

Research Report: **Engagement is Profoundly Human.**

Book 1 - Early Engagement

Based on the results of the 2024 Member Engagement Labs

Written By Amanda Lea Kaiser

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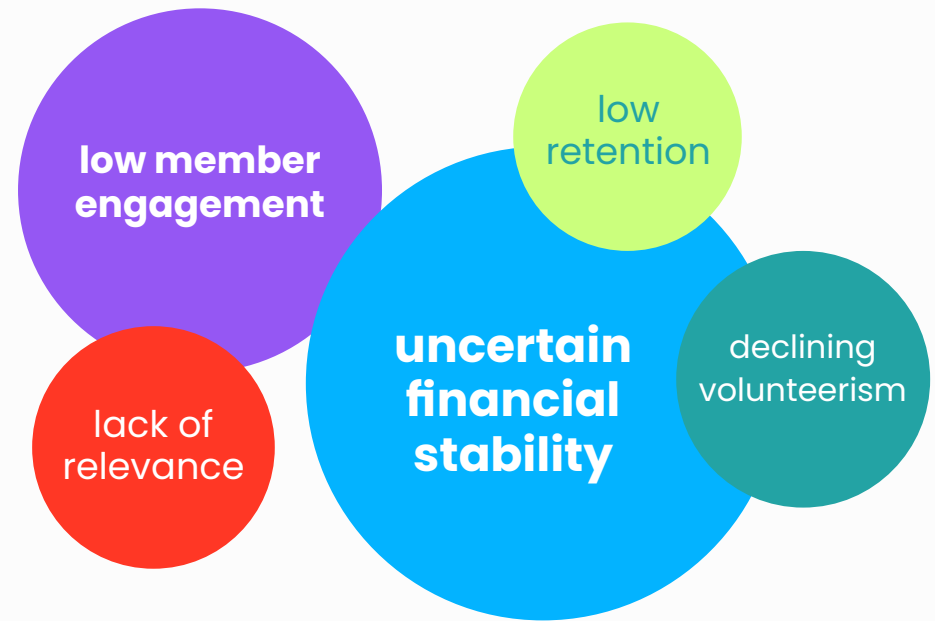
Hi, I'm Amanda Lea Kaiser, and we mined the data and wrote this report to help you engage your members a whole bunch more!

We have a motto in my family. "Chocolate makes everything better." It's true! The next time you skin your knee, pop some delicious chocolate into your mouth, and voila! All better. Do you know what else makes everything better? Engagement! Engagement makes EVERYTHING better. **Consider this question for the next 30 seconds:**

What worries you most about the future of associations?



What is your answer?



These were at the top of the list for the 478 [Member Engagement Lab](#) participants.

Whoa! Member engagement is among the most significant strategic issues your staff and board will likely grapple with in the coming years. Imagine now that we could wave our magic wands and make our members 75% more engaged.

We asked the Lab participants a similar question:

“What would that mean for your organization if you could engage your members/ community/attendees/peeps/bunch/pod more?”

74 association leaders pointed to these topics (in rank order):

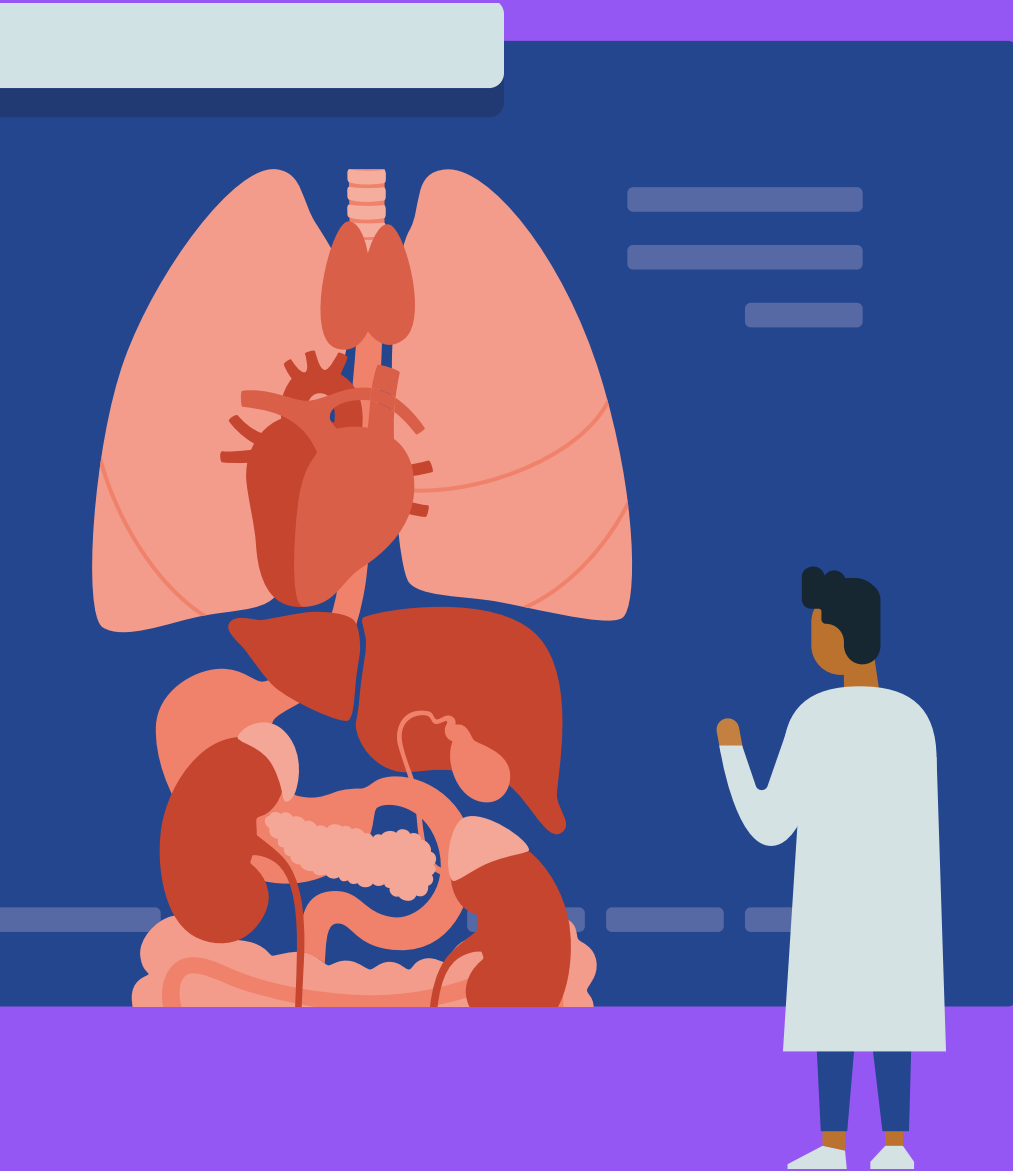
- 01. Membership **growth** leading to whole organization growth 
- 02. Improved member **experience** and value 
- 03. Happy **members** & better community vibe 
- 04. More ability to achieve organizational **mission** and goals 
- 05. Increased **participation** and involvement 

Improve engagement, and you'll improve just about everything.



