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How to Revive Membership Organisations

Membership organisations have long been a cornerstone of professional industries, advocacy groups, political parties and community networks. Whether industry associations, trade groups, political or not-for-profits, these organisations have historically thrived on strong communities and a shared sense of purpose. However, the landscape has shifted dramatically in recent years, particularly since COVID-19. Many groups are now struggling to attract new members, let alone retain existing ones.

The challenge isn't just financial—it's cultural. Fewer people are willing to commit their time, money, or resources unless they see a direct and immediate return. The traditional sense of loyalty to an organisation has been replaced with a more transactional mindset. The question is no longer *"Should I support this organisation because I believe in its values?"* but rather, *"What's in it for me?"*

This shift presents a major challenge but also an opportunity. If membership organisations want to remain relevant, they need to rethink their approach.

Why Are Membership Organisations Struggling?

The organisations I work with have observed clear trends that explain why fewer people are joining, engaging, or volunteering their time:

1. The Shift to Transactional Thinking

People still care about values and causes, but that's no longer enough. Today, individuals and businesses assess involvement based on clear, measurable benefits. They ask, *"What do I get in return?"* If an organisation doesn't offer exclusive opportunities, strong networking, or professional advantages, potential members simply won't sign up.

2. Time Is a Scarce Commodity

We live in a world of constant demands—jobs, families, side hustles, and personal commitments. Many people struggle to justify regular meetings, events, or committee work when they're already stretched thin. The expectation that members will volunteer significant time or energy is no longer realistic.

3. The Internet Has Replaced Traditional Membership Perks

Decades ago, membership organisations were the primary source of industry insights, political insights, training, and professional connections. Now, everything is available online—often for free. LinkedIn groups, specialist forums, webinars, and open-access research mean that people no longer *need* to belong to an organisation to stay informed or connected.

4. Membership Is No Longer Seen as Essential

There was a time when joining an association was almost a requirement for credibility within certain professions or industries. That expectation has faded. Younger generations, in particular, see membership as optional rather than essential. Without a strong, compelling reason to join, they simply don't.

5. Volunteer Fatigue and Financial Pressures

Not only are people hesitant to volunteer their time, but they're also more cautious with their finances. Membership fees, donations, and sponsorships have all been hit hard as individuals and businesses tighten their budgets. If people don't see immediate value, they won't justify the expense.

How Can Membership Organisations Adapt?

Rather than resisting these changes, membership organisations must evolve. The old model of simply expecting people to join, volunteer, and contribute without clear incentives no longer works. Instead, organisations need to rethink their approach:

1. Shift from a Membership Model to a Value-Based Engagement Model

Stop focusing on membership numbers alone. Instead, prioritise engagement. Offer flexible ways for people to connect—whether through one-off events, short-term projects, or online interactions. Give them multiple entry points, rather than demanding long-term commitment upfront.

2. Clearly Define and Communicate Benefits

If people are more transactional, organisations must respond in kind. Membership should offer *clear, tangible benefits*—whether it’s exclusive resources, discounts, industry influence, or career advancement. Avoid vague promises like “networking opportunities” and instead showcase *specific* benefits:

- Access to high-profile industry leaders
- Exclusive market reports or policy insights
- Tailored mentoring or coaching opportunities
- Discounts on training, certifications, or industry events

If membership isn’t solving a real problem or providing unique value, it will be a hard sell.

3. Go Digital—But Do It Right

The internet may be a competitor, but it’s also an opportunity. Organisations should invest in high-quality online engagement:

- Exclusive, members-only digital communities
- Virtual events with top industry speakers
- Regular, high-value content (not just newsletters)
- Interactive tools and resources that members can’t get elsewhere

Instead of competing with free online resources, organisations should create *premium* content and experiences that justify membership.

4. Rethink Volunteering Models

Instead of expecting long-term commitments, offer short, flexible volunteering opportunities. Many people are happy to contribute—but in small, manageable ways. Consider:

- Micro-volunteering (one-off tasks, short-term projects)
- Advisory roles rather than committee positions
- Digital volunteering options (e.g., mentoring via Zoom)

Making volunteering easier and more accessible increases engagement without overwhelming people.

5. Create a Sense of Exclusivity and Influence

If membership feels like an obligation, people won’t join. But if it feels like an opportunity, they will. Organisations should reposition themselves as *exclusive networks* that provide access, influence, and insider knowledge.

- Offer ‘invite-only’ networking events
- Provide opportunities to shape policy or industry standards
- Give members direct access to decision-makers

Making people feel like they’re part of something *important* can increase both membership and engagement.

6. Strengthen Partnerships and Cross-Memberships

Organisations don’t have to stand alone. Partnering with other associations, businesses, and industry groups can provide additional value. Consider:

- Shared membership perks with aligned organisations
- Joint advocacy efforts for greater impact
- Co-hosted events that expand networking opportunities

Strategic partnerships can make membership more appealing by broadening its benefits.

7. Charismatic Leadership

One of the most compelling reasons people join and stay engaged with an organisation is strong leadership.

Inspiring, forward-thinking, and competent leaders can energise members, attract new talent, and create a sense of purpose and momentum. Organisations should:

- Ensure leaders are visible, accessible, and actively engaging with members
- Develop strong communicators who can articulate a clear vision
- Encourage leadership that is adaptive, innovative, and inclusive
- Recognise and mentor emerging leaders to sustain long-term growth

People don't just follow causes—they follow *leaders*. Organisations that invest in strong leadership will find it much easier to attract and retain members.

The Future of Membership Organisations

The traditional model of membership is fading—but that doesn't mean organisations have to disappear. People still want connection, industry influence, and access to opportunities. The key is adapting to *how* they engage.

By shifting from a passive “join and support us” approach to a dynamic, value-driven model, organisations can not only survive but thrive. The future belongs to those who meet people where they are—offering flexible, meaningful engagement that makes membership a *privilege* rather than an expectation.