

MEMBER ENGAGEMENT STUDY

Aligning Organization Strategy with
What Matters Most to Members



Author:
Amanda Myers, *Director of Member Strategy, Abila*

Surveys Conducted By:
Edge Research

abila™

Overview: Why Care About This Study?

Professional membership organizations play a vital and important role in our culture and society – providing, among other things, resources, education, and support for their members. They come in all shapes and sizes, from national associations that provide career guidance, to scientific organizations that offer learning and collaboration opportunities.

However, at the core of all these organizations' efforts is membership – recruitment AND retention. It's not a stretch to say members serve as the lifeblood of any organization. Member engagement is crucial. Not everyone's talking about it, but they should be.

There have been a number of insightful studies published about member engagement from the member's perspective, as well as from the organization's perspective. However, we set out to explore the topic of engagement differently, looking at the subject through a new lens that compares how and why members actually engage with organizations and how professional organizations think members engage with their organizations – all in a single study. This pioneering approach compares the attitudes, practices, and communication preferences of members and the organizations to which they belong to discover where they align, where differences emerge, and gaps exist. Our research attempts to answer four essential questions:

- 1 | What matters most to members when they join an organization?
- 2 | What makes members feel involved and engaged?
- 3 | How can organizations better communicate?
- 4 | Are organizations engaging members in a segmented, targeted, personal way?

We explored questions with more than 1,000 members in the United States ranging across all age segments – Millennials, Generation Xers, Boomers, and Matures. We also posed questions to 150 professionals who work at membership organizations. The professionals surveyed are involved in decisions around member communications and engagement. The online surveys took place between April 7 and April 25, 2016.

Here is what we learned.



Key Findings

- **Jobs matter**

By and large, today's new members join organizations – first and foremost – for job opportunities. Socializing/networking and professional development also rank close to the top. Many professional organizations, however, are not prioritizing these benefits.

- **Get them early**

The best time to attract new members is early in their career stage (as a student or between one and five years into their career). Members become increasingly difficult to acquire as they progress in their careers.

- **Segmentation is important (know thy members)**

The benefits and value members get from being part of an organization change, grow, and evolve as members age and advance in their careers. Younger generations care more about job opportunities and training, while older generations are more interested in getting the latest industry information and staying current on the latest code of ethics and credentials. Younger generations need more benefits, whereas older generations need fewer.

- **Organizations and the members they serve are misaligned on the value of some benefits**

When it comes to communicating value, professional organizations put too much emphasis on meetings and conferences, as well as advocacy. And, they put too little emphasis on job opportunities, credentialing, and certifications, as well as standards and ethics, based on what members say they're looking for in a membership organization.

- **Organizations are missing a major opportunity to target communications by members' age and career stage**

Very few organizations target members with any sort of consistency, and instead, adopt a "one-size-fits-all" approach across the entire member base. There are stark differences in the way younger and early career members like to be communicated with versus older, more established members.

- **Overall, members see value in professional member organizations**

For the most part, professional membership organizations remain relevant to the members they serve across all career stages and generations. Members see value, but there are certainly areas that need improvement.

Generational Overview

It's nearly impossible to look at any sort of engagement study without looking at behaviors across generations, especially with the ongoing emergence of Millennials in the workforce.

According to [Pew Research](#), Millennials now comprise the largest generation in the workforce (more than one in three workers in the U.S. is a Millennial). AND, they make up the largest percent of the population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (surpassing Gen Xers and Boomers).

While the growing influence of Millennials has been well documented, their movement into prime earning and career growth years can no longer be denied. The behaviors and attitudes they bring to their new leadership roles will reshape the economy and how companies do business – this will also impact how professional membership organizations engage and retain them.

But, this should not minimize the importance of other segments of a membership's population. Generation Xers, Boomers, and Matures also comprise important groups within the membership base. These members tend to become more loyal to the organization the longer they're a member, and they require less from the organization.

Understanding generations and how they like to engage now is essential for any organization. And, acknowledging that an emerging generation will change the rules of engagement down the road – and planning for that – will help ensure success.

The chart below shines a spotlight on areas where the generations converge and diverge. Additionally, we dig deeper into the generational divide throughout the different sections of this study.