Here's some more good news! Anyone and everyone can increase engagement, so this eBook is for *ALL* association staff, from CEOs to education, membership, marketing, editorial, and even IT, finance, and research staff—any and all member-facing staff, which is just about everyone, right?

So why doesn't every organization have SUPER engaged members when ALL staff (and ALL volunteers, too) can contribute to member, volunteer, sponsor, exhibitor, and attendee engagement? Well, partly because we've been thinking about engagement somewhat narrowly.



With the help of hundreds of Lab participants, this eBook seeks to open up our thinking about engagement because how our members feel engagement isn't always reflected in how we measure or even talk about engagement.



Engagement is deeply human.

We feel it in our hearts, guts, and deep in our bone marrow when we are genuinely engaged. Engagement is a feeling, but unlike rage or joy, it's a hard to describe feeling because it shows up in different ways, at different times, for different people.

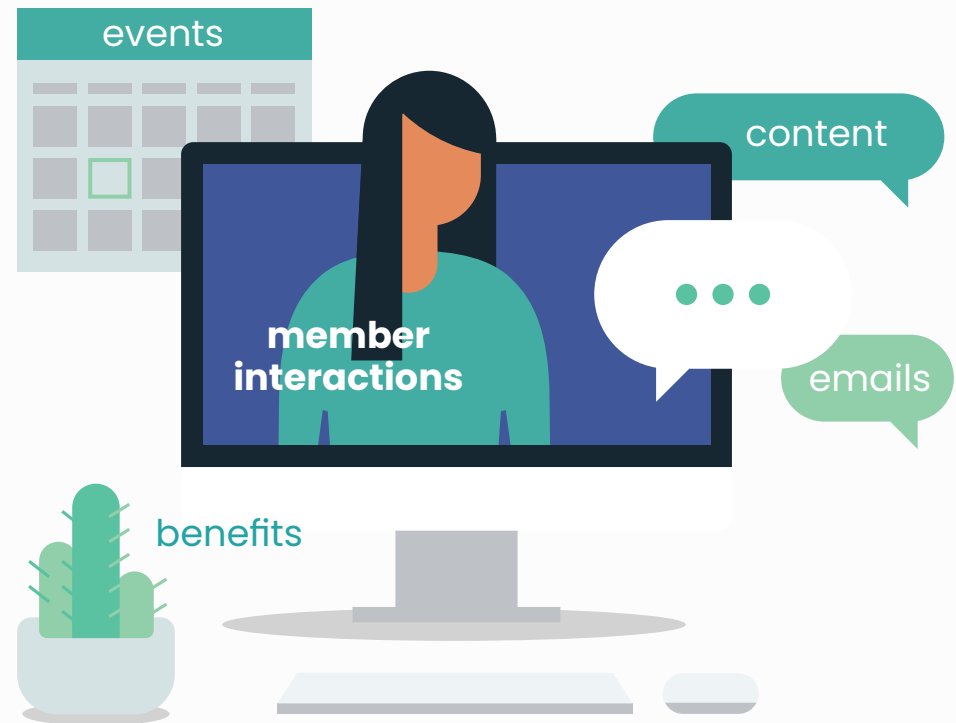
Because engagement is hard to describe, let's discuss what it is *not*.

Counterintuitively, **engagement is not renewals, clicks, or registrations or how we typically describe engagement**—these are outcomes of engagement. We like to talk about these outcomes because they are measurable, but measurable outcomes are not the only outcomes.

There are a bunch of other, squishier outcomes of engagement we rarely talk about, like the look on someone's face when the dots suddenly connect, and they have a lightbulb moment. Or that feeling of meeting someone for the first time and immediately knowing they could be a great friend. Or being so involved with a fascinating conversation that hesitancy and fear are forgotten so they can participate with their whole being. Or bellylaughing so hard eyes water, and maybe a few happy tears are shed. Or reading a post and thinking, "Oh, wow, I'm not alone!"

These are just some examples of engagement outcomes; there are hundreds, maybe thousands of outcomes.

This eBook is all about the human side of engagement. We'll delve into what members think and feel and how they decide at every stage in their membership journey. We will use these insights to redesign member interactions, benefits, events, content, emails, and more.



You will see lots of data in the pages of this eBook, and that data was gathered live in the [Labs](#) via Mentimeter and in the Zoom chat as well as asynchronously through onboarding and feedback surveys hosted in Typeform. Each Lab had between 118 to 138 participants, so each question received a research-worthy number of responses. We'll note the number of responses whenever we can. I'll swirl in some insights from my interviews with 477 members and other research when it makes sense, as well.

Join us on the member journey from prospective member to long-time member as we unpack the thoughts and feelings of members so we can engage them better.



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About the Respondents

478 association professionals like you collaborated to solve some BIG engagement problems because engaging people is getting waaayyy more difficult. They come from all sizes of associations.

