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Engaging Young Association Members

A Strategic White Paper
for the Association Industry

“Each generation goes further than the generation preceding it because it stands on the shoulders of that generation. You will have opportunities beyond anything we’ve ever known.”

Ronald Reagan
President
United States of America
1981 - 1989

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Letter from the President

Engaging young professionals as association members is a priority for many organizations. To help associations deal with this challenge, Association Laboratory assembled a group of 35 young association executives from a range of industries to identify the challenges and opportunities for engaging younger members in trade and professional organizations.

We are pleased to share the outcome of this collaborative effort in the following white paper report: [Engaging Young Association Members](#).

Helping trade and professional associations make better strategic decisions is what we do at Association Laboratory.

The company is nationally recognized for its expertise and thought leadership in association research and strategy, serving a client base of leading state, national and global professional, trade and credentialing organizations through staff in Chicago, IL, and Washington, DC.

Our clients receive objective, in-depth qualitative investigation linked to empirically validated data using the most sophisticated research techniques in the industry.

As a client, you work with association executives and corporate researchers with decades of practical experience providing you with real world insights and ideas. Practical insights mean workable solutions for your association.

Your engagement with us is designed around you and your desired goals so that the learning from the research and discussions resides in your association. By developing informed, consensus-driven decisions, you ensure that you and your leadership move forward together.

I hope [Engaging Young Association Members](#) provides you with information that will help you lead your association more effectively. If we can ever be of assistance, never hesitate to contact us.

We look forward to working with you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dean West". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dean West
President and Founder
Association Laboratory Inc.

Executive Summary

This white paper will introduce commonly faced challenges to young professional engagement, identify common factors for successful engagement strategy and assess the most likely barriers to success. Each of these areas are highlighted below and discussed in greater depth within the text.

Highlights of Challenges to Young Professional Engagement

Based on research gathered from 35 association executives, much of the challenge of engaging young professionals rests within the association, which means that with a different strategy and approach, associations can lessen or overcome these challenges. The following list represents the primary challenges to successfully engaging young professionals.

- Having a culture that is resistant to the change needed to engage young professionals.
- Overestimating the knowledge and understanding that young professionals have regarding the existence and role of associations.
- Not providing young professionals with engagement value propositions that meet their needs or capabilities.
- Not sufficiently understanding young professionals' financial barriers to engagement.
- Not communicating a clear value proposition regarding the benefits of engagement to young professionals or their employing organizations.
- Not creating paths for engagement that meet the needs of young professionals.
- Underestimating the influence of external factors on the desire and ability of young professionals to engage with the association.
- Not fully understanding the impact of career uncertainty and not linking the benefits of association engagement to young professionals' career goals and needs.

Successful young professional engagement strategy will need to take these challenges into account.

Highlights of Success Factors for Young Professional Engagement

The primary success factors for developing an effective engagement strategy targeting young professionals are as follows:

- Being specific when identifying young professionals as a target market and learn about them to understand their needs and desired experiences.
- Allocating a larger percentage of the association's marketing investment to awareness and knowledge—building activities designed to inform and educate young professionals about associations, their role in the industry or profession and how association engagement is relevant to their personal and professional lives.
- Developing ongoing research mechanisms to investigate the goals, attitudes and perceptions of young professionals regarding association engagement and incorporate young professional voices into decision making.
- Identifying and customizing young professional engagement models specific to their needs, including, but not limited to, membership categories.
- Developing outreach strategies that link young professionals with more senior industry, professional and association leaders and specifically focus on identifying and developing young leaders as peer opinion leaders.
- Focusing on trial engagement strategies designed to provide young professionals a low risk means of experimenting with key aspects of the association and to experience the engagement value proposition without substantial investment of time or financial resources.
- Creating sustainable engagement paths with distinct rewards or recognition for achieving particular milestones.
- Creating and sustaining benefits-oriented communication strategies that consistently reinforce the value of association engagement through communication channels that are familiar to young professionals.
- Developing strategies that specifically educate employers on the benefits of their young professional staffs' engagement, to encourage and sustain investment by organizations.

By developing *intentional strategies* in these areas, associations are more likely to be successful engaging young professionals in association membership.

Highlights of Barriers to Young Professional Engagement

The presence of any of the following barriers challenge an association's ability to successfully implement strategies designed to engage young professionals and can cause those strategies to fail.

- The existence of a very competitive market for the attention and engagement of young professionals.
- An association leadership team that is not in agreement on whether or how to engage young professionals.
- A focus on legacy audiences and programs instead of the goals and needs of future audiences.
- Insufficient time and effort being invested in understanding the goals, decision-making influences and resulting needs of young professionals.
- Thinking in terms of young professional "programs" instead of young professional "strategies" and therefore having a shortsighted view of young professional engagement that limits their success.
- A structure to serve an audience with needs and desired programs that are substantially different from young professionals' needs and desires.

Associations that successfully identify the role of young professionals and develop engagement value propositions that meet their unique needs have an advantage in the global competition for time, money and quality leadership engagement.

