

Membership Recruitment and Retention in Europe 2005

This report provides a summary of the views of European professionals about association membership. A preliminary survey was carried out in September 2004, followed by an extended survey in February 2005.

The project is sponsored by IMEX (Frankfurt May 30 - June 1 2006, www.imex-frankfurt.com) and Resources for Associations, (www.resourcesforassociations.co.uk).

Copies of the report may be downloaded free of charge from www.associationgateway.org, a not-for-profit information resource for the association community.

Key points

Successful associations focus resources on the effective delivery of business networking opportunities, a relevant education programme and providing access to up-to-date industry news and best practice.

Cost-benefit analysis and clear presentation of the benefits to potential members, volunteers and employers is needed to attract and retain members.

Age, experience, work environment and isolation are not key factors in why professionals decide to join an association.

Professionals prefer local activities to reduce the time spent out of the office.

Professionals are willing to receive electronic communications more frequently than printed communications.

Professionals want to contribute actively to association activities and in general are prevented by their perceived lack of time.

Key elements of successful membership retention are effective communication and involvement, strategic planning and professional management, clear benefits and well-delivered services.

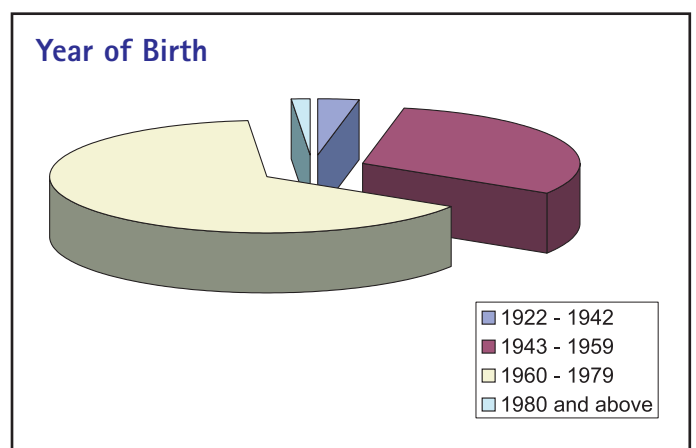
Background

Without a strategic business plan, there is an increased risk of allocating scarce resources to activities which do not support

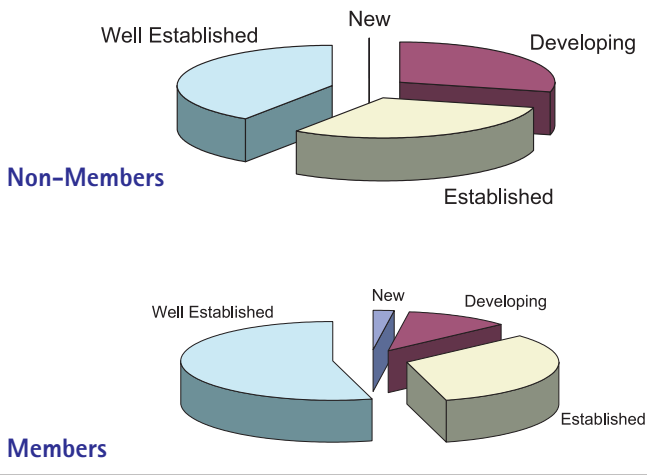
the overall objectives of the association. Effective business planning requires data to support the decision-making process: with a focus on the recruitment and retention of members, this report provides a summary of how potential members view association membership and what they expect from their associations.

Following a pilot survey and preliminary report based on 192 professionals, mainly from the UK, the survey was extended in February 2005 to cover the whole of Europe. We are grateful to the 207 responders who took the time to complete the second survey, providing a broad distribution of answers from professionals across Northern, Central and Southern Europe. A number of industry sectors are represented, mainly within the hospitality, business services and medical/pharmaceutical industries. The demographic data collected includes generations, experience and work environment.

Of those who responded, 70.4% are members of an association. There are 60 responders who are not members of any professional association and who gave frank and illuminating comments about why they had decided not to join an association within their industry. The majority of the respondents are Baby Boomers (born 1943 - 1959) and Generation X (born 1960 - 1979), with a very even distribution across geographical region and industry sector. Only one subset is slightly different: those in Southern Europe are slightly older than elsewhere in Europe.



