

*Identity, Affinity, and Access:*  
The Makings of Membership



July 11, 2024



# Member

*Noun*

A person, animal, or thing that is part of a group

A person who joins a group to take part in a particular activity

# Membership

*Noun*

The state of **belonging** to an organization

All the people who **belong** to an organization



## Self-Actualization

desire to become the most that one can be

## Esteem

respect, recognition, self-esteem

## Belonging

family, friends, intimacy, sense of connection

## Safety

health, security, employment, resources

## Physiological Needs

air, water, food, shelter, sleep, clothing

# Belonging

“Belonging isn’t just a connection to other people, but also to place, power, and purpose. The experience of belonging is about **connectedness through community**, as well as **rootedness in a place, a feeling of ownership in shared outcomes**, and a **sense of mission with others.**”

Kim Samuel

*On Belonging: Finding Connection  
in an Age of Isolation*

# Membership and Belonging

- People support nonprofit causes to create a sense of reciprocity, shared purpose, and agency
  - Donors – i.e. caring humans – expect/want to be a part of the mission
  - Members want to *belong* to the organization, the mission, the cause

**Is your membership program simply a fundraising tool masquerading as membership? Is it just a way of building recognition levels? – or are you seeking members to belong with and a be a part of the promise your mission holds?**

# Membership vs. Donor

- Annual Giving –
  - Unrestricted financial support
  - Generally fully tax deductible – no tangible benefits
  - Not restricted by time/expiration
  - Can be recognized by different levels/gift ranges – sometimes named recognition societies
- Membership –
  - Implies “belonging”
  - Involves specific benefits or privileges – “something others don’t get”
  - Benefits may have associated costs – not necessarily tax deductible
  - Different than “donations”
  - Can be associated with access e.g. museum, zoos, etc. Not always associated with tickets, e.g. theaters, symphonies, etc. (Although some membership levels can include tickets).

**In other words – Be Specific on what a Member *is***

# Benefits of a Membership Program

- Easily Understandable – “If I do this, I get that, and the community benefits”
- Time-bound – easier to renew/explain need
- Sustainable income/cash flow
- Cadre of “insiders” – potential advocates
- Like-minded groups of people – creates belonging and identity
- Additional Income – Upgrades, additional gifts, recurring giving (especially to increase membership level)

# Potential Membership Issues

- Restrictive – members will assign value – ‘you are worth \$x to me’
- Transactional – true engagement or just want the benefits?
- Requires constant nurturing and management
- Possibly seen as exclusive – are members only at certain \$ levels?
- You spend time managing stuff/benefits – can be time and dollar intensive
- Without clarity, can be confusing – what does it mean to be a member?  
(Especially if you have other access, e.g. tickets, dues, fees, etc.)



# Member Benefits

# What to offer for Benefits

- Access – behind the scenes, inside view, “I know something/someone other people don’t know.”
- Knowledge/Insider Information – special newsletters, communications, conversations with leadership
- Attention – feeling special, part of the “in-group”
- Services relative to your mission – seminars, finances, consulting, etc.





# Membership vs Recognition

- Membership = Benefits, tangibles
- Recognition = gift levels

You can build recognition levels that aren't benefit-driven/memberships.

*Inclusivity tip: published recognition levels tells others “you’re only valued based upon the dollars you give.” An inclusive fundraising strategy is to either recognize ALL donors – or none. Focus on individual, personalized stewardship. Published recognition is not generally a huge motivator in giving.*

# Let's Talk About Swag

- Nobody needs another tote bag. Or insulated cup. Or mug.
- But they are very popular – what do your members want? Don't make assumptions for them
- Make your giveaways relative. Is a tote bag relevant to your mission?
- Be very careful of cost – consult with your finance/tax advisor. Generally, benefits with no/low cost allow the membership to be fully tax deductible, but if there is value only the portion of the membership that exceeds fair market value is deductible and *you must disclose that.*

# Benefit Examples

- An insider newsletter
- Networking – meet other members
- Discounts/special offers (can be enticing to corporate sponsorships)
- Involve/Report on Advocacy
- Workshops/Learning Opportunities
- Special Volunteer Opportunities
- Discounts on gala/event tickets or other events
- Recognition levels – for members
- Access to senior leadership/program – let their voice be heard
- Information/data on programs
- Fundraising benefits e.g. wills & gift planning
- Annual member survey – feeling of engagement and being listened to
- Surprise and Delight – unexpected acknowledgement
- Social media recognition



