

10 LESSONS for Cultivating Member Commitment

*Critical Strategies for Fostering Value,
Involvement, and Belonging*

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LESSON

3

Capitalize on involvement.

FAILURE TO APPRECIATE WHAT associating really means can lead to a series of related, negative consequences. Some think that getting people to join an association is important because revenue is attached to it, but getting them involved is a free choice they should feel free to make on their own. This is like selling a car to someone and not caring if the buyer ever drives it. As a rule of thumb, a third of your members should be involved as volunteers, which is an ambitious target, but it includes those who perform one simple task. Another third should have been involved at some point in the past. The visceral experience of involvement is what solidifies their appreciation of what an association is: peers helping peers. Otherwise, they come to see the association as a bureaucracy with a staff that

panhandles things. The research established this fact with one simple question. The surveys asked a well-documented question regarding the value people put on their association experience and cross-tabulated those findings according to their level of involvement. The question was based on a clever approach developed by Fred Reichheld and described in his book *The Ultimate Question* (Harvard Business School Press, 2006). His assertion is that you can ask customers all the questions you want, but there is only one that reveals the strategic value of their satisfaction with whatever you offer. That question is “*How likely is it that you would recommend (membership in the association) to a friend or colleague?*” It is asked on a scale of 0 to 10. Those who give a rating of 9 or 10 are characterized as “promoters.” Those who rate it at 7 or 8 are “passive,” and ratings of 6 or less are “detractors.”

Yes, this is a pretty high standard—but think about it, and it makes sense. When colleagues ask for your recommendation on buying something they know you have experience with, your reputation is at stake. You may be happy with it but that doesn’t mean they will be, so the safe answer is to go with a 7 or 8. It is a form of approval but it leaves room for them to reach a different conclusion, which makes it passive. Giving it a 6 means the cup is more than half full, but barely so and that sends a message. Anything below that is blatantly negative. A 9 or a 10 rating is tantamount to putting your unconditional seal of approval on it and people are very favorably impressed by that level of confidence.

Responses to this ultimate question were cross-tabulated against four levels of involvement that included

- Governing boards at the local or national levels;
- Committee volunteers with an extended willingness to serve;
- Ad hoc volunteers who agreed to at least one quantifiable task but not an ongoing commitment like a committee assignment; and

- Nonparticipants; those who had no active involvement in the association.

(Note: attending meetings did not constitute “involvement” in the volunteer workforce.)

The findings from this cross-tabulation may come as no surprise to anyone in the business, but they are worth noting nevertheless because there is a provocative corollary. The percentage of promoters for each level of involvement were not significantly different in the two study years as follows:

Involvement Level	Promoters 2006	Promoters 2011
Governance	66%	69%
Committee	60%	60%
Ad hoc	47%	44%
No involvement	39%	38%

Sources: Decision to Join studies, 2006 and 2011.

Earlier decision research, and it's upheld here, established that performing one simple task for the association, the minimum level of involvement, moves the perception of the association's value up substantially. Think about this! Lifting an elbow to provide help on one given day can increase promoter ratings. It is as if they are saying “once I came to see how value is delivered by volunteers like me I came to see it in a much better light.” They may never perform another task again but having been there briefly left a positive impression. Exposure to how hard other volunteers are working for their benefit leaves them more inclined to give the association's services a higher rating across the board. In Freudian terms that might mean guilt for not doing more themselves, but in capitalist terms it means sell whatever sells. In association terms, it means being with those who are working to help you constitutes a relationship and kindles a sense of belonging.

The corollary point worth noting is the extent to which association leaders know how many ad hoc volunteers they actually have. As a part of this research, many CEOs were asked informally to estimate how many of their members volunteered in a given year. Very few could answer this question quickly, with confidence. They paused and thought about the question in a manner that made you think they estimated the number of names in the committee directory and then divided that by the number of members to produce an estimate on the spot. Nice work, but two points worth noting. If this is as important a metric as it appears to be, maybe they should know it, because they manage it. Furthermore, their estimates tended to imply their assumption that involvement means committee work because most of them guessed between 5 and 15 percent. The survey finding was that 14.6 percent of an association membership is involved at the governance or committee level. Not bad. But the survey also found that another 15.5 percent were involved at the ad hoc level, something the CEOs did not seem to consider in their quick calculations, as if that population didn't matter or they simply weren't visible.

Maybe they do matter—to an extent that they constitute a performance metric that influences future renewal revenue. And this may warrant some action items.

Action Items

1. Provide many meaningful ad hoc volunteer activities—for example, opportunities to write articles or provide expert review of or input into publications. Work hard to keep track of how many members are involved at the ad hoc level and invest in increasing this number on an annual basis.
2. Maximize this number by requiring program committees to identify tasks that ad hoc volunteers can do to help without taking on an

extended committee assignment. Generate a list of these activities and try the following:

- a. Require board members and committee chairs to actively recruit these people, giving them a website address to explore the opportunities and sign up for one.
 - b. Communicate directly with all new members to make them this same offer.
 - c. Follow up on this performance metric with CEO prowess to make sure everyone who expresses interest in this opportunity is brought into the involvement.
3. Set up and find ways to promote an involvement hierarchy. First see what one looks like, and then understand how to use one. (The ASAE publication *Maximum Engagement* by David Gammel, CAE provides some good insight on this topic.) The premise is that all members can be found on a certain level of involvement. The job is to find out where people are and find ways to move them up one level at a time. The hierarchy is a variation on the following:
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|--------------------------------|--|
| 1. <i>Leaders</i> | <i>Board members</i> |
| 2. <i>Managers</i> | <i>Committee chairs</i> |
| 3. <i>Production workforce</i> | <i>Committee members</i> |
| 4. <i>Helpers</i> | <i>Ad hoc volunteers</i> |
| 5. <i>Participators</i> | <i>Show up to receive value, but not to produce it</i> |
| 6. <i>Loyalists</i> | <i>Perceive value, but are rarely seen</i> |
| 7. <i>In for appearances</i> | <i>Weak connections, like: the boss told me to join</i> |
| 8. <i>Dropouts</i> | <i>Members, but waiting for the next invoice to vote</i> |

Here are a few observations that make use of this hierarchy:

- All new members enter the system as level 5 possibilities and their destiny is in your hands. You either pull them up into level 4 by getting them involved and actively engaged or watch them descend at their own pace toward level 8.
- Moving from 5 to 4 for a single stint of involvement is okay because that is all some people have to offer and a brief appearance as an ad hoc volunteer increases the probability that they will land safely at level 6.
- The ambitious need a clear and clearly supported pathway up to the top. Otherwise it can look like a good-old-boy/girl network.

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