68%

Professional Associations



32%

Trade Associations

Associations by region



38% Globally



35% Nationally



18% State



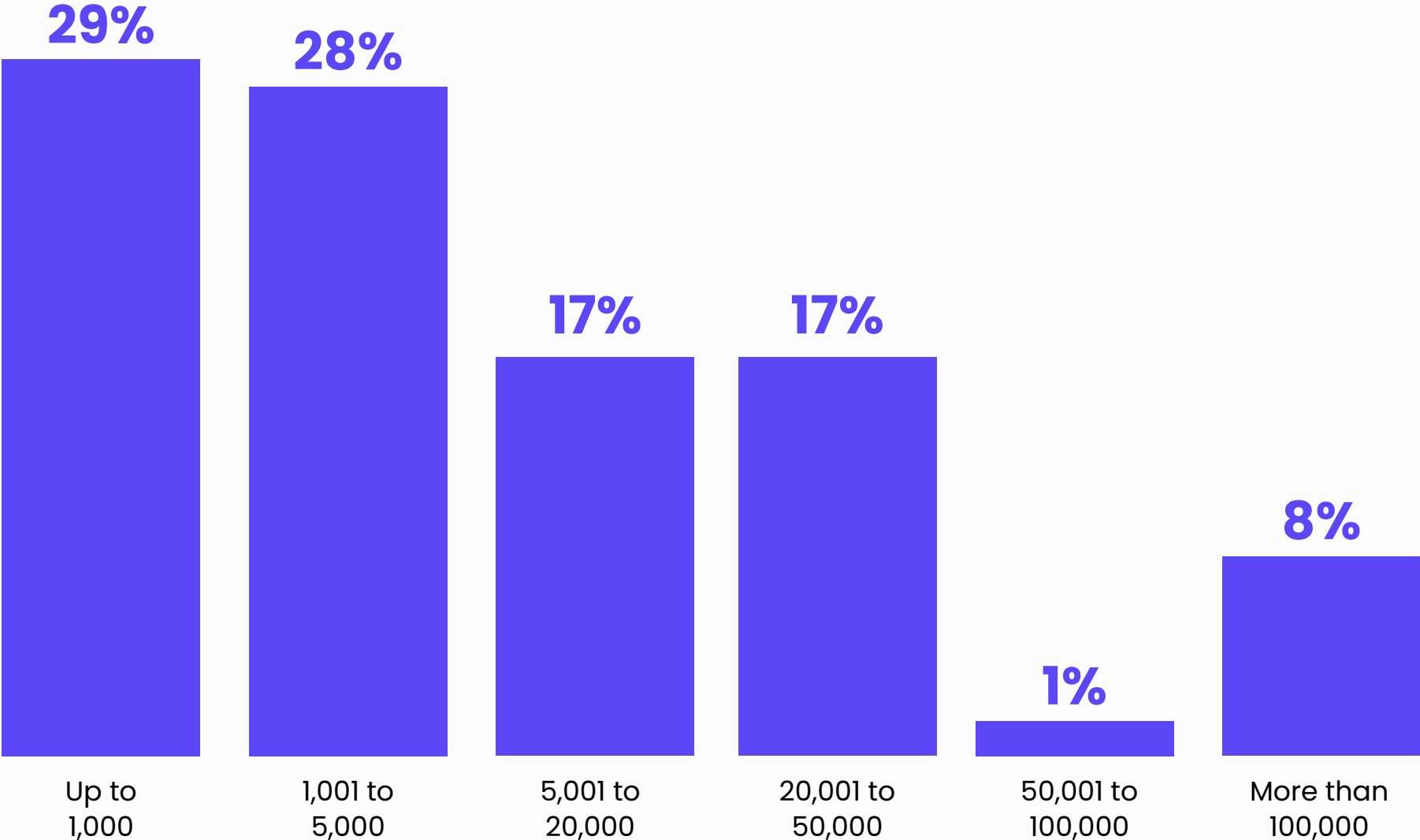
7% Regional



3% Locally

Associations by size of membership

(72 respondents)



Associations by staffing size

(81 respondents)

10%

Very Small (0-1.5 staff)



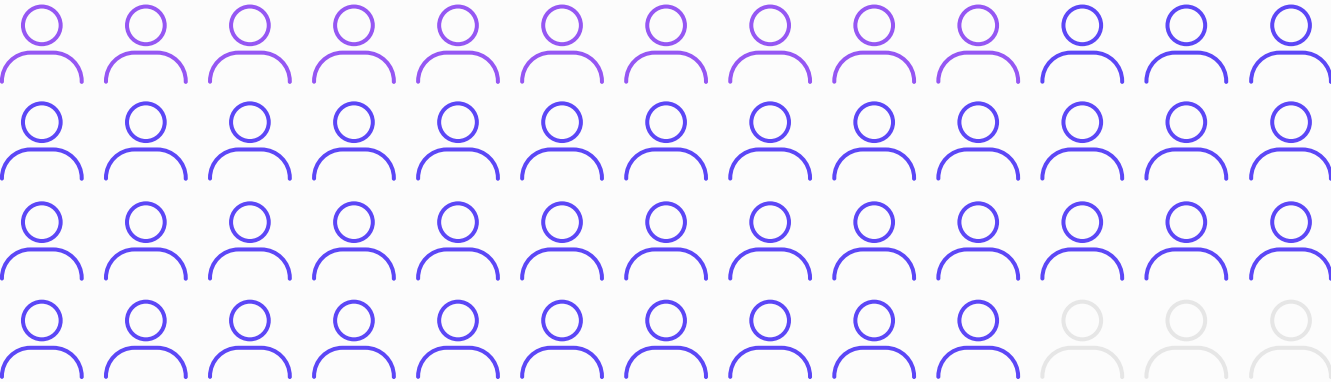
27%

Small (2-9 staff)



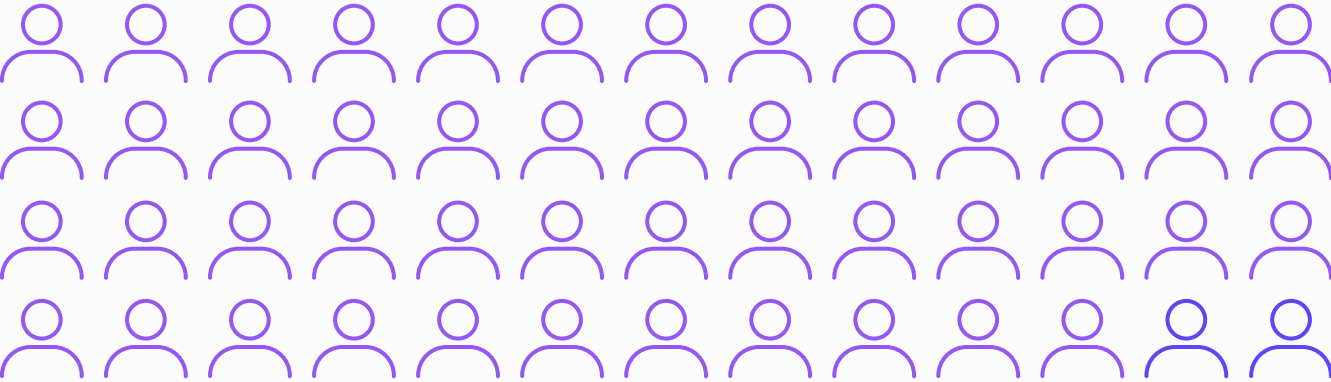
33%

Medium (10-49 staff)



30%

Large (50+ staff)



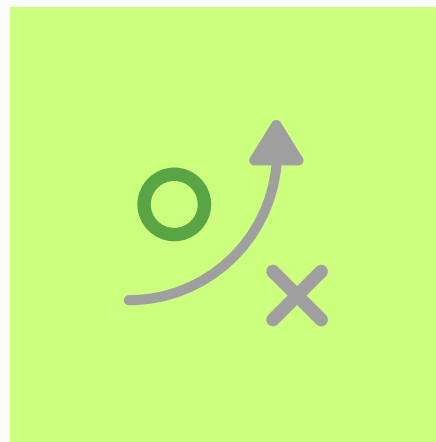
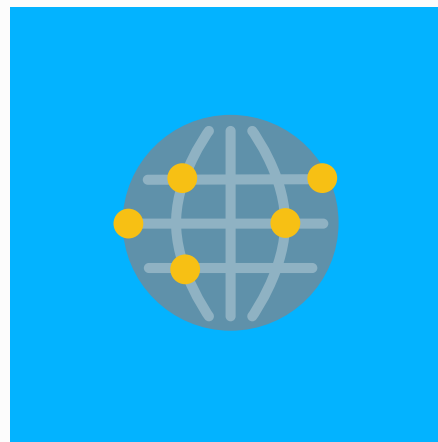
The ideas in the Labs were shared by a very diverse set of associations **representing many different professions and industries.** These organizations have various constraints on their time, budgets, and staff, which means that we were able to capture ideas for all associations—small, medium, and large.

This is GREAT news because we know that the way small associations engage members differs from how medium associations engage, which differs from how large associations engage.

I.e., there are many ideas in here for YOU!



So, what did they come up with? Thousands of ideas, and we will summarize the hundreds of pages of data gathered into three easy-to-use guides for how to engage people in your association.



Engaging Prospective Members

Let's start at the beginning with prospective members. After all, you can't engage members without first engaging those prospective members.