# Member Engagement: *A Year-Long Process*

# Membership Renewal Drives Easier Planning

- Membership – 12 months. Renewal cycle = 18 months.

| <b>Time Since Membership</b> | <b>Action</b>                            |
|------------------------------|--|
| 6 Months                     | Anniversary note “it’s been six months!” |
| Nine Months                  | Early renewal notice                     |
| Ten Months                   | Early renewal notice/Soft reminder       |
| Eleven months                | “You expire next month”                  |
| Twelve Months                | Time to renew!                           |
| 13 Months                    | Don’t forget!                            |
| 14-17 Months                 | Soft reminders/postscript, etc.          |
| 18 months                    | Final reminder/Drop & moved to lapsed    |

# Membership Communications Planning

- Every month you're driving communications to segments based on their level and time of membership
  - What benefits are they getting and what's their stage of renewal
- Rolling Membership vs Fixed Membership
  - Rolling – membership begins on their join/gift date – ends 12 months later
  - Fixed – membership begins on set date regardless of when they join (requires “grandfathering” e.g. if I join in June but membership begins in July, I get 13 months of benefits)

# Sample Renewal/Stewardship Plan

|                                     | July | August | September | October | November | December | January | February | March | April | May |
|-------------------------------------|------|--------|-----------|---------|----------|----------|---------|----------|-------|-------|-----|
| <b>Mail Donors</b>                  |      |        |           |         |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |
| Direct Mail Appeals                 |      |        | x         |         | x        |          |         |          | x     |       |     |
| Digital Newsletter                  | x    | x      | x         | x       | x        | x        | x       | x        | x     | x     | x   |
| Print Newsletter                    | x    |        |           |         |          | x        |         |          |       | x     |     |
| Holiday Card                        |      |        |           |         | x        | x        |         |          |       |       |     |
| Giving Tuesday                      |      |        |           |         | x        |          |         |          |       |       |     |
| Valentine's Thank You               |      |        |           |         |          |          |         | x        |       |       |     |
| Tax Statement                       |      |        |           |         |          |          | x       |          |       |       |     |
| Donor Survey (print)                |      |        |           |         |          |          |         | x        |       |       |     |
|                                     |      |        |           |         |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |
| <b>Online Donors (With Address)</b> |      |        |           |         |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |
| Direct Mail Appeals                 |      |        | x         |         | x        |          |         |          | x     |       |     |
| Digital Newsletter                  | x    | x      | x         | x       | x        | x        | x       | x        | x     | x     | x   |
| Print Newsletter                    | x    |        |           |         |          | x        |         |          |       |       |     |
| Holiday Card                        |      |        |           |         | x        | x        |         |          |       |       |     |
| Giving Tuesday                      |      |        |           |         | x        |          |         |          |       |       |     |
| Valentine's Thank You               |      |        |           |         |          |          |         | x        |       |       |     |
| Tax Statement                       |      |        |           |         |          |          | x       |          |       |       |     |
| Donor Survey (Print)                |      |        |           |         |          |          |         |          |       |       | x   |
|                                     |      |        |           |         |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |
| <b>Online Donors (No Address)</b>   |      |        |           |         |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |
| Digital Appeals                     |      |        | x         |         |          |          |         |          |       |       |     |
| Digital Newsletter                  | x    | x      | x         | x       | x        | x        | x       | x        | x     | x     | x   |
| Digital Holiday Card                |      |        |           |         | x        | x        |         |          |       |       |     |
| Giving Tuesday                      |      |        |           |         | x        |          |         |          |       |       |     |

# Sample Renewal/Stewardship Plan - Detail

## July Mailings:

- July '23 Renewals
- August '23 – Early Renewal III
- September '23 – Early Renewal II
- October '23 – Early Renewal I
- January '24 – Six Months/Anniversary
- Newsletter – Member Dates January 2023 – June 2024
- Lapsed Reminders
- Long Lapsed “We’ve Missed You”

Invest the time in set up at the start of the year and then update the system/dates every month . . . Let automation /tech do the work for you.