Introduction

In Association Laboratory's 2015 environmental scan of the association business environment, presented in [Looking Forward 2015](#), nearly 1/3 of the respondents indicated that their members were struggling with how best to manage a multigenerational workforce. Respondents also identified challenges in creating compelling, affordable professional development programs that serve diverse audiences through multiple delivery channels.

With that in mind, Association Laboratory conducted research and found that many associations are currently structured to serve the needs of the Baby Boom Generation. Naturally, as this cohort retires, member engagement value propositions will need to evolve to serve the emerging X and Y generations.

This strategic white paper, [Engaging Young Association Members](#), was created to identify the primary challenges association face when attempting to engage younger members and to offer tips for success. This white paper is based on the input of thirty-five (35) association executives who are actively working on identifying and engaging young professionals in their trade and professional associations. Respondents' functions span the range of association responsibilities, from membership and education to components and meetings.

These association executives working in the "trenches" of young professional engagement provide a unique and authentic perspective on the challenges of, solutions for and barriers to effective association engagement strategy.

For purposes of this white paper, young professionals were defined as individuals between the ages of 21 and 34 years. Based on Association Laboratory's research, young professionals exhibit the following characteristics.

- *Less experience* – Young professionals have less experience within their careers and, specifically, less experience with associations. As a result, they place a premium on peer guidance and use technology to facilitate this peer-to-peer knowledge exchange.
- *Less power* – Young professionals have fewer financial resources and less power with their employers. This makes them more dependent on employer support for engagement with associations.
- *More uncertainty* – Young professionals are making initial choices about their lives and careers and are full of uncertainty. This uncertainty leads to more frequent changes in family and employment status and greater experimentation with personal and job choices.

These characteristics mean that young professionals are inherently a riskier target market to attract and sustain as an association investment.

But this demographic is vital in the long term and how associations respond to it is worth serious thought and consideration. All associations need to determine how the next generation entering a profession or industry is similar or different from preceding generations and how association strategy needs to be adapted as a result.

Associations seeking to improve young professional member engagement need to invest more resources in how to identify and understand young professionals' needs and values and how to adapt and sustain a strategy that achieves young professional member engagement.

Challenges to Young Professional Engagement

The following section provides an in-depth look at the primary challenges the contributing authors identified as common impediments to the successful development of engagement strategy targeting young professionals.

Cultural Resistance and Attitudes

Associations often have legacy cultures that are resistant to engagement by young professionals.

Associations are often designed to meet the needs of current members, not future members, and senior executives, not young staffers. Deeply invested, long-term members enjoy the benefits their steadfast commitment affords them, and they often don't want to give up any of the resources dedicated to them. As a result, associations often meet resistance from its chief stakeholders to create opportunities for young professionals or customize their engagement value proposition to the unique needs of their juniors.

The following are some of the most significant challenges:

Lack of professional respect — Too many senior association members fail to view young professionals as industry or professional participants.

When young professionals are treated as “kids,” they are less likely to be interested in engaging with the association. Young professionals are often frustrated by the perceived dominance of discussions by more senior members of the association, industry or profession.

Resistance to change — Many current association members are often hesitant to make any changes that would make participation in the association more attractive to young professionals. Young professionals often encounter this resistance because more senior professionals have invested substantial time and energy in existing programs, services or initiatives. The longer the person has been involved, the more likely he or she is to resist change. The result is unwillingness to alter the culture or engagement value proposition to be more attractive to young professionals.

Tenure-based instead of merit-based advancement — Many associations advance members through volunteer leadership based on a person's tenure with an association rather than selecting a person for leadership advancement based on merit as well—or on merit alone.

Many young professionals have experience as leaders and are successful in their own right; tenure-based rewards frustrate young professionals because this is a characteristic that cannot be overcome through training, education or performance.

Poor relationship support — Senior member support can be vital to expanding a young professional's network. Too often, though, associations isolate young professionals or create specific barriers to interaction with senior professionals. For example, prohibiting interaction between senior executives and young professionals by creating groups based on title. By limiting interaction, the association creates a culture that isolates young professionals and limits their desire for engagement.

Lack of Association Awareness & Role

Many associations overestimate the knowledge and understanding young professionals have regarding the existence and role of associations.

Most associations do not play a direct role in the lives of most university students or other young people. The result is that many young professionals have a low level of awareness of the existence of associations, their role in various industries and professions and the benefits of engagement.

The following summarizes some of the key issues:

Association awareness — Many young professionals have not heard of the association industry in general or the specific associations within their industry or profession.

Association role — Often the work of an association is at a high level within an industry or profession; and therefore, its activity may not be apparent to a young professional. Young professionals may have little knowledge about the role that association plays in their industry or profession and why this role is important.

Association career benefits — Since young professionals are in the early stages of their careers and have less experience with associations, they may not know or recognize how an association can be an asset to their careers, allowing them to become more educated, and support their personal and professional development.

Designing an Effective Engagement Value Proposition

Associations must provide young professionals with engagement value propositions that meet their needs or capabilities.