Participants ranked prospective members as the second most challenging group to engage, almost neck-and-neck, with the most difficult member segment, **new members**.

Who has a difficult time engaging prospective members? *Everyone!* Staff in charge of membership, events, marketing, and even volunteers lament that it is hard to engage prospective members.





Chapter leaders have difficulty “getting them to show up to in-person chapter events.”

Well, it might be okay to host smaller groups these days because “**people are still getting comfortable being in crowds after the pandemic.** Small group gatherings are good and actually form deeper relationships.” Still, some attendance is necessary, and depending on the group, bigger attendance may be desirable because there is more energy in bigger crowds.

But still, many chapters are having a tough time moving non-members (and members) away from virtual to in-person.

To overcome the reluctance to attend in-person events, some chapters have chapter leaders and members personally invite prospective members.

“When we get people who come for free content, how [do you] convince them to take the next step and join when they think they’re getting “enough” through the free stuff?” asked an association exec. *Boom! Good question!*

Try Sampling the Goods

Sample models (i.e., sampling membership for a short duration like 7–14 days, offering registration for one free event, or a bundle of other benefits for a finite duration) can work great for associations, but make sure the sample is clearly defined—sort of like software companies do with their freemium model (up to 10 participants, for up to 40 minutes, with one user). **Want to try before you buy?** *Sure!*

Prospective Member, you can come to one meeting for free. Like it!? Great, we’d love for you to be a part of our association family. Narrowly define the sample offer and explain exactly what they are getting (one complimentary in-person event, or only the virtual version, etc.). And explain, no show them, what they will get when they become a member.



This is an excellent time to figure out what is happening in prospective members’ minds as they interact with a new association. Based on my qualitative research with 477 members, prospective members recall being worried that they would feel like imposters, would be treated like outsiders, or would be bored. The organization’s events might be the same old, same old type of gatherings. Let’s show them that your association is totally amazing!

Remember the Warmest of Welcomes

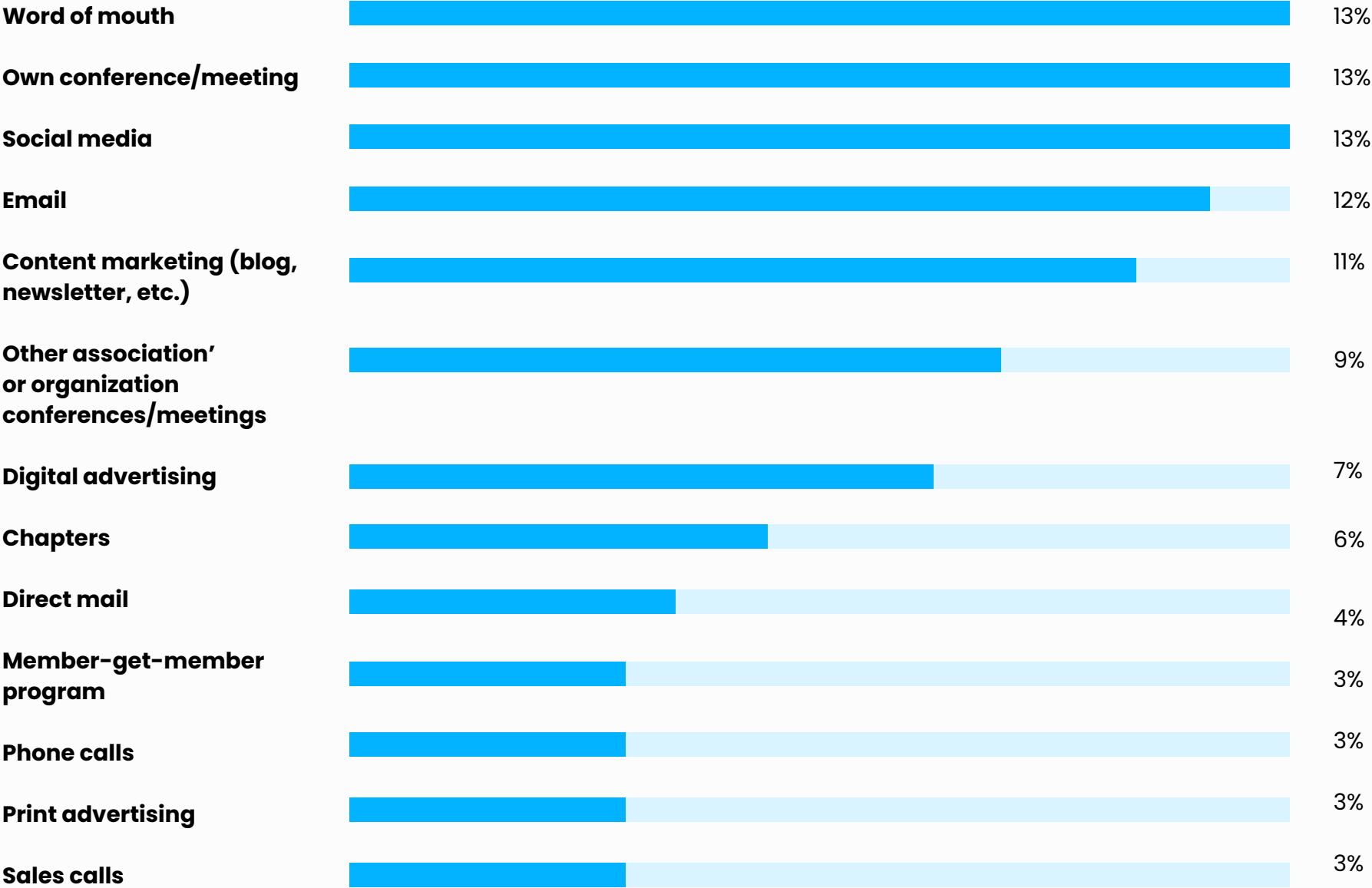
One of the best ways to answer all these worries is to intentionally plan warm welcomes so prospective members can **start to feel like one of the group, not like an imposter**. Warm, genuine welcomes don't always happen that often in our everyday lives, so they are also a signal that this is not the same old, same old.

By the way, warm welcomes are not just limited to something you do at events. You can warmly welcome prospective and new members **via emails, social media, video, or other content marketing**. It's okay to warmly welcome new people lots—you likely won't overdo it, so don't worry about that. But before you can warmly welcome prospective members, you've got to get their attention.

