

Larry J. Seibert, Ph.D.

Over time, individuals develop a relationship with associations to which they are a member. Some of these relationships may be strong, others may be moderate, and still others would be considered weak. Sometimes members exhibit behaviors that might be considered indicators of their commitment to the association (e.g. recruiting new members, volunteering for committee work, and actively participating in association activities). But these outward signs do not always accurately reflect how members feel about their association.

Of most concern for association executives are the members who have a weak relationship with the association and are at-risk of leaving the association. Because many members are not heard from except when there is a problem or when they mail in their renewal check, it is difficult to know how strong their relationship is with the association. One should not assume that a member who does not actively participate in association activities is necessarily at-risk of leaving the association.

In our research, we identify the strength of the relationship that each member has with the association and segment them into one of three categories based on this relationship. We label these three groups as loyal, neutral, and vulnerable. This loyalty classification is based on their responses to a three question sequence in a member survey, and is done primarily to help associations improve their member retention. We believe that the key to higher retention is to understand why members are vulnerable, identify them, and apply intervention techniques to retain them as members.

Vulnerable Members Were Not Vulnerable When They Joined.

Some members come into an association exhibiting the characteristics of loyal members. That is, they have a positive attitude toward the association, they speak highly of the association and they intend to renew their membership. If there are any initial difficulties in dealing with the association, they tend to give the association the benefit of the doubt.

Other incoming members exhibit the characteristics of neutral members. They tend to have a “wait and see” approach, and may not readily get involved. Still, they believe the association

will satisfy their needs and they want to be a member. Active participation in committees and activities may be something for which they have no interest or time.

Once the new member begins to experience the benefits, opportunities and other interactions with the association, he/she forms an impression of the association, which could be positive or negative. These experiences will either change or cement the relationship the member has with the association.

Why Are Members Vulnerable?

1. Low performance by the association If the association is underperforming or under-delivering on its value proposition, then members' expectations are not being met. When members join an association to take advantage of networking opportunities, keeping abreast of issues in their field, or to have someone advocate on behalf of their professional interests, they expect the association to deliver. This gap between members' expectations and the benefits they actually receive raises doubts about the value of their membership.
2. Mismatch between members' expectations and association's business model When a member joins an association, he/she has expectations of what the association membership will do for them (e.g. save money with member discounts, keep abreast of the profession, make professional contacts, etc.). In some cases, their expectations are unrealistic. The member may have misinterpreted the marketing literature, or someone who recommended that they join may have exaggerated the benefits of association membership. In this instance, vulnerability is not caused by poor performance on the part of the association, but rather is caused by the member expecting benefits that the association is not designed to deliver.
3. Evolution Members and associations change over time. When a member who joined primarily for networking opportunities has developed a successful practice and no longer has a high priority on networking, the member no longer needs what the association offers. We typically see that members initially join an association for several reasons, and their priorities change over time as they progress through the stages of their careers.

How Can Vulnerable Members Be Identified?

Association Metrics uses a three question index to determine whether a member is loyal, neutral or vulnerable. This sequence of questions can be used in any member survey (e.g. online, paper or telephone).

1. *If asked by a friend or relative, how likely would you be to recommend they join ABC Association?*
2. *When your current membership with ABC Association is up for renewal, how likely would you be to renew your membership?*
3. *Considering all of the benefits and opportunities you receive from ABC Association in relation to the cost of dues, how would you rate the overall value of your ABC membership?*

All respondents who indicate that they would not be likely to recommend the association to others, OR to renew their membership, OR give a low rating for the value of their membership, are vulnerable. This process will identify vulnerable members who responded to the survey.

There is an additional analysis that can be used to determine which individuals who did not take the survey are more likely (or less likely) to be vulnerable. First, calculate the percentage of vulnerable members among all survey respondents. In this example, let's say that 10% of all members who took the survey are vulnerable.

Second, using the results of demographic questions from the survey, determine the percentage of vulnerable members in each classification. If, for example, you find that 20% of all respondents in a certain age, income, or educational category are vulnerable, this would indicate that members who have this characteristic are twice as likely to be vulnerable as the overall average. (This procedure is done for identification purposes and does not imply cause and effect.)

What Can Be Done?

If the member's vulnerability stems from poor performance on the part of the association, improving the areas that are the key drivers of member value is the best solution. Through multiple regression techniques, one can determine which benefits and experiences drive value, and through performance analysis, one can determine which of these key drivers are

underperforming. Focusing improvement efforts on underperforming key drivers is the most economical and effective method for improving the association in ways that increase the value of the membership.

If members' vulnerability stems from a mismatch between members' expectations and actual benefits, there are a couple of ways to resolve this issue. One method is to ensure that marketing literature and recruiting efforts clearly explain what the association does, what it offers, and what it stands for, in order to eliminate confusion. Second, if there is a sizable segment whose needs are not being met with the current array of benefits, it might be worthwhile to offer an additional benefit or two to meet those expectations, provided the new benefits are consistent with the association's mission and do not have any negative effects on other members.

Lastly, if vulnerability stems from evolving needs, make sure that there are benefits or programs designed to meet the variety of needs of members as they change over time.

In the short term, regardless of why a segment of your members are at-risk, you can build a profile of members who are more likely or less likely to be vulnerable to help you target these members with prevention and intervention techniques to retain them as members.

About the Author

Larry J. Seibert is the President/CEO of Association Metrics. He has an earned Ph.D. from Purdue University in Retail Management and holds an MSBA from Indiana University Northwest with a concentration in Marketing. Dr. Seibert is a member of the American Society of Association Executives and the Indiana Society of Association Executives. He can be reached at larry@associationmetrics.com or by phone at 317-840-2303.