

To Attract and Keep Next Generation Young Professional Members, Let Them Engage on Their Own Terms

Adapted from an article *by Andrea Pellegrino* (www.pellegrinocollaborative.com)

In many associations, the discussion about how to attract and keep younger members centers on the various technology options available. “Should we use Twitter?” “Do we need to be on Google+?” “Should we develop a wiki?” By focusing on the technologies, these discussions miss the point that Twitter, Facebook, etc, are simply methods of communication. Technology is the delivery medium, not the end in itself. Instead, associations should be asking themselves:

- What are the specific needs and expectations of young members?
- Are they substantially different than those of older/more experienced members?
- What are the lines of demarcation between “younger” members and everyone else? Age? Experience? Region? Specialty? Job function?
- How should this association adapt its operating model to meet these needs/expectations? What will be the return on investment for each adaptation?

Before an association devotes itself to developing what can be very expensive, labor-intensive—and ultimately non-productive—interactive services or channels to attract younger members, it is critical that the organization first discover what these members want from the association, how they want it delivered, and whether the association can deliver it.

Involve the Audience

With social media technology and usage changing so rapidly, the only practical way to answer these questions is to engage with the younger member segment directly. Let them inform the association, guide it through the almost-daily changes in this area, and help it evaluate and implement any adaptations that are necessary.

New Terms of Engagement

Young professionals are an incredible resource that is usually overlooked as organizations wrestle with this challenge. The usual excuse associations give for failing to attract and keep younger members is that “they don’t join associations,” or “they aren’t interested in participating,” or “they don’t want to work their way up the ladder.” Thus, they are written off as unsuited to being members even though study after study, and real-life example after real-life example shows that the so-called “young professionals” do want to be involved. They do want to be community (association) members, they do want to participate and they want to know they are making a difference. They just want to do it on their terms!

So let them! Stop fighting and let them lead your association into the future!

- Form an official advisory group of members who are in your demographic target area to advise your association about how to engage younger professionals in the association, develop relevant benefits and delivery methods, and help recruit members from this demographic group.

- Identify influencers in this segment and invite them to form the group and to recruit their peers for the group. (Younger members strongly prefer to be personally asked to participate, usually by someone in their network.) Expect the make-up of the group to change frequently and to be much more fluid than a traditional committee.
- Give the group “official” status within your governance structure. To show them you are serious about hearing what they have to say, put a representative of the group on the board.
- Allow the group to define its task, its outcomes and its deadlines. Ask the group to identify and solve a specific problem or challenge of immediate interest by a specific deadline.
- Allow the group to determine how it wants to meet (e.g., conference calls, web conferences, Facebook, special online forums, Twitter, Google+, Linked In—whatever works for them), address the issue, and report its progress.
- Once the group has completed its first task, ask it to help the association implement the appropriate recommendations, again through short-term, defined tasks.

Why it Matters

The very different way the so-called “young professionals” or “Millennials” (or whatever the “young people’s” segment is called), interact with one another and with organizations, means every association that hopes to attract and keep the next generation of members must begin to re-think the way its benefits are delivered and marketed. Given the quickly-changing technology and practices utilized by this demand-driven market, the only realistic way for associations to keep abreast of these changes and accurately evaluate what they mean for the association is to directly engage—and listen to—this newest generation of members.

What it Will Accomplish

Forming an advisory group of next generation members will involve these members in the association in a productive way within the current association structure, while preparing it for change. It will allow the association to tap into the “young professionals” vast knowledge of and familiarity with social media to help design, develop, and deliver high-value benefits; utilize their social networks to recruit other “next generation” members; and minimize risk and expense by allowing the association to ascertain, test, and refine its services based on what this market wants before committing to benefits development.

Allowing members to engage on and define value on their own terms is a “win-win” for both associations and their members. But are associations ready to “walk the talk,” and change business as usual to accommodate their demand-driven future members?