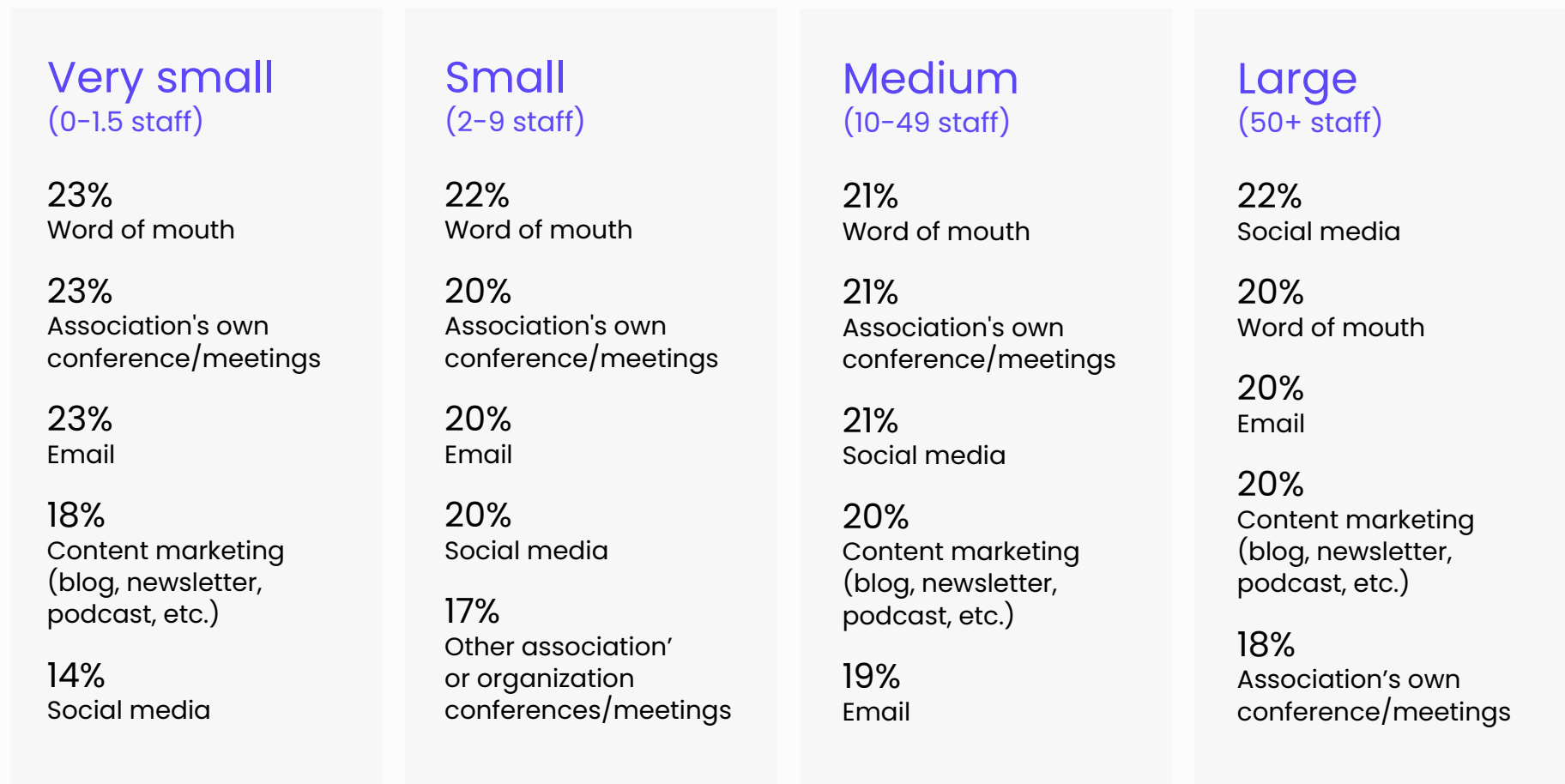
So, how do you get non-members' attention, especially when budgets are tight? After all, it's not like most of us will be able to run out there and buy a \$7 million 30-second Super Bowl ad.



Here's how associations gain awareness:



But mileage differs by association size. Here are the top 5 ways associations gain awareness by size:



How to recruit student members and keep them?

Lab Participant Answer: *I've seen some organizations offer reduced dues for young professionals under a certain age or for a certain number of years out of school, but of course, if they don't feel connected, that will not matter either way. One group I work with spotlights student members during their "free year" by asking them to participate in key organizational initiatives, such as strategic planning or as a program panelist in effort to create a meaningful experience.*

Leveraging Word of Mouth (WOM)

Word of mouth is a pretty big deal when it comes to gaining awareness, so we asked, “Do you have methods for encouraging engaged members to spread the word?”



Immediately, someone asked, “What does word of mouth mean these days?” and this is an excellent question because is it literally one person speaking some positive words into another person’s ear hole? Or, in these days of social media, is word of mouth something broader? We settled on broader!

“WOM is anything that’s a third party telling another third party about you.”

This means word of mouth can be spoken, tweeted (is “tweeting” still a word? Xing seems weird), emailed, Zoom chatted, or even a member recommendation broadcasted on LinkedIn.

Are there ways to nudge your members, volunteers, and board members to be your **“word-of-mouth champions”**? *You bet!*



Here are a few great WOM ideas that participants are leveraging:



In a previous role, we had a nomination form and encouraged current members to nominate their peers to join. About 95% of our members came to the organization that way!

I like to nominate vs. refer.



Yes, it feels like an honor.

We have had success with our awards and are putting in effort to make sure they are proud of it. We focus on everything coming from them specifically. Videos of the winners talking. Shares on social have gone far.



We are primarily a patient advocacy organization where I manage a professional membership program. Our members are great at referring patients to the organization. We give them a prescription pad for the organization, so they tear off sheets to give to patients with our info. Trying to figure out how to encourage them to be promoters to their peers.



Also thinking about how to convert to a virtual mechanism for patients who go paperless!

Prescription pad. I love this!