GENERATIONAL BREAKDOWN	 MILLENNIALS 1981-1998	 GEN Xers 1965-1980	 BOOMERS 1946-1964	 MATURES 1945 or earlier
MOST IMPORTANT BENEFITS	 Job opportunities  Code of ethics  Credentials and training	 Industry info  Code of ethics  Credentials	 Code of ethics  Industry info  Raising awareness	 Code of ethics  Industry info  Credentials
TOP REASON FOR JOINING	Professional benefits	Professional benefits	Feel a professional responsibility	Feel a professional responsibility
COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES	 I want to know everything!	 Update me regularly	 Update me regularly	 Tell me the big news, the rest is not necessary
TARGETING PREFERENCES	Key acquisition period – many join professional member organizations at this stage	Established, and looking to further their careers	Winding down, and interested in changes in the industry	Retiring, but want to be in the loop – loyal, low engagement, and want the big news

Section 1: Attracting Members

At the risk of stating the obvious, every membership organization needs members. Recent data pulled from Abila's own systems indicates that membership revenue remains the leading revenue source, and increasing the number of dues paying members is vital for growth. Acquiring members early in their careers (or even as college students) is important – this is the key acquisition period. Sixty-two percent of all members join within the first five years of their career, as illustrated below in Figure 1.

ACQUISITION: MOST MEMBERS JOIN AS STUDENTS OR EARLY IN THEIR CAREER



Figure 1: When members join organizations

Considering a large majority of members join early in their careers, it's essential to understand the motivation for joining. By and large, these members are interested in job opportunities (34 percent), socializing (30 percent), and certifications (24 percent).

But, are organizations prioritizing these benefits? While younger members and those early in their careers want job opportunities and networking, organizations cite conferences (48 percent), networking (45 percent), and advocacy (38 percent) as the top benefits they believe members value. As a matter of fact, advocacy and legislative efforts is second from the bottom (8 percent) in reasons new members join. Figure 2 provides a look at why new members join, versus what organizations prioritize.



Figure 2: Why new members join; why organizations believe they join

Figures 3 and 4 provide a more visual representation of the discrepancies between what members value versus what organizations value. Figure 3, for example, illustrates the difference between the members' prioritization of job opportunities, far beyond the organizations to which they belong.

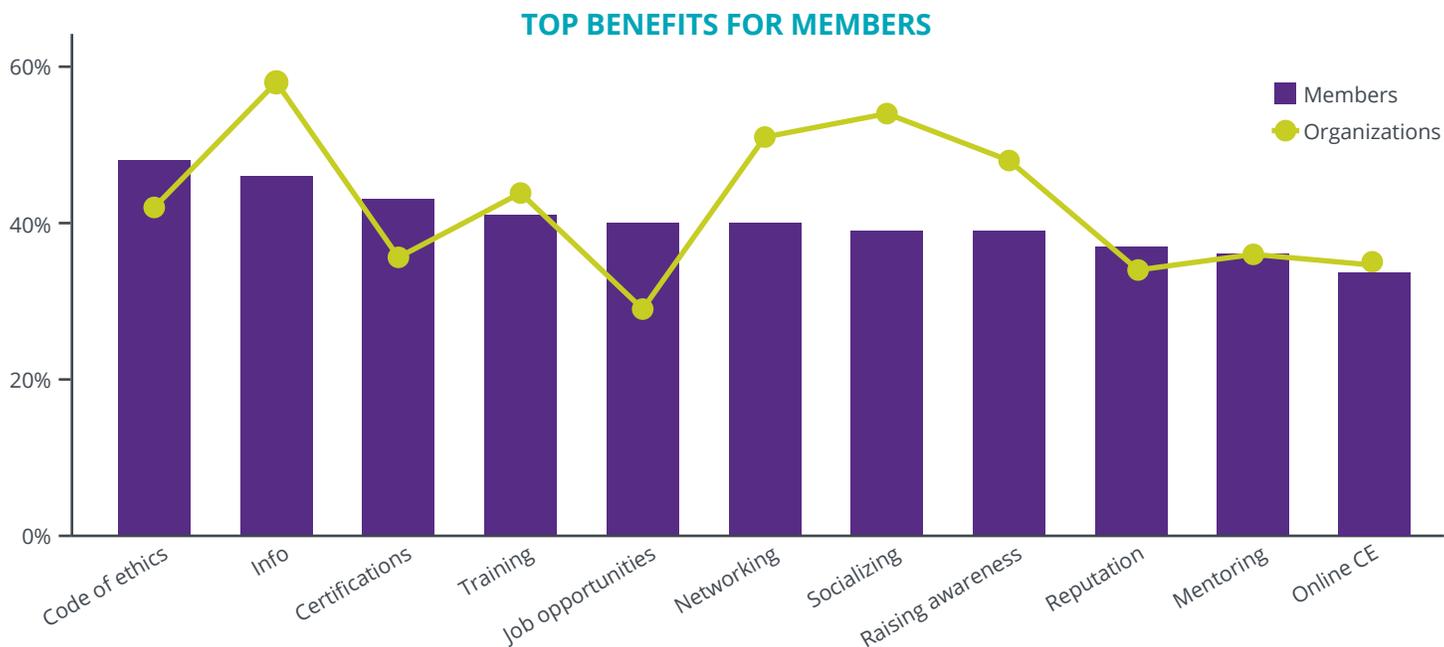


Figure 3: What members prioritize vs. what organizations think is important

This next view highlights several areas organizations prioritize more than members, mainly, conferences, in-person CE, advocacy, and magazines/journals.