Young professionals have unique needs and their own work experiences. Some actually do have experience with associations, but many have more limitations on their ability to join or otherwise engage with an association than their more seasoned colleagues.

Consequently, young professionals are often faced with association membership and other distinct product/service offers that don't meet their needs, are beyond their means or their capability to purchase or participate.

The following are more specific examples of challenges related to poorly designed value:

Needs investigation — Not fully and completely understanding the needs and desired experiences of young professionals prior to designing an engagement value proposition will most likely cause it to miss the mark.

Using generational myths as a guide for strategy — Generations are huge. While books on macro-differences within and between generations are interesting, too often, association professionals use broad generational descriptions as substitutes for actual knowledge of young professionals' needs.

Reliance on legacy engagement — Many associations assume young professionals want the same basic benefits and engagement paths as more senior members. Consequently, they use different messaging but provide the same benefits through the same delivery mechanisms.

Tradition — Some organizations have strict hierarchies, and substantial time and effort is required for member involvement. Senior professionals may resent younger members' desire to jump ahead and skip the traditional forms of "paying one's dues" that had been the customary way to move through the organization.

Underestimating the desire for experiences — Young professionals seek different experiences than more senior professionals. They place greater priority on social and peer-based learning because they are creating networks not managing networks. Many associations often underestimate how difficult it is to create a new network.

Lack of a cohesive road map or rallying point — Many associations provide a very fragmented experience by attempting to serve multiple audiences through a complex product/service portfolio. There is often no clear path for engagement and no cohesive, centralized experience or rallying point for young professionals.

Insufficient Consideration of Cost

Associations are not sufficiently understanding of young professionals' financial barriers to engagement.

Young professionals have less discretionary funds available, and their freedom to expend organizational funds on engagement is more limited. Many associations do not seem to understand this. This creates substantial financial barriers to engagement.

The following are some of the most significant challenges:

Price barriers to entry — Associations often provide discounted memberships to students; however, membership becomes substantially more expensive once the person is out of school. The more substantial the increase in membership dues, the less likely the student member will convert to a full member once he or she graduates and loses the student benefit.

Price as share of wallet — The cost for membership, as a percentage of a young person's total salary or available resources, is often too high. For example, a \$500 registration is a substantially higher percentage of someone's take home pay at \$45,000 than at \$90,000.

Organizational support of cost — If the employing organizations are not financially supportive of engagement in associations, it is more difficult for young professionals to find the resources necessary to fund this activity. Moreover, while membership may be supported, supplementary support for activities, such as conference attendance, may be substantially limited.

"In my opinion, young professionals get engaged when there is a rallying point or a very clear campaign of purpose that gives them something important to focus on and drive their involvement."

Tammy A. Barnes

Director, Operations, State Advocacy Office
American Psychological Association
Vice-Chair, ASAE Young Professionals Committee 2014-2015; Chair, 2015-2016

Misdirected Communication

Associations that do not communicate a clear value proposition regarding the benefits of engagement for the member or their employing organization sabotage their own efforts.

Young professionals have fewer resources and require more organizational support to engage with an association. This places a premium on a clearly communicated value proposition.

Many associations fail to communicate how young professionals are already engaged with the associations. Like other members, young people want to see themselves reflected in association communications and have the association visibly acknowledge that their story is important.

The following are some of the most significant challenges.

Education on association purpose — Young professionals have less experience with associations. So more education is required regarding the benefits of engagement and how those benefits are received and accrue over time.

Features vs. benefits orientation — Too often, the focus of association communication is on the features of association engagement, not the benefits of engagement. For individuals less knowledgeable and experienced with associations, these features are meaningless.

Lack of clear rationale — Association communications too often focus on all the theoretical benefits of engagement instead of focusing on those unique benefits desired by young professionals. This creates message dilution and makes it difficult for someone less experienced with the association to understand why he or she should engage.

Poor uses of modern communication — Young professionals typically use different communication vehicles than many senior association members and are more accustomed to virtually constant peer-to-peer contact to transmit information and share experiences. Too many associations fail to take communication differences into account or invest in the communication infrastructure necessary for success with young professionals. For example, the vast majority of young professionals are likely to go online from a smartphone for at least some of their information searches; consequently, to meet the needs of this new audience, association websites must be easy to use from all types of mobile devices.

Bait and switch — Changing marketing language, but offering the same legacy program that isn't geared for them as advertised.

Creation of Sustainable Engagement Paths

Not creating paths for engagement that meet the needs of young professionals creates unnecessary challenge

Young professionals are less established in their careers; therefore, they are less likely to take advantage of traditional association engagement paths, such as volunteers or subject matter experts, or participate in more expensive engagement opportunities.

Young professionals want to contribute in their own way. This requires a structure that allows them to establish their own pathways for participation in the association. For example, associations may foster chapter participation for young professionals since the lower cost and easy accessibility are more consistent with their ability to engage. Another option is to create unique paths for engagement. This gives young professionals freedom to avoid legacy structures that are either out of their reach (ex: expensive conference) or inappropriate at that career stage (ex: subject matter expert).