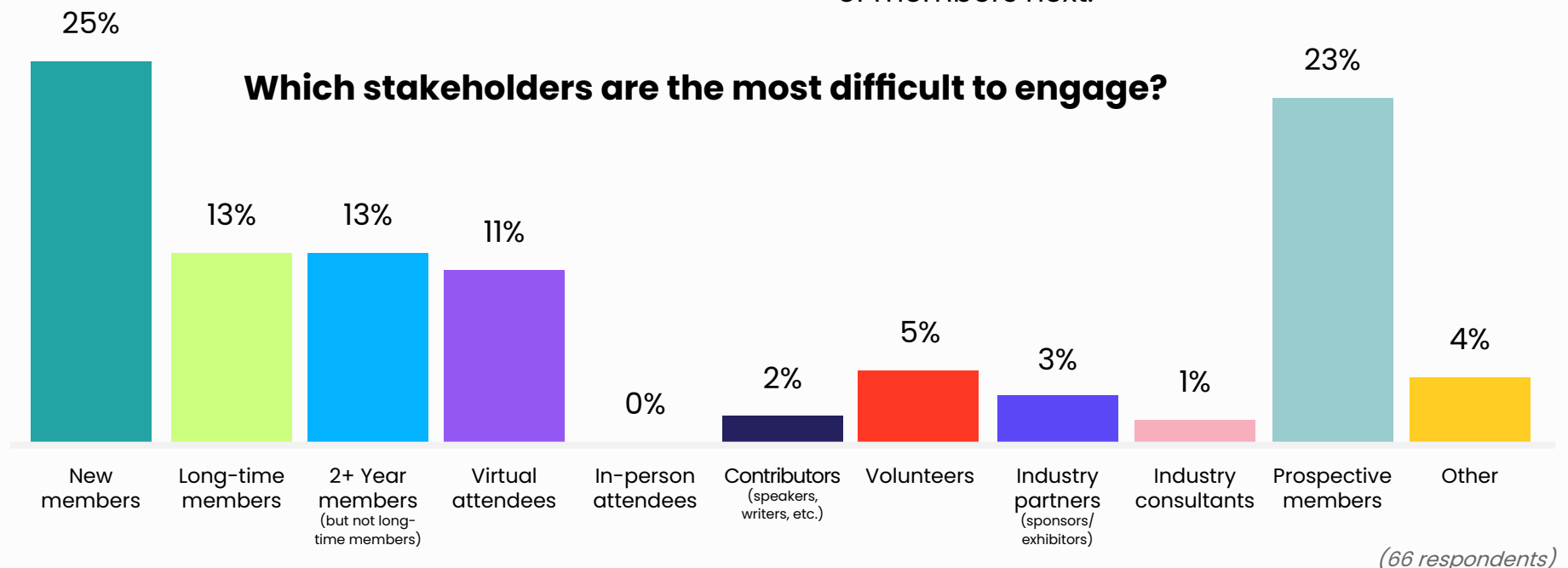


Engaging New Members

I remember hearing marketing expert [Seth Godin](#) talk about being remarkable. Remarkable means good enough to be remarked about. That's what we are talking about here. Engage members so much that they can't help but make positive remarks to others and recommend your organization at every turn.

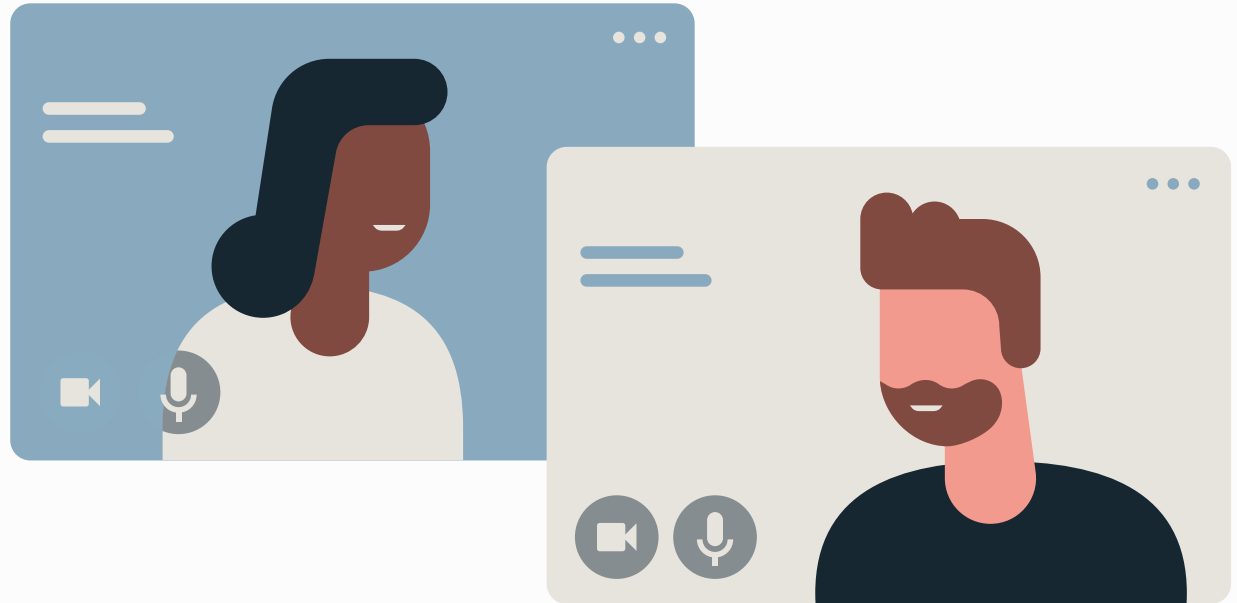
Then the question becomes, how do we engage those engaged members who may be doing the word of mouth? Well, first, you've got to engage your new members, and that's tricky! Prospective members are difficult to engage, but the MOST difficult segment to engage is new members.

Engaging new (and new new members) is critical, and if you are having difficulty engaging this segment, *you are not alone*. Let's learn about this very special and unpredictable group of members next.



Engaging New New Members

Nope! There is no typo here.
(I meant to type 'new' twice.)
You see, there are new members,
however, your organization defines
new members.



Many associations count the first year of membership as new. Others say it is the first 18, 24, or even 36 months. So, there are new members, and then there are new new members, and these two creatures are vastly different.

New new members are in that very critical, three-day to 3-week window after joining. Three days to 3 weeks after joining is when the seeds of engagement are planted. To carry this analogy a little too far—**no seeds, no plant; no seeds of engagement, no engagement.**

New new (ugh! Spell check is being a bit of a pill about 'new new members.' I've got to come up with a new name) members decide to join, and now they are trying to determine whether they made a good decision.

They observe everything they can about the organization and, perhaps even unconsciously, assess whether they could fit in. Do people like them join organizations/communities/groups like this? Of course, we know the answer is YES! And we want them to know the answer is YES!

But how do you do that? Well, it turns out that a new new member's first impressions have a lot to do with whether they say YES or NO.

There's A LOT of neuroscience about first impressions, and to save you a week of painstakingly reading about fifty very long, very dry research reports, I'll sum them all up.

First impressions are powerful, fast, and stick, and they color members' subsequent interactions.



Do you want to get your new new member's attention? Do you want to plant the seeds of engagement? (I'm betting you've got two green thumbs up right now! Yes? Great! Let's go!)

The key is to curate some great first impressions for them. Great first impressions are **the magical ingredient to plant the seeds of engagement**. Poor first impressions squelch the possibility of engagement. Why would an association or any organization create poor first impressions? They don't mean to. First impressions happen constantly; if unattended, you never know what you'll get.

When do first impressions happen?

"Everywhere—all types, formats, and moments of contacts," said one participant. They sure do! Someone even said, "In the ladies' room," in the chat. *Yep! There too.* But let's focus on the most common points of contact because likely all your new new members will not be in the ladies' room with you all at the same time (I mean, it could happen, I suppose. But let's stash this in the category of 'maybe, but unlikely').

Here are the first points of contact the Lab attendees brainstormed:



Let's start by considering email.

Email is the primary way most associations communicate with their members. Have you ever had a new member unsubscribe to your email??!!

Or do you have a segment of new members join and then stop opening, clicking, and probably reading your emails? Why would they do that?! It's perhaps because they unconsciously decided that emails from the association were not as critical, valuable, or easy as the hundreds of emails they get every day that need their attention.

So, they start to ignore our email, which is a real problem (and bummer, too) because email is the primary way most associations communicate with their members.

Okay then, how do we keep new new members from ignoring us?

In rank order, your colleagues said design your email to be:

01

Shorter/Concise

"Shorter and more conversational/personal."

02

Personalized

"Make them personalized (mail merge) short and sweet, but clear and informative."

03

Visual/Interactive

"Visually engaging," "make it interactive," and "mobile responsive, shorter, engaging (conversational), call to action."

04

Targeted/Relevant

"Targeted to their industry/interests" and "make it about them."

05

Authentic/Non-spammy

"A unique and non-spammy type of subject line."

I agree! Shorter emails (I'm thinking 3-5 sentences here), delivered more often, written in a warm, welcoming tone, focused on one topic and a single corresponding call to action, or an interactive email could keep your new members engaged.