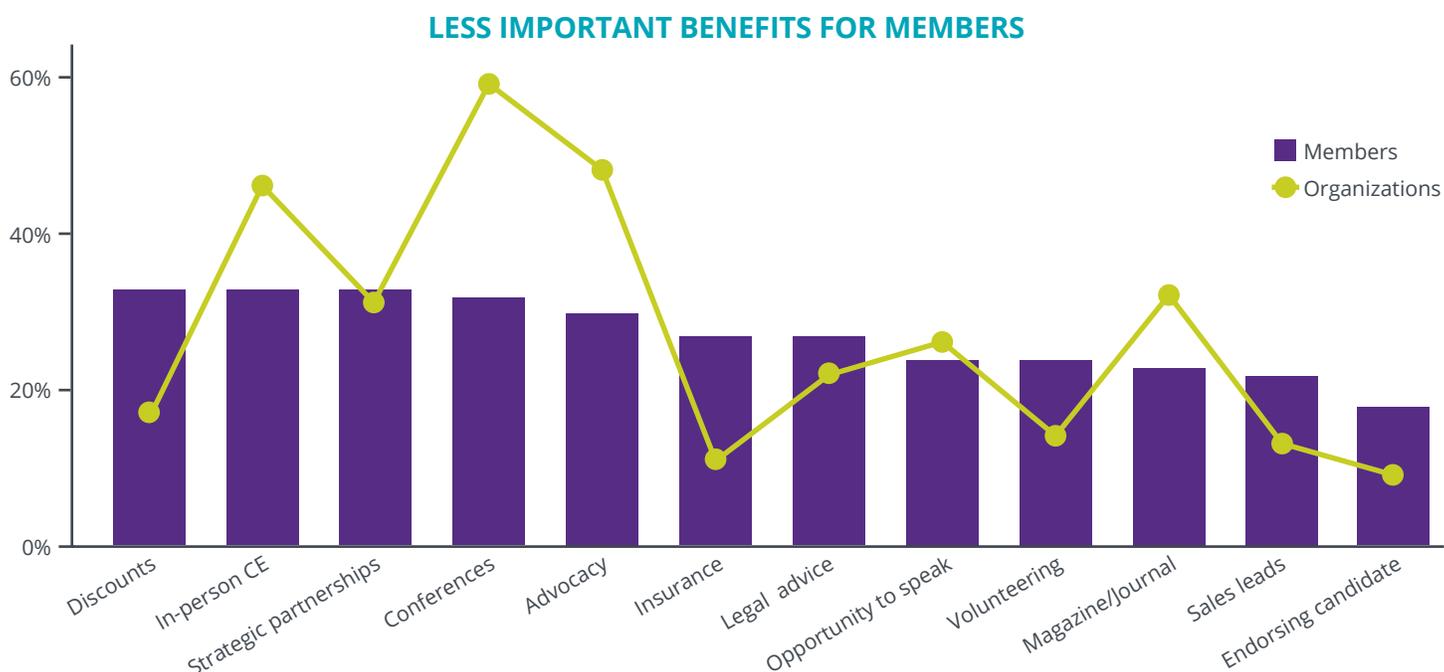


Figure 4: What members prioritize vs. what organizations think is important

Members give their professional organizations overall strong ratings; however, several differences between the perceptions of members and professional membership organizations suggest opportunities for additional improvement:

- **Responsiveness** – 68 percent of members surveyed feel organizations are responsive, while 91 percent of organizations feel they’re responsive to their members.
- **Good value** – Only 63 percent of members feel they’re getting good value for the membership fee, while 81 percent of organizations believe they’re providing good value.
- **Voice of the profession** – A full 70 percent feel the organization of which they’re a member is the voice of the profession, while 84 percent of the organizations themselves feel they’re the voice of the profession.

Figure 5 provides a summary of where members and organizations align and where they don’t when it comes to the perception of the organization.