Finally, many traditional association programs and services may not match the needs of young professionals. For example, a job bank may include a substantial number of senior level positions but fewer junior positions that would be more appropriate for a younger person. There also are many competing demands on the time of young professionals that could limit their ability to attend evening or weekend programs.

Many associations fail to sustain engagement paths for young professionals once they're created

While many associations implement strategies to create trial engagement, for example, through less expensive dues categories or first-time attendee rates at conventions, too often they fail to create strategies designed to sustain this initial engagement.

Common mistakes include the following:

Inconsistent communication and follow-up — Associations often fail to create consistent communication and post engagement follow-up communication strategies necessary to maintain the interest of young professionals.

Lack of supporting engagement paths that build upon a trial interaction — Many associations often fail to create secondary or tertiary paths of engagement designed to build on a trial engagement. For example, once a person has attended a chapter meeting, what happens next? How does the association build on this initial engagement? Once a person has decided to engage with the association, mechanisms for continued and expanded engagement need to be implemented.

Lack of outcomes communication — Many associations often fail to communicate the outcomes of engagement. What was accomplished for the industry or profession through the young professional's contribution of time or money? Young professionals seek feedback more often than senior professionals and want to know the impact of their engagement on the association and on their lives.

Lack of immediacy — Young professionals place a higher priority on immediate gratification. Many associations fail to create a clear and immediate benefit. When an association seeks to attract young members, they need to identify and provide a relevant benefit as soon as possible. The longer the delay, the more likely the person will consider the organization less relevant. If this continues then they may drop out or have a negative opinion of the association that then needs to be corrected and/or dealt with. Young professionals may be reluctant to take this risk without the experience necessary to understand why the wait is justified.

Underestimating External Influences on Engagement Decisions

Underestimating the influence of external factors on the desire and ability of young professionals to engage with an association can challenge engagement results.

Young professionals are not living and working in a vacuum. They are often in a transitional period of their lives and face substantial decisions on issues ranging from their career to their family situation.

Some of the most common influences are the following.

Managing work/life balance — Young professionals are still struggling to determine how best to manage career, family and personal pressures that more senior professionals have learned to navigate. In addition, their career may not be as central to their lives relative to social interests or family issues.

Workload management — Young professionals are still developing the personal skills necessary to manage their jobs and careers. As a result, the daily activity of prioritizing and successfully accomplishing work tasks is more challenging.

Information overload — Young professionals, like other professionals, must process an incredible amount of work and professional information. Unfortunately, many are attempting to process this information with a less developed skill set. They have less experience than more senior members, which may make the amount of information more overwhelming.

Financial pressures — Young professionals are often faced with initial debt payments for education, transportation or housing at a time when their career is at its least lucrative stage.

Association alternatives — Young professionals may not see the need for association engagement relative to competing opportunities within their industry or profession. Their employer may provide or support continuing education that does not involve association membership, and there are avenues for professional networking which do not rely on the association, for example LinkedIn, that the young professional may pursue.

Competing engagement alternatives — Young professionals are being actively courted by a wide range of organizations, from their local church or school to social clubs and other professional and industry associations.

Career Uncertainty

Many associations miss opportunities by not putting enough energy and resources into fully understanding the impact of career uncertainty and linking the benefits of association engagement to a young professional’s career goals and needs.

Young professionals are in the evaluator stage of their careers. This stage is characterized by uncertainty, inexperience and experimentation.

Some of the most substantial issues are the following:

“Young professionals tend to not only change companies frequently, but many also change professions (some more than others, of course). Being able to track, in a timely manner, who is entering and leaving the industry can be challenging.”

Alyssa Engle Giannini
Grant Development Manager
Association Management Center

Underestimating the level of career commitment —It is a mistake to overestimate how committed young professionals are to a particular career path. Young professionals are still evaluating their work and career options. Their current positions might be “just a job” or a strategic stepping-stone to a later career. Association engagement might be just what a young professional needs to grow in his or her career.

Underestimating career education requirements — Young professionals are less knowledgeable and confident when evaluating engagement paths.

This creates uncertainty regarding the benefits of prospective engagement paths and reduces the perceived benefits of specific engagement activities because the desire for these benefits may be less certain.

Poor links between association benefits and career paths —Education strategies are designed to inform young professionals about potential industry or professional career paths. Many associations under invest in these strategies. Once associations have educated young people about a career path, they need to show them how their desire for this path links to the association and its products and services.

Success Factors for Engaging Young Professionals

The following are the primary factors important for successfully developing engagement strategy targeting young professionals.

Market Identification and Understanding

Associations need to identify their young professional target market and develop a fundamental understanding of this market's needs and desired experiences.

Many associations often target young professionals by focusing on age without exploring or understanding the other aspects of their professional lives that influence decisions. This results in a lack of specific knowledge that undermines marketing and other initiatives.

Once young professionals have been defined, their movement through the industry and profession and their engagement with the association can be tracked to guide strategy decisions.