Experience



In this survey, the most commonly selected reason for joining an association is for business networking (54%), while access to best practice (49%), industry news (49%) and education (43%) are consistently included as strong reasons.

"all the benefits are important and give a totality of what you want from your association"

Gaining access to, and sharing, best practice continues to be rated consistently by all the sectors, with added emphasis from the medical sector. The combined buying power of a trade association is given as a reason for joining mainly by those in the manufacturing industries. Relatively few include social networking, job vacancies or special offers as reasons for joining an association.

A recurring theme from all sectors is that professionals feel they often see few advantages for the cost of membership. Cost-benefit analysis is critical and association leaders who demonstrate a return on investment for the individual/employer will benefit from increased membership numbers.

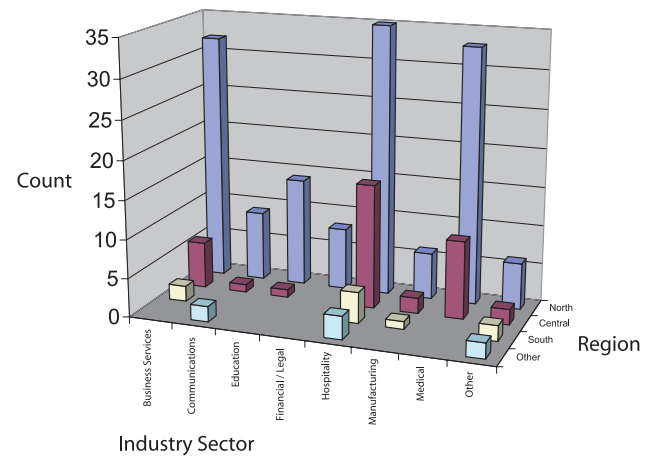
Interestingly, a higher proportion of the non-member responders suggest that representation is an important benefit of membership. However, it does not appear to be a strong enough reason to make them join. This may reflect the maturity of the sectors represented and the perception that there are no burning issues to fight for. However, of those who did join, many provide comments about the importance of giving something back to their industry or helping to make change happen within their industry.

"to be proactive in driving the industry forward"

"to be able to combine forces for the better good"

"better to influence from within"

Region and Sector



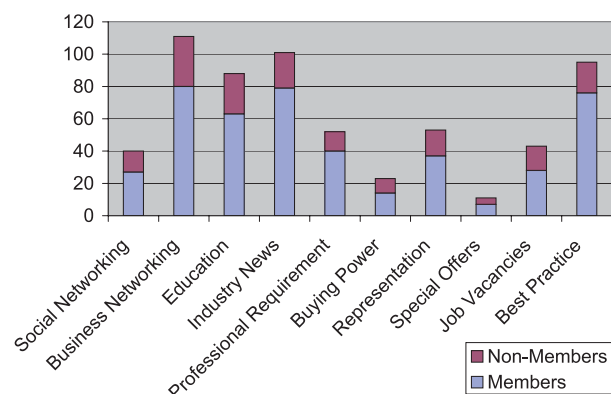
Membership recruitment

Why do professionals decide to join an association? What are the characteristics of the people who decide to join? The answers to these questions help to identify the key benefits and target audience for membership management and development.

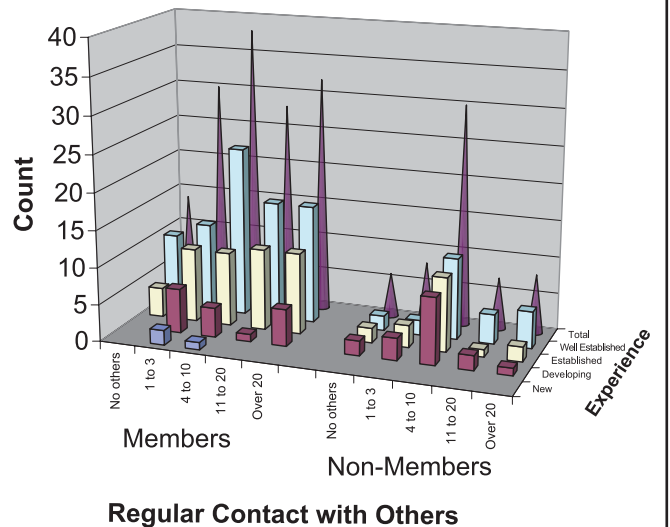
Target audience

The survey explores whether the level of experience or working environment of individual professionals may affect their decision