HOW MEMBERS VIEW ORGANIZATIONS

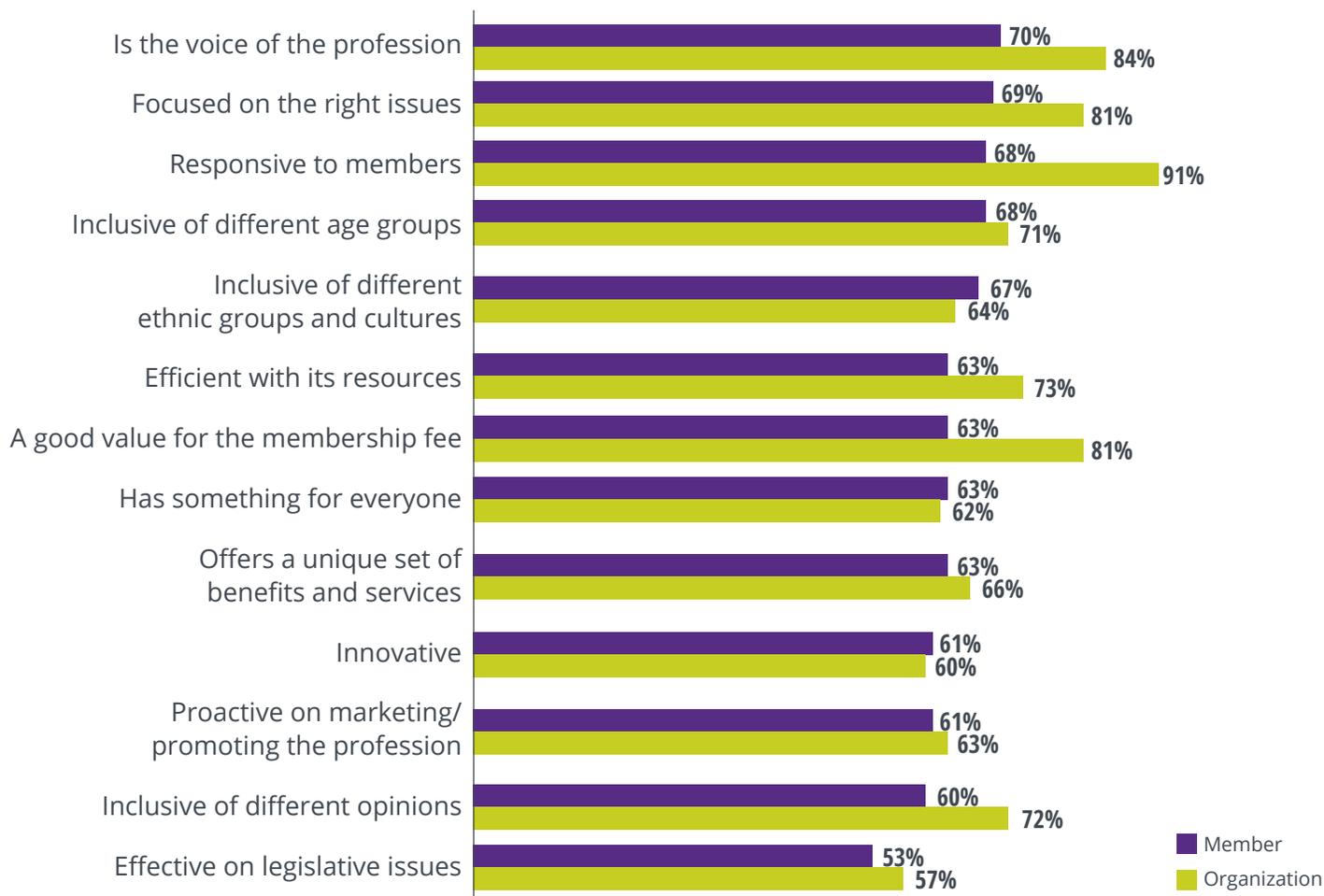


Figure 5: How members perceive the organizations to which they belong; how organizations believe they are perceived

More than 20 percent of members say they have canceled their membership or let it lapse in the last year. Why do members leave? What’s the main driver for membership attrition? In simplest terms, it comes down to cost (32 percent). For Millennials, the numbers skew slightly – the two main reasons being they find membership too costly (37 percent) and they forgot to renew (27 percent). Figure 6 looks at the reasons members cancel their membership.

REASONS FOR ENDING MEMBERSHIP



Figure 6: Why members canceled their membership (among those who have lapsed or canceled membership)

Considering most survey respondents report paying their own membership dues, it’s no real surprise that the ultimate decision to stay a member comes down to cost. Figure 7 shows the breakdown of who pays membership dues.