Key characteristics for successful engagement include the following.

Market definition — Associations need to create a uniform definition of “young professional” that is consistently understood and used throughout the association.

Purpose — Young professional engagement is a component of the association's total engagement strategy that must be in alignment with the other priorities of the organization. When creating programs or groups specifically for young professionals, associations need to have a consensus about the purpose of a young professionals group and the role of young professional engagement relative to the broader Mission, goals and strategies of the association.

Awareness and Education

Most associations need to allocate a larger percentage of marketing investment than they currently do to awareness and knowledge building activities designed to inform and educate young professionals about associations, their role in the industry or profession and how engagement is relevant to their personal and professional lives.

Young professionals naturally have less knowledge of associations. This includes less awareness of associations in general, less understanding of the role of the associations within their industry or profession and less understanding of how engagement with the association might be helpful.

This makes them less amenable to membership or product sales pitches and offers that are created based on an assumption of knowledge that does not, in fact, exist.

In addition, young professionals have less experience with the programs and services of associations, such as chapter meetings, conferences or other common association initiatives. As a result, it is more difficult for them to appreciate the value of these activities.

To overcome this, associations need to invest less in communications that provide a distinct marketing offer and more on communications that educate and inform.

Young professionals are a *future market* for more substantial product and service offers. In the short term, a more substantial investment in awareness and education is necessary to create a sufficient knowledge level to allow this audience to make informed choices later in their career.

Ongoing Investigation of Goals and Perceptions

Create mechanisms for ongoing research to investigate the goals, attitudes and perceptions of young professionals regarding association engagement and incorporate young professional voices into decision making.

Young professionals are not a singular, monolithic block. Associations need to understand the profession, types of jobs within the profession (i.e. working for government is different from being a consultant) and the need to understand how people move through stages within the profession (moving into management vs. staying hands-on).

A young dental assistant, for example, may have very different perceptions than a young product marketing executive or engineer. In addition, the lives of young professionals change rapidly as they make decisions regarding education, work and family, and these decisions impact where they work and what they do.

As a result, associations need more frequent monitoring of young professionals so that these rapid changes can be quickly identified and incorporated into strategy.

In addition, Associations need to create mechanisms to incorporate young professionals into the association's decision making.

Incorporating young professionals into how the association makes decisions fulfills several purposes.

1. *Market understanding* — You create a mechanism to learn about their needs.
2. *Leadership development* — You create a structure to identify and orient new leaders.
3. *Authenticity of communication* — You demonstrate that young professionals are integral to the association.

ASSOCIATION LABORATORY TIP

A leading edge tool for ongoing investigation of young professional needs is a *voice of the member program*. Voice of the member programs are ongoing qualitative and/or quantitative research initiatives designed to create a more in-depth dialog with an important stakeholder group. The goal is to create and sustain a continual understanding of how a person views the association and how that translates into choices and behaviors over time. Common tools for this investigation are online bulletin boards or the creation of larger, more sophisticated online marketing research communities. These modern techniques often resonate with young professionals.

It is important to note, though, that this does not mean associations should necessarily put young professionals on the Board of Directors. The key is to involve them, not to force them into roles for which they may not be prepared and may generate resentment among more senior leaders.

Common techniques include the following:

- Voice of the Member Programs that collect and funnel young professional insights into the association.
- Young professional advisory boards that create a way for young professionals to discuss and comment on issues important to the association
- Young professional volunteer recruitment that encourages and supports young professional involvement in volunteer activities.

Develop Customized, Meaningful Engagement Models

Identify and customize young professional engagement models specific to their needs, including, but not limited to, membership categories.

First, many associations attempt to modify current membership categories to fit the needs of young professionals.



ASSOCIATION EXAMPLE

In order to create communities and governance more attuned to the needs of younger members, the Lions Clubs International allowed young professional members to create their own clubs designed around how they wanted to engage with the organization. The new initiative, called **Your Club, Your Way**, is getting very positive feedback. Lions Clubs International is looking at various elements of meeting and club management and encouraging young professionals to use their own forms of communication to manage club business.

Mindy Marks
Manager, District and Club Administration
Lions Clubs International

Second, too many associations limit their discussion of engaging young professionals to membership.

Young professionals may desire to engage with the association but membership may not be their preferred path. Modern associations are designing engagement models that may or may not result in traditional membership.

While many senior professionals have already made decisions regarding their profession and specific career track and are less likely to substantially change professional or industry direction, this is not the case for young professionals.

Young professionals are more likely to be experimenting with their career and industry choices, as well as the location where they work and live. They're also educating themselves on whether or not associations are relevant to their situation.

To solve this challenge, associations need two distinct things:

- First, an engagement value proposition customized to the needs of the young professional audience.
- Second, an engagement value proposition that is adaptable to the changing needs of the young professional.

An engagement value proposition looks at the entirety of the experience with the association. By determining the *engagement value proposition*, you establish how everything within the association supports young professionals.