Think about the emails you get from your favorite brands. They are usually featuring super short text. They have done research and know they can only capture a reader's attention for a few seconds, so they need to say quickly what they have to say. And we do, too.

Email is not the only way to capture our members' attention and deliver great first impressions.

New members see your website, read social media posts and articles, may attend events, and more. Any of these first points of contact may be throwing off a poor first impression, so here's a little thought process for creating fantastic first impressions and engaging your new new members better.



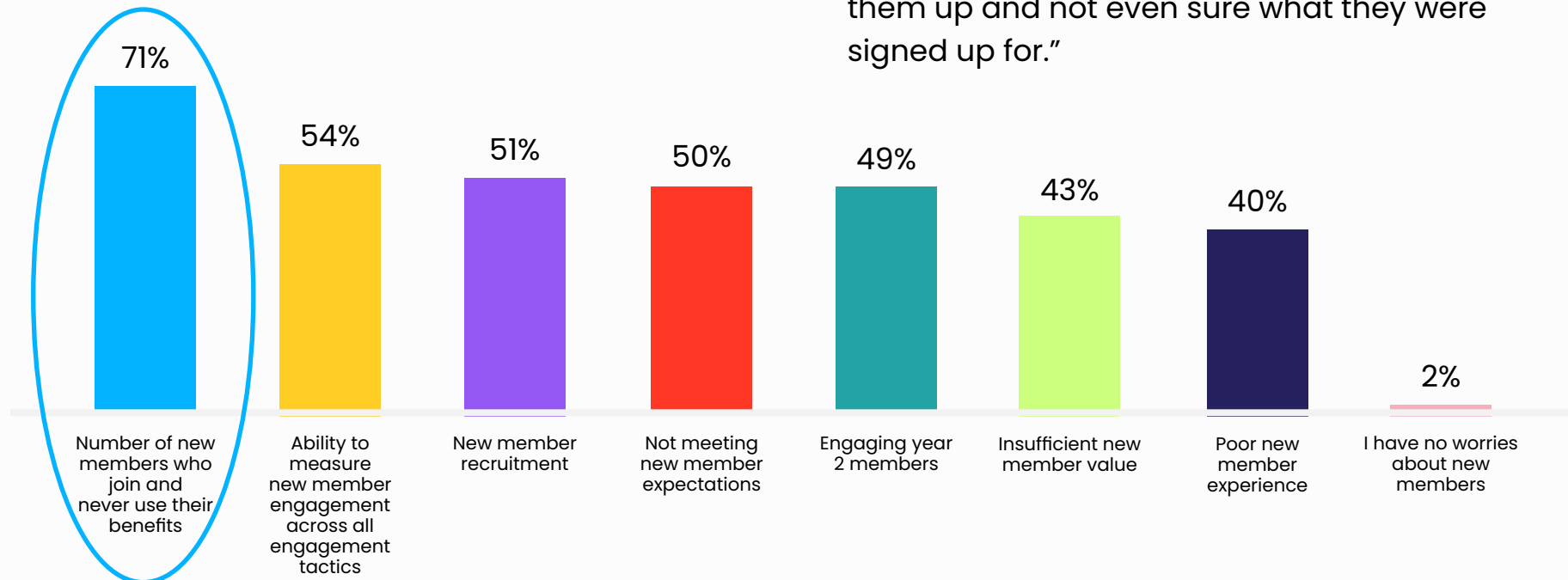
These three questions can get you started:

- ✓ What are the first points of contact new new members have with our organization? *List the top 3.*
- ✓ Consider each item on your list in turn. What are the current first impressions like for new new members?
- ✓ How could we make *[one of the top 3 here]* a better first experience for new new members?

Engaging New Members

When it comes to new members, association professionals have lots of worries. Especially about those new members who join and then never use their benefits. Here's a chart from the [New Member Engagement Study](#):

What worries you about new members?



Isn't it frustrating when members join and then don't use their benefits!?! To figure out how to engage new members, let's first talk about why they DON'T engage.

Participants said that new members don't know how to get started with their new membership. "They don't know what to do next," where or how to begin. They don't know how to engage, get involved, access their benefits, or participate. Not only that, but they may not even know they should be participating, "Their company signed them up and not even sure what they were signed up for."

Help Members Become Aware of Your Value

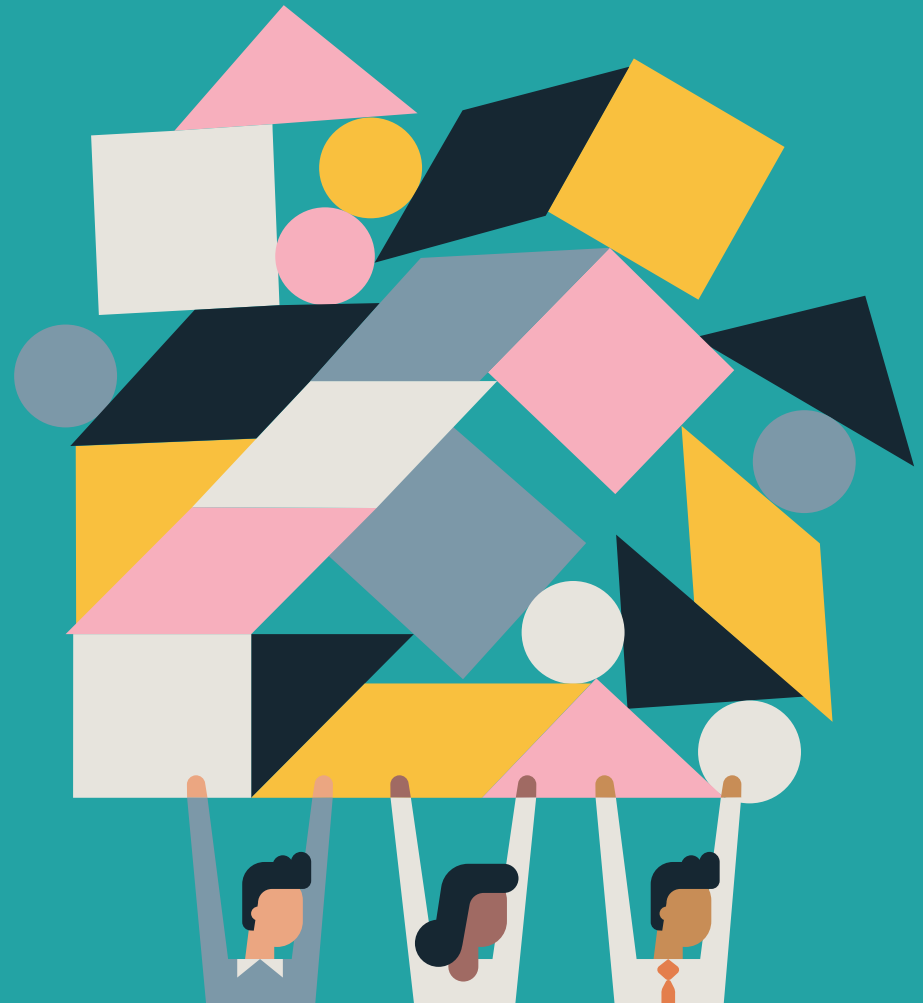
When new members feel overwhelmed, knowing what to do next is hard. Once, I heard Reggie Henry, Chief Information and Performance Excellence Officer at [ASAE](#), talk about the Dump Truck Effect.