MEMBER DUES STRUCTURE

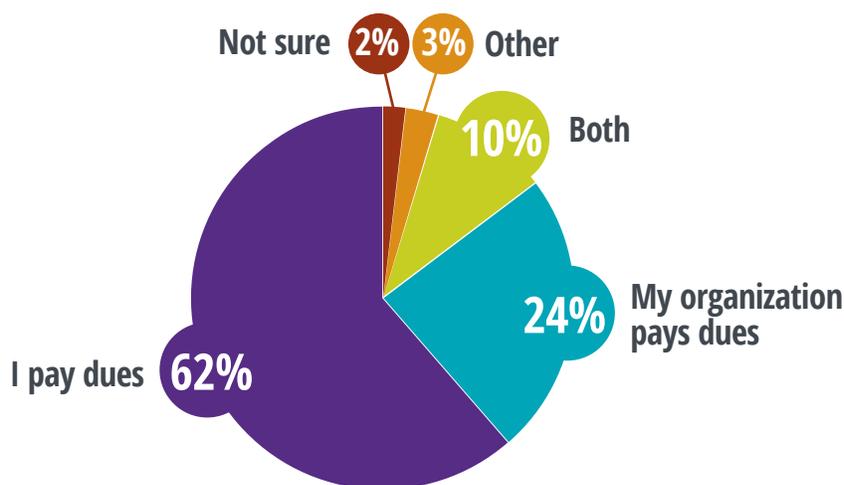


Figure 7: Who pays membership dues

Section 2: What Keeps Members Engaged?

Attracting members early in their careers is essential. But, once an organization has acquired a member, what matters? Do members value the same benefits early in their careers as they do in the middle and latter stages of their careers? The answer is unequivocally, no.

Members extract value from the organizations to which they belong in very different ways along their career journey. This section takes a deeper look at the various features and benefits members want at different stages of their careers, and how these influence retention, engagement, loyalty, and satisfaction.

Earlier in the study, we provided a quick snapshot of generational differences when it comes to identifying what's most important. To reiterate that point here and to dive a little deeper, we look specifically at different generations/career stages to identify what they value the most and how to best engage. Figure 8 shows what benefits are most important to different age groups of members.

