Mining for Gold: How to Turn Member Data into Actionable Insights to Grow Your Association
How Leading Associations Use Survey Research to Grow & Thrive

Across the nonprofit landscape, leading associations and mission-driven nonprofits have managed to grow and thrive – even when other, apparently similar organizations have suffered from stagnant or declining revenues and membership. *How have they done it?*

Many associations have become a trusted source of intelligence for their members and other key stakeholders through the savvy use of survey research. These organizations have made themselves indispensable by providing actionable insights drawn from member data to help association leaders and members alike make better-informed, strategic decisions.

As we explore the secrets to their success in this piece, you will learn how you can leverage best practices in survey research within your own association to:

- Expand your membership growth – even in hard-to-reach niche segments
- Enhance your association’s value proposition – for both new and renewing members
- Drive sustainable non-dues revenue with a benchmarking or industry market study
- Gain deeper insights into your current and prospective members’ needs and priorities

**Use Membership Surveys to Better Understand Your Most Valuable Asset**

At most associations, members often rank data programs, research and industry data in the top three membership benefits. Successful associations engage members in a variety of survey research initiatives, ranging from benchmarking of financial and operational data to creating highly sought after industry reports.

Members now expect – and rightfully so – a greater level of customization than ever before: in your email and print communications, publications and research products, even in the user experience across your web and social media presence. It’s become increasingly essential for associations to respond to this need for individualized attention and information, catering to members’ desires to receive exactly what they want, how they want it and when they want it.

**Member surveys help you understand what people value most about their membership** – while highlighting those less popular benefits that may need to be enhanced, or eliminated altogether.

One association successfully used a membership survey to turn the tide on decreasing memberships. The survey data, when combined with the organization’s CRM data, revealed a need to better segment and serve different categories of members, who had radically different needs and priorities. Once the association successfully addressed this issue, overall dues revenue as well as new memberships began to steadily climb.
Use Benchmarking Surveys to Help Your Members See How They Measure Up

Benchmarking provides your members with actionable intelligence to objectively assess how they're performing compared to industry peers, meaningful metrics to guide strategic business decisions, and comparative measures of success that can be tracked from year to year.

Compensation and benefits surveys provide vital, industry-specific information to help take the guesswork out of the employee hiring and promotions process for association and member executives.

Benchmarking reports focused on financial and operating costs help association and member executives:

- Interpret financial ratios, such as liquidity, asset turnover, and profitability
- Measure an organization’s operating efficiencies
- Determine a blueprint for the most profitable organizations in their sector
- Provide critical insight as to how they stack up against industry peers

Share Industry Market Insights No One Else Can

If you run a trade association, your organization may be uniquely positioned to provide the leading source of information on key market trends for your sector.

By implementing a customized statistical program that collects, analyzes and reports in the aggregate on highly confidential member data, you can produce industry market research that provides crucial business intelligence on trends and competitive movements within your sector that's invaluable for members, association leadership and other key industry stakeholders.

Associations produce a range of industry reports, including:

- Market size/state of the industry reports
- Production/end-use sales reports
- Capacity and inventory reports
- Customized market share reports and dashboards for individual members

The Consumer Electronics Association’s industry market program provides member companies with an invaluable view into manufacturing-level data that would be difficult, if not impossible, to attain otherwise. As Sean Murphy, CEA’s Senior Manager, Industry Analysis Research, has observed, others covering the industry can only provide reports at the retail level.
Another trade association has generated a series of benefits as a result of creating their own proprietary industry market report. Their industry research provides a highly valued membership benefit, while driving significant non-dues revenue. At the same time, it has boosted satisfaction among current members and expanded the organization’s reach beyond its existing membership pool. And by establishing the association as the premier source of information for its industry, the research has served as a powerful recruitment tool, helping drive overall membership growth.

How to Get Started with a New Research Program

First, decide on the type of research program you want to initiate. Take a look at what other organizations are doing. What publications and research do they provide to their members, subscribers and other key stakeholders? Look for areas of opportunity – topics for which your association has access to better, perhaps even unique sources of data.

Next, decide whether to run this research program in-house, or whether you’ll outsource it to a survey research firm. The advantages of administering a research program internally include the ability to directly control in-house costs and resources and the proximity of program staff. Conversely, the advantages of outsourcing the program include fewer legal, confidentiality and data security issues, and less risk that you’ll overload current staff.

Get Your Members Involved To Ensure Buy-In & Overall Success

The most effective way to get your members engaged in a research effort is to involve them from the outset in the program’s goals, design and administration and ongoing implementation. Jery Huntley, former President and CEO of the Vinyl Siding Institute, knows this firsthand. By involving members from the very beginning, she advises, association executives stand a much better chance of increasing members’ sense of ownership and enthusiasm for the program and its results.

Emphasize the accuracy and flexibility of a data program in which the members have input. Point out the value and cost savings of sharing research resources and costs among all participants (often the prime driver of member involvement and satisfaction with such a program).

Secure Funding & Set a Fair Price for Your Research

The next step is to review options for funding your research:

- Your organization provides direct research funding with no changes in member dues
- Member dues increases or assessments provide funding
- Research participants and subscribers pay for the total cost of the program; individual members can opt to pay for additional, customized research
- Sponsors underwrite research costs in exchange for recognition and benefits
- Your pricing strategy generates a profit after reaching a break-even point
Reach out to your members and ask them for their input. What other sources of data do they rely on for market research? What value would they be likely to place on the insights your research will provide? Would they consider your program a direct membership benefit worthy of an increase in dues? Or would they prefer to pay à la carte for certain pieces?

In some cases, it may be a good idea to collaborate with another organization to share costs and pool resources and data. However, make sure to determine beforehand who owns the data, who has access to it and how the data and research will be used. Then clearly communicate all agreed-upon policies to everyone involved.

You’ll want to set a pricing strategy that takes into account your funding requirements, while setting a fair price for your members and other potential consumers of your research, such as financial institutions, government agencies, educational institutions and the like.

Determine whether you can price your program at a premium, at a similar cost, or for a lower price, when compared against other available research options. You may also choose to customize your pricing. Subscription programs allow users to enjoy tiered, flat or dynamic pricing depending on individual circumstances. “Freemium” models give away some data for free as a teaser, then charge for additional information. Flexible value-based pricing adapts products and services to the exact needs of individual subscribers, while maximizing your margins.

**Inspire Your Members to Create Lasting Success**

Once your research is complete, present the results through workshops, seminars and webinars and regularly solicit your membership for ideas to further enhance the program.

Focus on growing the perceived value of your research program over time, as subscribers increasingly come to rely on it. As members become enthusiastic advocates for your organization’s research efforts, you’ll see the initiative achieve sustained and organic growth as a result.

Prove to your members the value of your research and they will become your program’s greatest champions. That’s when you’ll know you have a winning program on your hands.
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