Key characteristics of an adaptable engagement value proposition are as follows:

- *Market directed* — The engagement value proposition needs to be oriented to the needs and desired benefits of the person, not the organizational needs of the association.
- *Flexible* — The engagement value proposition needs to be adjustable to adapt to and come in line with the frequent, changing needs of the young professionals. .
- *Monitored* — The more frequently the person makes decisions about their value proposition, the more closely and frequently the association needs to monitor their changing needs. This requires associations to have the ability to track how members and prospects engage over time.

Traditional membership strategy is still very successful when done correctly. Young professionals value the Mission of the organization and want to be part of something “bigger” than themselves, just like more senior professionals. Traditional membership strategy also continues to be an effective way of conveniently “buying” the products, services and initiatives of the association.

Unfortunately, young professionals have less knowledge and experience with associations. This places a premium on customizing membership models and corresponding membership price to their needs and capabilities. Associations need to improve the creation and communication of specific, customized membership categories.

A successful membership value proposition will model the following characteristics:

- *Market based* — The membership model must be based on the needs of the young professional market, not simply a modification of a membership model designed to serve more senior professionals. Young people have different needs and the membership model must reflect their needs.
- *Adaptable* — The membership model needs to be more flexible because young professionals’ lives are in greater flux. Consequently, their needs change more frequently, perhaps in concert with changes in their employment or personal situations.
- *Practical* — The membership model must provide practical and achievable benefits and opportunities for engagement. For example, a 15% discount on a conference young professionals are not likely to attend is not a benefit to them and might be beyond their financial means right now.
- *Easy* — Young professionals are less experienced with associations. The more difficult it is to join or retain because of bureaucracy or inconsistent or conflicting business processes, the less likely the association will attract and retain young professionals.
- *Modern* — Young professionals are savvy about technology and use it in their daily lives. A membership value proposition built on outdated communications methods or other old technology will frustrate them. For example, the inability to join online or websites that don’t quickly direct them to a solution will cause frustration and inhibit engagement or membership. And email transmissions/websites that can’t be read on a smartphone, might not be read at all.

Develop and Sustain Leadership Outreach Strategies

Develop outreach strategies that link young professionals with more senior industry, professional and association leaders and specifically focus on identifying and developing young leaders as peer opinion leaders.

Young professionals value relationships with more senior leaders, but they are less experienced in how to create these relationships and less secure about whether they will be accepted by more senior professionals.

By creating intentional strategies to link young professionals to industry, professional and association leaders, the association helps them overcome their lack of experience and insecurity.

This requires an association structure that doesn't limit young professionals' access to more senior members and a culture that embraces young professionals as peers worthy of time and respect.

Mentoring programs are a common method of incorporating young professionals into associations. Leader to Leader programs that match senior association volunteer leadership with younger association leaders is another example.

The following are essential to success:

Eliminate structural barriers to interaction.

A structural barrier is an organizational characteristic that inherently limits interaction. For example, a CEO-Only meeting restricts access and a substantially higher cost for participation restricts access.

Eliminate cultural barriers to interaction.

Cultural barriers are how you communicate and behave. For example, if the association constantly refers to young professionals in derogatory language (newbie, rookie, etc.) focusing on the "young" instead of the "professional," younger professionals will be less enthusiastic.

Make mentoring relevant.

It is important to match people not necessarily by age but by interest and professional relevance. A younger sales executive or clinical researcher will be more interested in knowing a more senior sales executive from the industry or more senior researcher from the profession.

In addition, associations need to create intentional strategies to identify and cultivate young professional leaders who then act as visible peer opinion leaders for other young professionals.

Young professionals often look to their peers for guidance. By cultivating young professional leaders the association creates a pool of visible, capable opinion leaders who can authentically communicate the association's value proposition. Central to this culture is peer-to-peer guidance, not staff-directed guidance. Young professionals want to engage with fellow members.

An additional benefit is that this creates a pool of future association leaders who can take up the mantle of association leadership as they progress through their careers.

"It is important to develop a successful mentorship/leadership succession program to not only develop talent, but also attract it."

Shane Yates CAE, CMP
Executive Director
Ohio Society of Association Executives



ASSOCIATION EXAMPLE

The American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) discovered that if they could engage young professionals early as a student member it allowed them to demonstrate the value of AHIMA membership at a much lower price point (\$45). When people join as a student member they are eligible for new graduate membership of \$100. The price gradually increases as they become full active MEMBERS LATER in their career. In addition, over the last few years AHIMA has developed a mentor program that now includes more than 1,600 participants and a Student Advisory Council and New Graduate Leadership Council. All are mechanisms allowing young professionals to experiment with AHIMA and participate in decisions.”

Rachel Travis MS
Senior Manager, Member Engagement & Strategy
American Health Information Management Association

Finally, an engaged young leader core can act as an important sounding board or “check” to legacy or traditional attitudes held by more senior management or volunteer leadership.

It is people who make associations work, so investing in talented individuals creates a “bench” for future association leadership needs.

Specific questions to answer in these educational opportunities include the following:

Industry Education — What is the industry and what are logical career paths within the industry?