TOP BENEFITS BY GENERATION

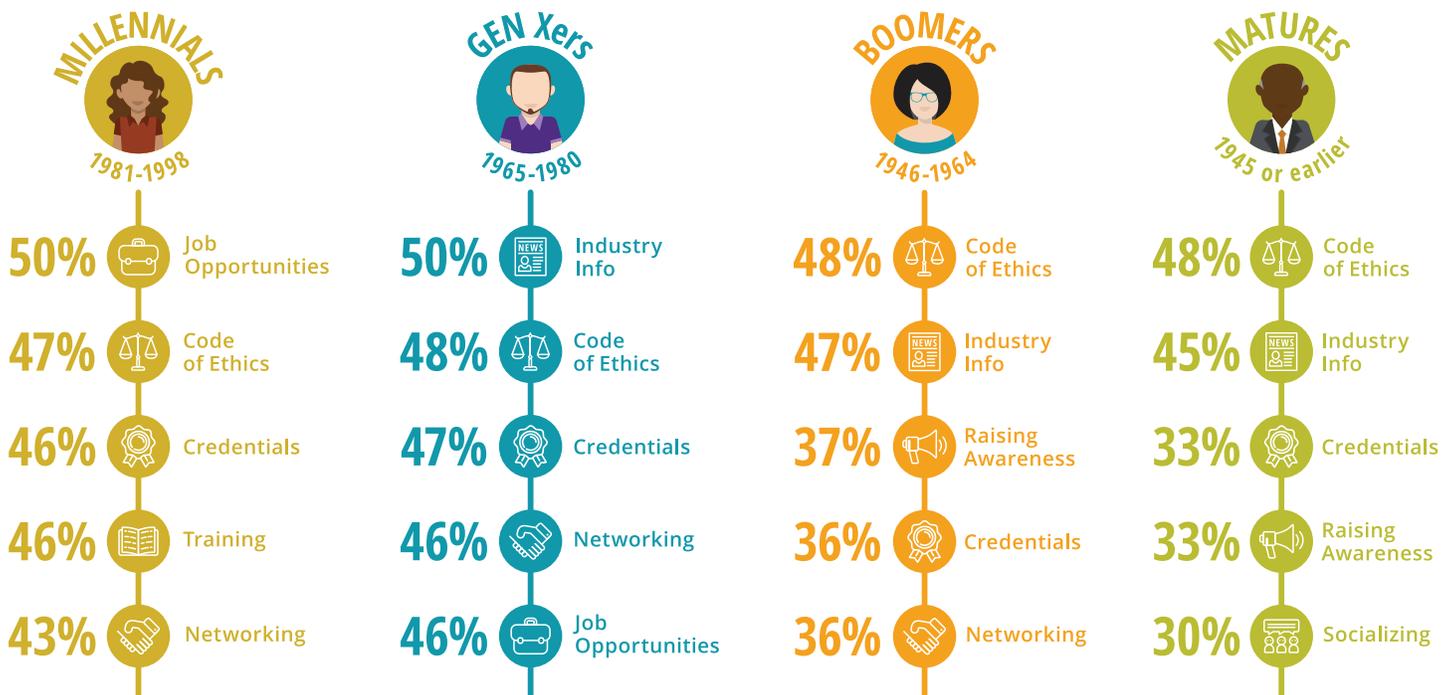


Figure 8: What matters most to members in different age groups (% very important)

Again, we see large differences in where organizations are focusing their time and efforts versus what members say they value most. While all age groups put a high value on a code of ethics, that benefit isn't perceived as a top priority by professionals at membership organizations. Figure 9 shows how professionals at membership organizations rank importance of member benefits.

PRIORITY BENEFITS ACCORDING TO ORGANIZATIONS

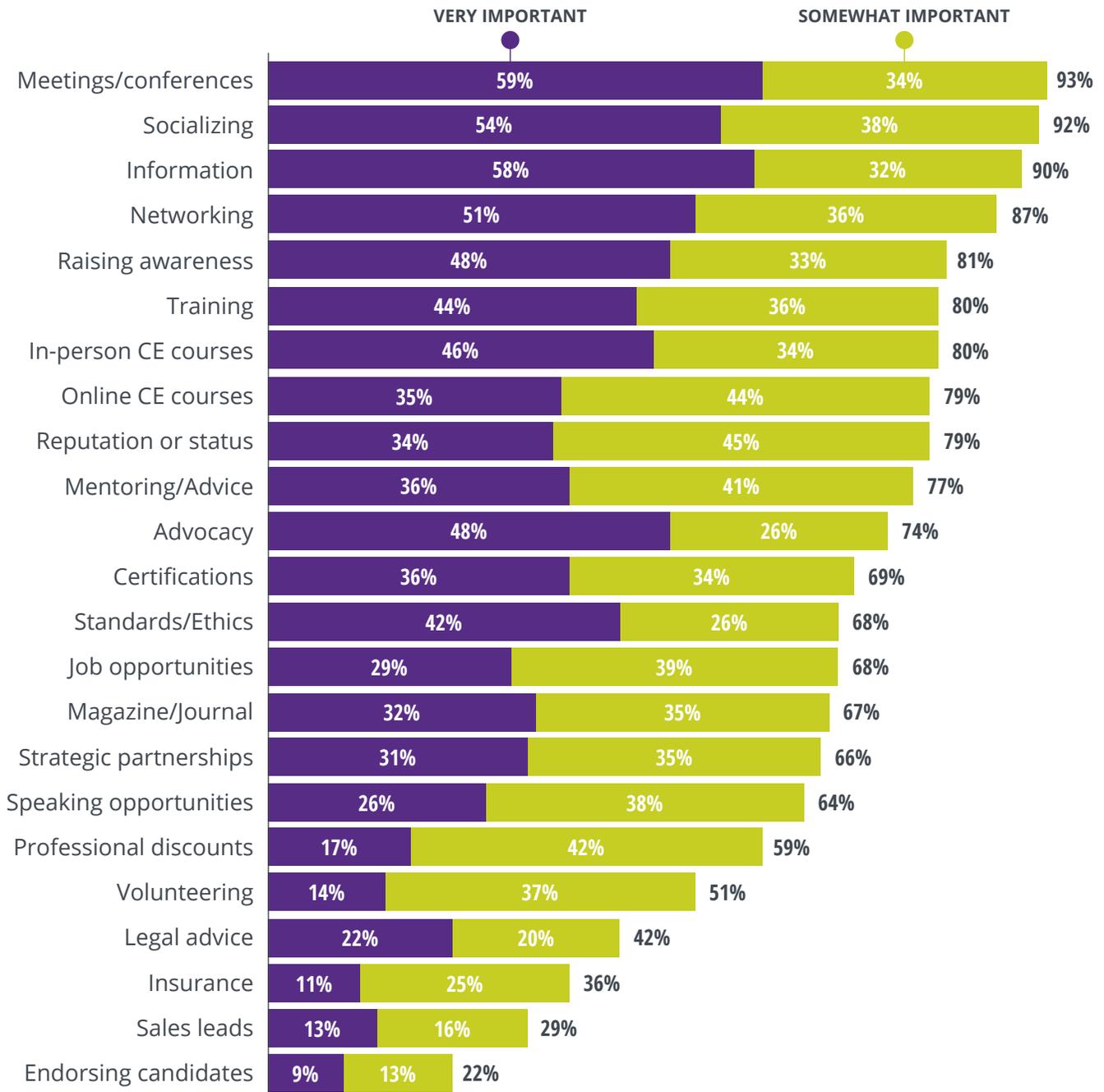


Figure 9: Perception of priority benefits by organization staff

When we look into what makes members feel most engaged, we see professional development, networking, and receiving information are the top ways members feel engaged with an organization. Figure 10 shows what keeps members most engaged over time as they grow older and become more established in their careers.