Perceived Benefits of Membership



Experience and Contact with Others



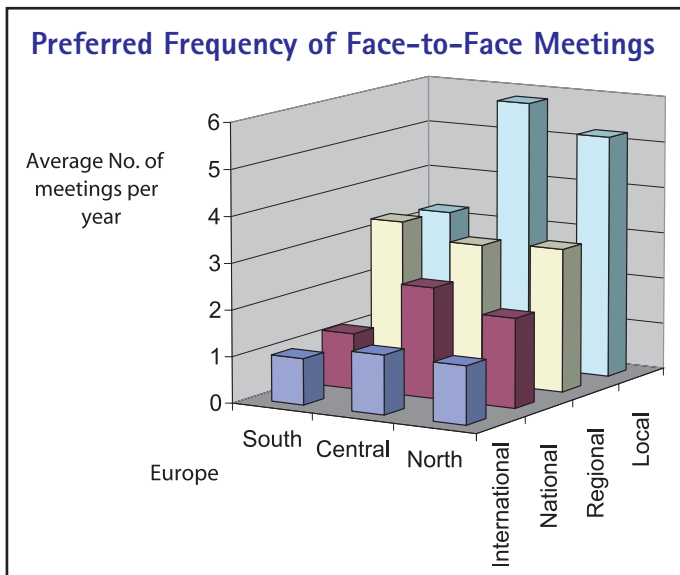
to look for and join an association, assuming that isolation may be a motivator. However, there is no evidence that the amount of experience a person has, or the number of people they work alongside, correlates in any way with their decision to become a member of a trade or professional association.

The key association benefits for professionals across Europe and the industry sectors are networking, education and access to industry news and best practice. Successful associations ensure they focus their resources on the effective delivery of these elements, rather than stretching their resources to deliver other benefits which may not be so highly rated.

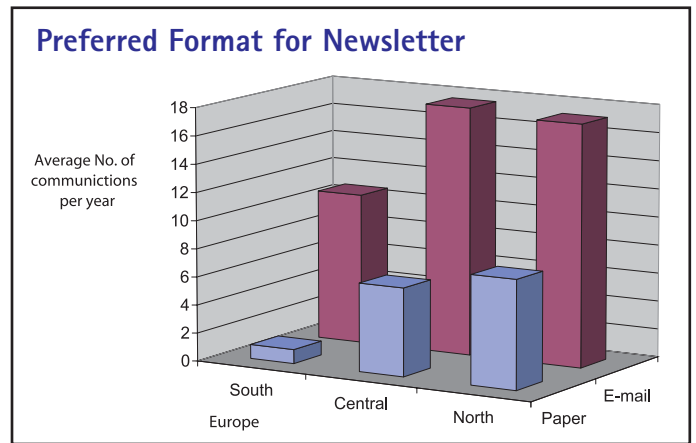
Membership care (MC) and the impact on retention

The ability of an association to retain its members depends on the individual's perceived return on investment. An association's approach to member care (MC) should include regular personal contact, relevant and timely information, and encourage members to be actively involved. The survey asked professionals about their expectations in each of these areas to assist with developing an effective MC programme.

Personal contact: Asked about how often there should be face-to-face meetings, 80% prefer meetings within easy reach to be held quarterly or more frequently. The preference for national (62%) or international (89%) meetings is for them to be held annually. This may be a reflection of the time people have available for longer periods away from the office suggesting that the regionalisation of activities will be seen as an increased benefit to members. There are no differences between the views of members and non-members.



Information: Regarding the distribution of information, responders are more willing to receive electronic communications more frequently than printed communications, for example 79% wanted at least a monthly email but only 38% would want at least a monthly printed newsletter. Poor communication is commonly mentioned as a potential reason for resigning membership which supports the importance of getting this right as part of an effective MC programme.



