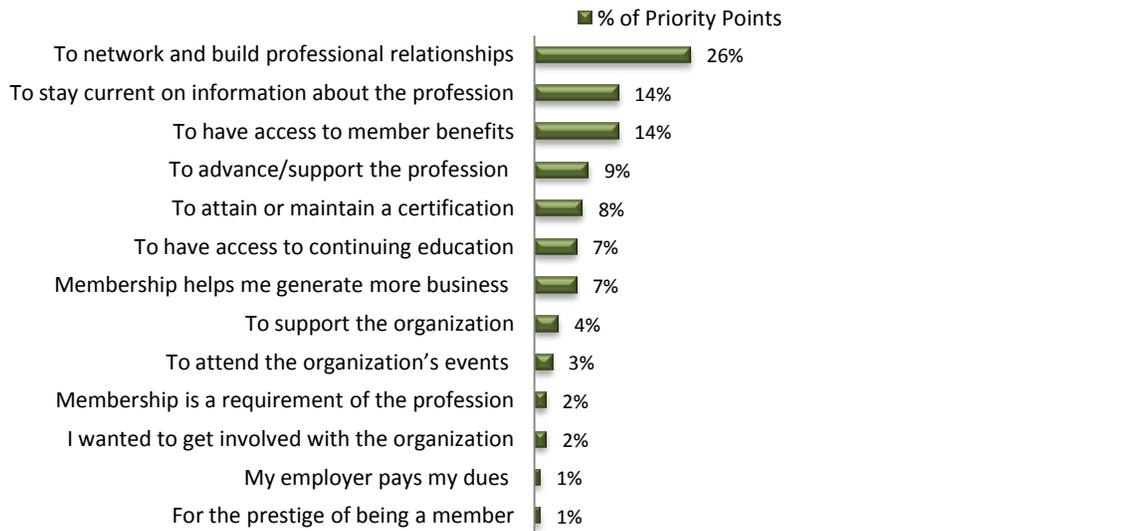
If a respondent has only one reason for belonging, all 100 points would be assigned to that reason. If a member belongs for two or more reasons, then the number of points assigned to each reason would be in proportion to the importance of that reason to the individual. All reasons that are not applicable would be assigned a value of zero, or left blank.

Unlike ranking where a first place rank automatically receives one point more than a second place rank and two points more than a third place rank, members choose the weights they assign in the allocation format. If they choose, members could select four reasons for belonging and assign their points as 97,1 1,1, as 40,30,20,10 or as 25, 25, 25,25. The allocation format is the most versatile and delivers the most information. There is no limit on how many or how few reasons must be selected. The only requirement is that their points must total 100.

This is the most time consuming of the three formats, and compliance is difficult with a paper survey, as it requires the respondent to fill in the blanks with numbers that total to 100. This type of question is made easier with online survey software that presents the respondent with a running total each time a number of points is assigned to a reason. This format is not appropriate for a telephone survey.

Because respondents assign the weights, the analysis is reported as the percentage of all points that each reason receives. An example of the output for an allocation question is shown in Graph 2 below.

Graph 2 – Allocate Points to the Reasons For Belonging



In our experience, more than 90% of all member respondents select two or more reasons for belonging to the organization, and the average is 3-4 reasons for belonging. Since very few members belong to an organization for only one reason, we believe that either a ranking or allocation question should be used to determine which reasons are the most important reasons.

METHODOLOGY – SEGMENTATION ANALYSIS

Segmentation analysis is used to determine if specific needs that are being satisfied with a membership to the organization are common among other members who share the same characteristics, and are different between those who do not share those characteristics.

This analysis may include any personal information that can be gathered from survey data, or if positive identification of respondents is possible, the information can be retrieved from the organization's member database.

A list of member characteristics is presented below as an example of what can be used. The availability of information will determine what is actually used.

1. Member's loyalty/engagement classification
2. Membership type (e.g. professional, associate, student, retired)
3. Industry type
4. Job Title (*important for trade organizations*)
5. Employment situation (e.g. self employed, full time employed, etc.)
6. Sex / gender
7. Race / ethnicity
8. Formal education
9. International vs. American
10. Institutional vs. individual
11. Years of practice in the profession
12. Years a member of the organization
13. Generation / age
14. Volunteer activity
15. Amount of reimbursed dues
16. Annual meeting attendance
17. Continuing education participation
18. Specializations / certifications

The output of the segmentation analysis is a bar graph similar to the previously presented graphs, in which the points or the percentage of points for each reason are presented, but differs in that the graph shows the points by each segment.

While the previous graphs show the percentage of points for all reasons presented in the survey, the segmentation graphs only show the reasons that received at least 5% of the total points given. Eliminating the minor reasons from the segmentation graphs produces a less crowded graph and allows the reader to focus his/her attention on those reasons that have a greater impact on belonging and should be the subjects of strategic planning efforts. An example of this output is in Graph 3 on the following page.

The example illustrated below shows that members who currently volunteer for this organization (segment A) place a significantly higher priority on belonging to the organization in order to satisfy their need for networking and building professional relationships, compared to those who have never volunteered (segment C).

Graph 3 – Segmentation Analysis Based on Volunteerism



Summary

Determining why members belong to your organization can be accomplished by adding one question to your member survey. This will enable you to determine what your organization offers that satisfies member needs, and to offer those benefits and experiences in a targeted way to enhance the value of your membership. As our research shows, members will join an organization if they believe it will satisfy their needs, and will remain an engaged member as long as the organization continues to satisfy their personal and professional needs while delivering a good value.

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