WHAT KEEPS MEMBERS MOST ENGAGED (BY GENERATION)



Figure 10: What keeps members most engaged as they progress in their careers

Section 3: Communications

Communication is essential in any relationship, and as we can see from the data above, one of the top three ways members feel engaged is by receiving information. The better the communication, and the more personalized the communication, the stronger the relationship will become.

For the most part, members feel like organizations communicate about the right amount (70 percent of those surveyed). However, when asked the same question, organizations report feeling less confident – 44 percent believe they communicate the right amount, but 36 percent believe they communicate too much (Figure 11).

PERCEPTION OF COMMUNICATION FREQUENCY

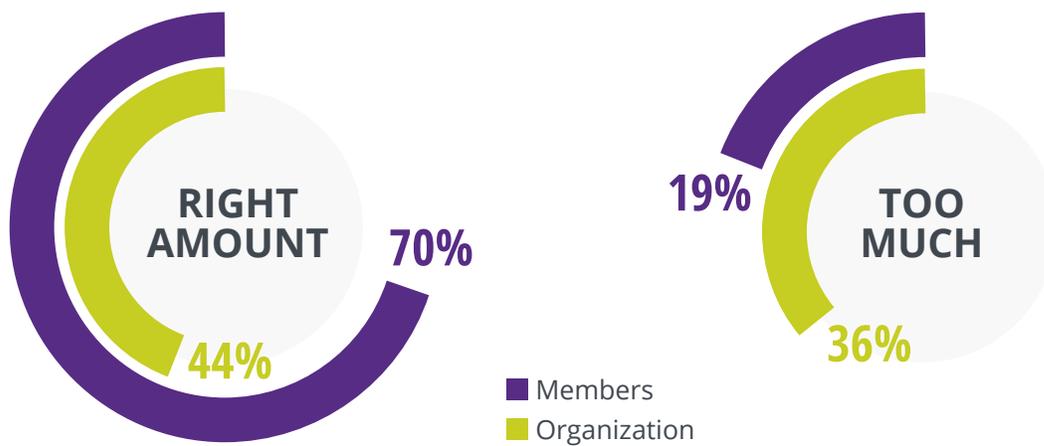


Figure 11: Communication frequency from the member and organization perspectives

What do members want to hear about? Figure 12 provides a close look at the type of information members are interested in receiving from their organization.

MEMBER CONTENT PREFERENCES



Figure 12: Type of information members want to receive (total interest)

Interestingly, although much has been made about the value of social media – it’s certainly an important channel – the research suggests it won’t replace traditional channels anytime soon. Millennials are the generation most open to receiving communications via social, mobile, and text; but, email remains king across all generations. Figure 13 illustrates communication preferences, looking at the overall preferred channel (email) and highlighting the greatest discrepancies across generations.