The Dump Truck Effect

Imagine that a new member joins, and an association dump truck backs up to the new member's desk and **dumps 37 benefits, 20,000 and something articles, dozens of research reports, fliers** for the 22 upcoming events to attend, trends, best practices, data, and more than a hundred recorded courses all over the top of their desk. Perhaps that's what the first few weeks feel like for many new members.

The Dump Truck Effect makes it difficult to pick through the mountain of incoming lengthy emails to determine the value of their

membership investment. "Is this worth it for me? Will my new membership be worth the money my organization or I invested? And because they haven't been able to answer the value question, they might be apprehensive about further committing. *Don't ask me to speak, write, share, participate, or serve (yet).*



Or they might be worried about being the outsider and not knowing anyone, which makes attending difficult, or “So new to the profession, feeling the imposter syndrome.” Okay, so new members don’t know how to begin and don’t even understand the value of the membership they just bought, so **they might be starting to feel a bit of anxiety**, and it’s easy to give up immediately, mainly because each new member has NO TIME.

Time, or lack of it, is why engaging people is getting more difficult. The demand for everyone’s time is high (and ever-increasing) at work and home. More pressure is being put on us, and we are putting more pressure on ourselves. *(When you have time, listen or read [Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals](#) by Oliver Burkeman; it is illuminating.)*

When people run out of time, they start ignoring anything that doesn’t seem to matter. When the association **dump truck shovels piles of information at members**, which is too much information to digest, members

push it all aside because it doesn’t seem to matter. How do we then deal with a significant problem like lack of time? Well, we can prioritize, personalize, and shorten.



#1 Prioritize

Prioritize the 100,000 data points you *could* give them to the one data point they need now. Some associations do this by researching different member segments and then serving up what these specific members need when they need it. Other organizations ask each member what interests them and serve up applicable resources on demand.

#2 Personalize

Virtual orientation events are one of my favorite personalization tactics, and they are growing, based on data from the [New Member Engagement Study](#) conducted in partnership with [Dynamic Benchmarking](#). These are not static webinars. Instead, these online events are more like conversations between the host and the attendees. The host starts by finding out what the attendees are challenged with or want to know and then finds solutions to their problems while giving them a tour of the site and a few of the benefits as applicable.

(Personalization can even be automated! Members can ask [Betty](#) questions, and the AI assistant will return answers based on the association's vast library of information.)



Psst! Trade Associations, this question is for you.

How to reach individuals when you're a trade association? Is it difficult getting the main membership contact to pass down info?

Lab Participant Answer: I've been there! Make sure you're in close communication with your main contact and make it SUPER easy to do roster updates...even if it means getting an intern to key in updates to your AMS for them.

Once you have some contacts, make sure you're keeping more than just your primary contact in the loop about engagement opportunities so you can occasionally go out and ask them for colleague updates/changes if you stop hearing back from your primary contact. I love onboarding campaigns for more than just the primary/billing contact for that reason!

Once there is a new contact at that company, put them into a short but engaging onboarding sequence so they also see the value in membership. It helps retention so much when you're not dependent on one or two contacts, because there is often plenty of employee turnover within a member company.

#3 Shorten

To understand the value of the association, do new members need to read the 100-page research report, spend 10 minutes reading a lengthy article, or spend an hour reading a whitepaper? Do they need to go to the conference?

These usual association benefits might be too much for the time-strapped new member. Consider what one client calls 'snackable content,' which is light, maybe fun, bite-sized content with a zip of value. Think micro-learning – short videos, courses, articles, even eye-candy polls, and graphics for new members.

Also, you can try making a map for new members. **“Provide a new member checklist on how to get started.”** And tell them how much time each interaction will take, like “If you have 5 minutes, go do/look at this” or “If you have 30 minutes, do this...”

Instead of using the dump truck method, develop a new member onboarding, orientation, or welcoming plan.

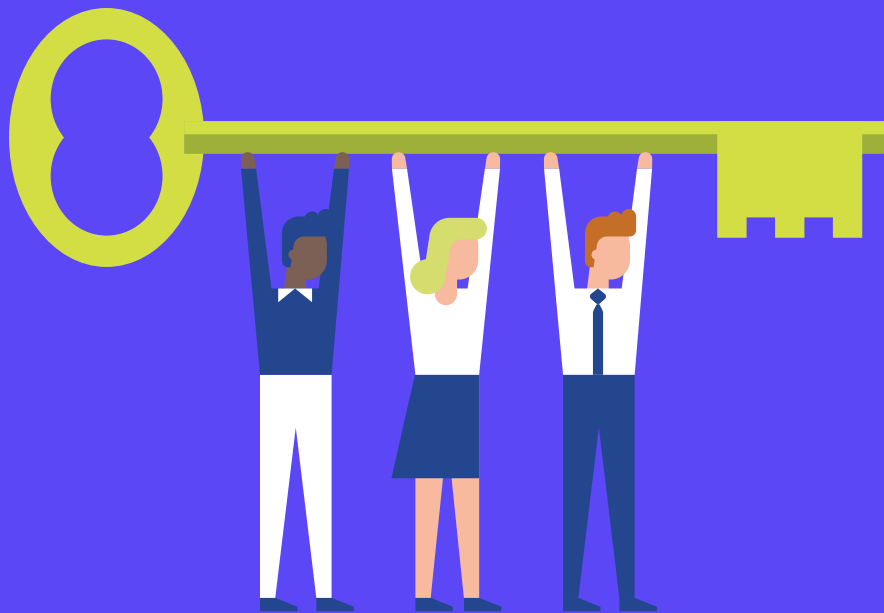
BTW, you'll find data sorted by association size on 15 different strategies and tactics that associations use to onboard/orient/welcome new members in the aforementioned [New Member Engagement Study](#). It's free, and while it is a research report, it's more like a how-to guide for engaging this fragile and critical member segment. *Did I mention it's free?*



Conclusion

If all has gone well, prospective members have converted to new members who have taken the first steps in their engagement journey. And we can't stop now. These new members have a long way to go down the path of engagement.

Keep an eye out for Book 2, where we will see what the Lab participants revealed about engaging our middle members.



More Resources

Watch

Register to [watch the Lab replays](#) and download the debrief reports.

Read

Three popular articles inspired by the labs:

- [Alternatives to Virtual Onboarding Events](#)
- [How to Engage Different Personalities](#)
- [Early Engagement is Fleeting](#)

About the Collaborators



[Amanda Lea Kaiser](#)

Member Engagement Strategist, Lab Facilitator, and Author of this eBook



[Lauren Janik](#)

Communications Expert, Chat Ambassador, Email Wiz



[Sarah Robertson](#)

Event Expert, Chat Exciter Extraordinaire, Matchbox Super User



[Paige Kooiker](#)

Graphic Design Pro, Designer of this eBook



[Patrick Dorsey](#)

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