# Trends in Membership Programs



## HOW HAS YOUR MEMBERSHIP CHANGED IN THE PAST ONE YEAR PERIOD?

**2023**

**MEMBERSHIP MARKETING  
BENCHMARKING REPORT**

### MEMBERSHIP CHANGE IN PAST YEAR (TREND)

|             | Increased | Decreased | Remained the same | Not sure |
|-------------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|----------|
| <b>2023</b> | 49%       | 22%       | 29%               | 1%       |
| <b>2022</b> | 38%       | 33%       | 29%               | 1%       |
| <b>2021</b> | 26%       | 47%       | 26%               | 1%       |
| <b>2020</b> | 42%       | 27%       | <b>30%</b>        | 2%       |
| <b>2019</b> | 45%       | 26%       | 28%               | 1%       |
| <b>2018</b> | 48%       | 25%       | 26%               | 2%       |
| <b>2017</b> | 46%       | 25%       | 28%               | 1%       |

[www.marketinggeneral.com](http://www.marketinggeneral.com)

# Membership Based Organizations

- Significant drops in ticket purchases/subscription-based models – bolstered by “choose-your-own” ticket packs and/or membership programs that allow flexibility
- Multiple surveys/responses – members will respond more/higher for a personalized experience. “Show me that you see me.”
- Traditional experiences for younger audiences need to merge more hybrid – but not fully digital. Let members choose. Give them agency on how they want their engagement. Options

# Membership Based Organizations

- Consider partnerships with other organizations – e.g. in Las Vegas, NV, membership with KNPR includes donation to Three Square Food Bank – sponsored, in part, by local company matching. Win-Win-Win.
- Open communication and honesty. Members want and expect real, genuine communications. Tell the truth – they can handle it.
- Traditional experiences for younger audiences need to merge more hybrid – but not fully digital. Let members choose. Give them agency on how they want their engagement. Options

# Membership Based Organizations

- Online communities that aren't social media based but centered around the organization – an online place to gather with other like-minded people.
- “People like us do things like this” – Seth Godin
- The Subscription Economy meets the Connection Economy



# Subscription vs. Connection

- We want both – the convenience of subscribing (our economy is moving to more subscription-based vs. product based, e.g., streaming services vs cable), but we also want to be connected.
- The Connection Economy – values relationships over assets, products, industry of previous economy.
- Basically – connection when we want it/how we want it.
- We used to be “members of Blockbuster” but now “we subscribe to Netflix”

# The Fundamental Question

- How do your mission, vision and goals align with your members?
- Identity forward – members join because “this is who I am”
- They are not “one of your members” – you are “one of the missions/causes they’ve joined.”



# Measuring Connection: *The Metrics of Membership*

# First and Foremost – What Are Your Goals?

- Measurement without intent is just noise
- “What gets measured gets managed”
  - Peter Drucker never said this
  - Be cautious of over-measuring – is every metric actionable?
  - What can you measure quickly, accurately, and intentionally?
  - Metrics can work against each other e.g. participation vs. upgrades
- What matters most to you and to stakeholders?

# Acquisition and Retention Rates

- Acquisition: How many new members are you acquiring each year?
- Retention: How many of last year's members are renewing this year?

$$\frac{(\text{Total Members This Year} - \text{New Members This Year})}{\text{Total Members Last Year}} \times 100 = \text{Renewal Rate}$$

# Other Key Metrics

- Reactivation Rate: How many lapsed/long lapsed members renewed this year?
- Upgrade/Downgrade: How many members are upgrading their membership/How many are downgrading? (this can also be referred to as “velocity”)
- Membership Lifetime Value – average monthly amount divided by churn rate (the rate at which you lose members/attrition rate)

Average Monthly - \$150; Churn Rate - 20%.  $150/.20 = \$750$



**LET ME EXPLAIN.**

**NO, THERE IS TOO MUCH.  
LET ME SUM UP.**

# The Membership Mystique



“Membership is much more than a group of people banded together to accomplish some goal or to meet some need . . . There’s also a kind of binding spirit that transcends the matter-of-fact mechanics of forming an organization and carrying out objectives.”

- Richard P. Trenbeth, *The Membership Mystique*

# Membership Matters

- “Human Beings can’t help it – we need to Belong.” – Seth Godin, *Tribes*
- Membership is a mutually beneficial way of advancing mission while inviting others to be a part of it
- Membership does have its privileges, but it is a reciprocal contract – we can’t invite members in and then not fulfill that promise of engagement
- Constant, regular monitoring and nurturing – and actively listening to members – is where success lies.

T. Clay Buck, CFRE, Master Trainer  
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