

Association membership life cycle

The American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) defines an association as an organization or group of individuals affiliated with one another who share a common purpose, interest, or mission and exist for the mutual enrichment and advancement of their membership. As such, membership is an association's main element for being.

In this column, I wish to share with you a framework called membership life cycle developed by Tony Rossell, senior vice president of the US-based Marketing General Inc. (MGI), a company that focuses on membership marketing for the association and nonprofit community. I believe the reason behind the "life cycle" description is that membership, as we in the association world know, goes through a cycle that repeats itself in the same sequence or occurrence over time. Here are the five stages in the MGI membership life-cycle framework:

Awareness—This is when prospective members first discover your association. No one joins an association unless they first know that you exist and have value that will help them. So the goal of the awareness stage is mutual awareness. When they know who you are and you know who they are, you have the chance to cultivate a relationship.

Recruitment—This is when prospective members choose to join you. Membership is what marketers call a "push" product, as opposed to a "pull" product or something that is bought not sold. If you are a coffee drinker, you do not need a promotion piece to convince you to drink coffee every morning. But very few people wake up in the morning saying that they need to find an association to join. As a push product, membership is sold, not bought. Successful associations test, track and analyze special offers, messages, marketing channels and timing to convince a prospect to give membership a try.

Engagement—This is when new members feel they belong with you. The most likely member not to renew is a member in their first year. The second most likely member not to renew is one who has not availed of any benefit or has not been involved. So the goal for these new members and those not taking advantage of the value provided is to generate interaction, whether a visit to the web site, a completed survey, a product purchase or even a phone call.

Renewal—This is when lapsing members decide whether to keep you. When thinking about renewals, you are undertaking a campaign and not managing an event. Politicians know that just sending one letter or making one phone call is not a strategy that will maximize voter turnout. A synchronized, multichannel, high frequency, campaign is required to maximize renewal outcomes.

Reinstatement—This is when former members agree to return to you. In life, there will always be bumps on the road with any relationship. It is no different with the membership relationship. The reinstatement portion of the life cycle is where attempts are made to understand the problem and fix it. Successful associations never give up on getting members to come back.

The membership life cycle is a useful tool to diagnose and fix the challenges that face every membership program. Take some time to look at your membership to see which of these parts of the life cycle is a weak link and put time and effort into making some changes to address these.