Active involvement: An encouragingly high 72% of responders answer that they would volunteer to support their association, with little difference between those who are members and those who are non-members. Responders were invited to add their own comments about why they give up time as volunteers. The answers provide the key benefits of active involvement:

- better access to information and services;
- improved networking and building relationships;
- personal and professional development;
- improved business and partnership opportunities;
- new challenges;
- social opportunities;
- to influence activity; recognition and visible profile;
- improved industry knowledge;
- career advantages;
- meeting like-minded people;
- increased business awareness;
- motivation and enthusiasm.

- "You have to be active to benefit"
- "it is always inspiring and energising"
- "personally rewarding"
- "you have to give to receive"
- "professionally enriching"
- "it is good professional practice"
- "you only get out of it what you put in"
- "increases competence in, and enthusiasm for, the job"
- "gaining experience"
- "good networking contacts"

However, the translation between intention and application seems wide as over a third of the people who give comments emphasise that time is a constricting issue.

Time! There is plenty of research about the importance of investing time for future planning and development. For those associations who struggle to attract volunteers, it will be helpful to demonstrate to their members, volunteers and employers how the investment of their time and expertise can bring rewards in the long-term - both personal and

professional/business. By specifying measurable outcomes, with case studies of success, more members and employers may add this activity to their strategies for achieving personal and professional/business ambitions.

Key contributors to success

The survey asked why people would leave an association. The answers provide an insight into the key elements of success for association leaders to consider.

High on the list for leaving is a poor connection between the association management (volunteer and/or staff) and its members. Many responders use descriptions like "elitist", "unfriendly", and "remote". As previously emphasised, relevant and regular communication with active participation makes a difference to these professionals.

Related to this issue, poor direction and management is considered to impact on the remoteness of the leadership to members, disagreement with policies and a lack of innovation. This was noted as being particularly apparent where there is no change in leadership over a period of time causing stagnation and a blinkered approach. Associations with strategic plans in place which are communicated to members can help resolve such issues, as can a dynamic leadership with a succession planning policy in place.

Poor administration and management is also considered critical. Many of the comments mention lack of reminders, inflexible payment methods (direct debit is not considered a member-friendly solution), follow up of requested information, not maintaining confidentiality of personal data, poor quality presentation of materials and lack of professional association management. Smaller associations tend to rely heavily on one individual to implement their strategy, membership recruitment and retention policies, delivery of services and MC programmes (event management and membership communications). Professionals in this survey suggest that this is not always an effective method of management and that seeking professional expertise in all of these areas makes a difference to the success of their association.

A major threat comes from other associations, with professionals willing to resign membership for a better service elsewhere. Successful associations will research the competition as part of their strategic planning and identify their own niche in the marketplace.

Finally, top of the list was a poor return on investment especially if fees are increasing with little or no increase in

services and benefits. It is important to note that an increase in services does not necessarily translate into extra services, rather improving the services currently available and delivering these at a regional level.

The key points from this survey provide guidance for associations reviewing their strategy and operations. Further research and membership needs analysis should be carried out by each association to determine their specific issues.

Sponsors

This survey was made possible with the support of IMEX (www.imex-frankfurt.com), Resources for Associations (www.resourcesforassociations.co.uk) and The Association Gateway (www.associationgateway.org).

IMEX, which takes place annually in Frankfurt, is the benchmark worldwide exhibition for incentive travel, meetings and events, bringing together 3,000 exhibitors from over 140 countries. IMEX Association Day, Monday 29 May 2006, will combine themed sessions, round-table discussions and networking opportunities which focus on the growing need for associations to spread the word on the value of their services. The day now attracts the largest gathering of association executives in Europe for a fully hosted programme, with over 250 expected to attend next year. For more information and to register please contact Carina Bloom: carina@imex-frankfurt.com
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(www.imex-frankfurt.com/assc-day.html)

Resources for Associations (RfA) is an association management company providing European Associations with a full range of services including: fully staffed headquarters offices; essential membership management including the development of member care (MC) programmes; event management for all educational and networking activities; and consultancy, training and facilitation for strategic planning, best practice solutions and volunteer management. RfA is responsible for the survey design, collation and analysis of data, and the final report. For more information please contact Carole McKellar: carole.mckellar@rfa.co.uk
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The Association Gateway is a not-for-profit information resource for association leaders. It provides a knowledge bank with case studies, best practice and links to useful web sites: www.associationgateway.org