Professional Education — What professional competencies are necessary for success and how does a young professional attain these competencies?

Association Role — What is the association’s role within the industry and profession and why is this important?

Association Benefits — How does the association relate to the personal and professional choices facing a young professional? How does the association contribute to improving the competence or skills of young professionals?

The association should develop specific strategies designed to create awareness among young professionals about these issues and orient them to how information about the industry, profession and association is relevant to their decisions.

Create Trial Engagement Strategies

Focus on trial engagement strategies designed to allow young professionals a low risk means of experimenting with key aspects of the association and to experience the engagement value proposition without substantial investment of time or financial resources.

Without complete understanding of the association and with less freedom and capacity of time and financial resources, engagement inherently seems riskier to a young professional.

A trial engagement strategy provides an easy connection between the young professional and the aspects of association engagement considered most essential. Examples might be a package of 3 complimentary chapter meetings or three-months' worth of digital communications.

The goal is to allow the young professional to self-define an engagement path and sample the best of what the association offers.

Engagement Continuity and Rewards

Create sustainable engagement paths with distinct rewards or recognition for achieving particular milestones.

Young professionals between 21 and 30 years of age are more accustomed to programs oriented around recognition than senior professionals. As younger professionals, they logically have less professional accomplishments and thus need more substantial 3rd party validation of their expertise.

Associations need to clearly identify key engagement milestones and provide recognition or reward systems that provide feedback to the young professional. Not only are these types of programs familiar to young professionals, but they also provide an intentional method of strategically rewarding engagement.

The goal is not to provide meaningless “participation ribbons” but to create a logical series of personal and professional incentives to expand engagement.

Strategic Benefits Oriented Communication

Create and sustain benefits-oriented communication strategies that consistently reinforce the value of association engagement through communication channels that are familiar to young professionals.

Young professionals are just discovering the benefits, and correspondingly, the costs and limitations of association membership. Associations need to quickly and authentically reinforce positive experiences and continue to educate young professionals on how to get the most from their membership or involvement.

“Young professionals prefer to communicate through various social media channels and thrive on continual updates to keep them informed.”

Ashley Gill

Manager of the ASGE Foundation
American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy

Keys to a successful communication strategy include the following:

- *Outcomes orientation* — Highlight the impact of their involvement.
- *Authenticity* — Make your message concise, believable and authentic. Don't promise what you can't deliver.
- *Peer-based* — Highlight peer support and acceptance through such techniques as testimonials from other young professionals.
- *Channel selection* — Communicate to young professionals through the channels they are accustomed to using, whether it be social media or text-based.
- *Strategic digital presence* — Create digital interaction and communication spaces consistent with young professionals' needs and preferences, such as LinkedIn, for example. These channels are part of the normal personal and professional environment for young professionals and the association needs to develop competency in these areas.

In summary, young professionals are incredibly savvy with marketing messages, so communication that isn't focused on their needs or over promises benefits will be less effective. In addition, young professionals are more likely to be influenced by peers because they have less experience with the association. Finally, you must communicate via channels they are accustomed to using to demonstrate your familiarity with how they interact and to best catch their attention.

Design Employer Support Strategies

Develop strategies that specifically target employers to encourage and sustain investment by organizations in association engagement.

Employers have substantial influence on the desire and ability of a young professional to engage with an association. As a result, associations need to create intentional strategies that help employers meet their goals, inform employers about the value of association engagement and promote employer support of young professionals in the association.

1. Understand the goals of employers and how those goals are relevant to the products, services and initiatives of the association.
2. Create intentional strategies linking relevant strategies to these goals in the context of young professional needs.
3. Successfully market these employer-centric strategies to employers to encourage and sustain support of young professionals.

Note that the needs of employers may differ greatly within an industry. An academic institution or related employer may wish for more access for new professors to publish, while a consulting company may prefer more avenues for younger employees to meet potential clients.

Barriers to Young Professional Engagement

The following represent challenges to the successful implementation of strategies to engage young professionals.

Competition for Engagement

There is a very competitive market for the attention and engagement of young professionals.

ASSOCIATION LABORATORY TIP

In Association Laboratory's white paper on membership engagement, **The Future of Association Engagement**, produced in cooperation with the American Society of Association Executives Foundation, several important influences on engagement were discovered.

- The influence of the company and professional culture.
- The influence of peers.
- The influence of other engagement experiences.

When evaluating how to incorporate young professionals more effectively into the association these influences have to be identified and understood.

This white paper can be downloaded [here](#).

Young professionals are constantly bombarded with marketing and engagement messages from a wide variety of organizations and individuals. The result is constant noise that makes it difficult to penetrate. In addition, many young professionals are just beginning substantial life activities such as career selection, marriage, home ownership or the birth of a first child.

There are hundreds of distractions, challenges and other opportunities, all of which are actively competing for the attention, time commitment and financial resources of the young professional.

Lack of Leadership Consensus

Association leadership is not in agreement on whether to or how to engage young professionals.

Lack of leadership consensus takes two forms.

Within the association, senior leaders are hesitant to invest in, or are even hostile to the idea of, the engagement of young professionals. For a young professional strategy to succeed, leadership buy-in is essential because the programs may not generate significant short-term benefits for the association and the Board will need to sustain organizational commitment over the long-term.

Within the industry or profession there is often a lack of support from key opinion leaders. Without the support of industry and professional leaders and employers, it is difficult to convince young professionals they should engage with the association and difficult to sustain this engagement over time.

Historical Bias

Associations often focus on legacy audiences and programs instead of focusing on the goals and needs of future audiences.

Young professionals are by definition the future of the association. They are making engagement choices in a world different from that in which the association may have historically operated. If the association creates engagement models based on historical assumptions and their experience with historical audiences, these models will be less effective.

Historical bias often manifests itself in some of the following:

Historical frame of reference — Marketing strategies based on the historical performance of programs designed for and marketed to people who are now senior professionals that no longer reflect the environment and needs of young professionals.

Leadership bias — The most experienced and often most senior professionals are active in association governance. Their decisions are based on experiences and assumptions that may bear little relevance to the world in which young professionals operate.

Using historical assumptions and decisions by leaders with a historical bias results in strategies that are less effective.

Lack of Market Identification and Understanding

Many associations invest insufficient time and effort in understanding the goals, decision-making influences and resulting needs of young professionals.

Associations make strategic decisions based on common myths of the Millennial Generation instead of actual knowledge of the specific young professional audience they desire to serve.

ASSOCIATION LABORATORY TIP

Young professionals often respond to more modern research techniques. One particularly useful research tool is the *online bulletin board*. An online bulletin board is a moderated online discussion collecting qualitative information. It allows for more in-depth exploration of young professional needs in a dynamic environment. Online bulletin boards take advantage of young professionals' experience and comfort with online communication and demonstrate the association's ability to meet the unique communication needs of young professionals.

Young professionals are often stereotyped by peers as taking a more radical technology-driven approach to association engagement. In order for young professionals to thrive, association executives and senior colleagues need to understand the unique attributes of the young professional population and also need to reduce stereotyping.

Young professionals are a new audience. Therefore, the association must invest greater resources in the discovery or investigative processes designed to truly understand how young professions think and how that might translate into professional or personal needs that can be realistically solved by the association.

In addition, the variance in experiences, perspectives and needs of thirty year olds relative to 22 year olds can be substantial. Young professionals are moving more rapidly and dynamically through their lives and investigative techniques need to take this into account.

Common investigative mistakes include not incorporating the perspective of young professionals into the analysis and analytic techniques, which are based on historical or legacy assumptions that may no longer be relevant.

Lack of Engagement Sustainability

Associations too often think of young professional “programs” instead of young professional “strategies” and, thus, have a limited view of young professional engagement that limits their success.

Associations often create a specific event or activity targeting young professionals without considering the entirety of the engagement experience. For example, there is a young professional meeting at the conference but this is disconnected from other young professional activities at the chapter or via the volunteer experience.

Many strategies simply need more time to incubate at the development and implementation levels. Planning with a long timeframe in mind, both for thorough development of the initial strategy and digestion of a new strategy by the broader organization, will generally lead to better results.

Association Structural Gaps

Associations are often structured to serve an audience with needs and desired programs that are substantially different from young professionals’ needs and desires.

Internally, many associations fail to identify clearly who is responsible for developing and sustaining young professional strategy.

In addition, the association’s existing organizational structure, designed around the needs of more senior association professionals, may be inconsistent with the desired engagement value proposition of younger professionals.

The result is often an association that simply lacks real opportunities for engaging young professionals. Without actual opportunities for engagement, it is difficult to create a viable young professional engagement proposition. An example of a structural challenge is an association focused on national activity but lacking, or inconsistent about, local communities, such as chapters, that are more accessible to young professionals.

Conclusion

The importance of young professionals varies by association. For some, the engagement of these individuals will be essential to future success, for others, it may simply be one aspect of a broader engagement strategy targeting a larger market of potential stakeholders.

Regardless of the importance associations currently place on young professional engagement, it is critical to understand this demographic, what the barriers to their engagement are and how best to engage them. It is critical for all associations to determine how the next generation entering a profession or industry is similar or different from preceding generations and how association strategy and mindsets need to be adapted to engage young professionals as association members.

Associations that fail to identify the role of young professionals within their organizations and industries and adapt to their needs and style of operating risk a slow death, as an engagement value proposition designed for a more senior audience and their needs will gradually become less relevant.

Associations that successfully identify the role of young professionals within their memberships and industries and develop engagement value propositions designed to meet their unique needs give themselves an advantage in the global competition for time, money and quality leadership engagement.

Appendix 1: Contributing Authors

Association Laboratory would like to thank the following association professionals for their contributions to this strategic white paper. An asterisk [*] indicate the selection of the person as an Association Forum of Chicagoland/USAE Forty Under 40 Award Recipient.

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