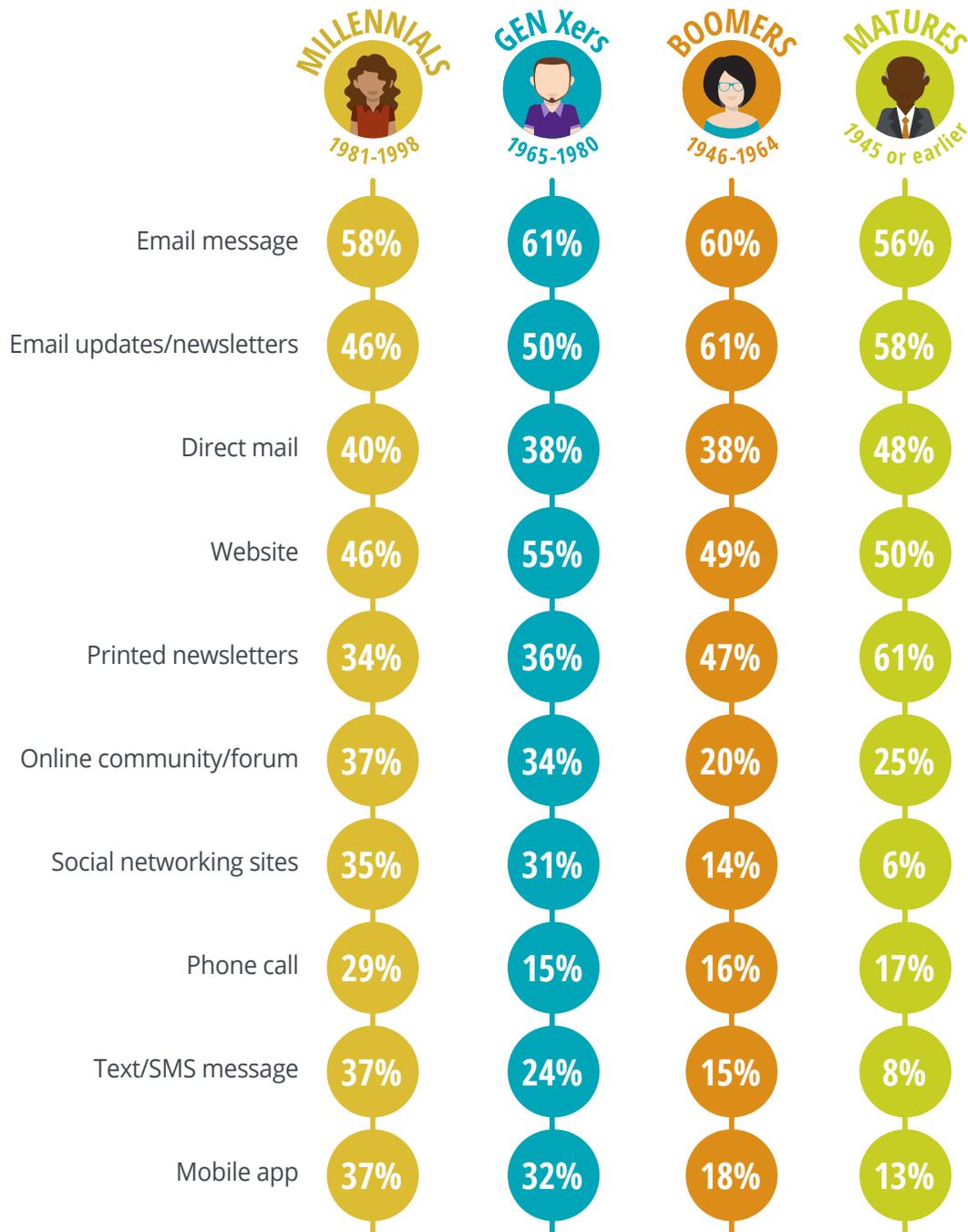


Figure 13: Communications preferences across generations

Different channels also have different expectations in terms of frequency. For email and direct mail, members report monthly contact is optimal. Weekly is okay for social and mobile, channels for which a user has to “opt in” to receive communications (for example, follow a Facebook page, follow a Twitter account, download a mobile app). For phone calls, hardly ever is preferred. Figure 14 maps out preferred frequency across a number of channels.

	DAILY	WEEKLY	MONTHLY	FEW TIMES A YEAR	LESS
Email	12%	35%	42%	10%	1%
Email updates/newsletters	11%	32%	45%	11%	1%
Website	19%	31%	35%	13%	1%
Printed newsletters	8%	17%	50%	21%	3%
Direct mail	10%	18%	40%	28%	3%
Mobile app	22%	36%	30%	8%	4%
Social network sites	23%	37%	29%	7%	3%
Text message	18%	35%	29%	14%	3%
Phone call	18%	22%	28%	24%	7%

Darker shading represents majority preference for respondents

Figure 14: Communication frequency preferences across channels among those contacted this way in the last year

Section 4: Targeting Communications

Although this report has introduced differences between members and their organizations in what they value and their communication preferences, the data specific to targeting and personalization shows perhaps the biggest missed opportunity for organizations to drive engagement. Only 29 percent of organizations take their members' age into account and only 48 percent take their career stages into account when communicating. The main information organizations look at when segmenting their member base is type of membership, at 81 percent. Some organizations may structure membership types based on a perceived career stage, but how reflective those benefits and communications are of the member's actual experience varies greatly.

Today's members have higher expectations of how technology can be used to personalize their experience with organizations to which they belong. Fairly or unfairly, these expectations for personalization are formed through their online experiences with the likes of Amazon™, Netflix, or other consumer outlets they use. Figure 15 showcases the multiple ways organizations can target members, many of which are not being leveraged to their fullest extent.



Figure 15: Information membership organizations use to target their members

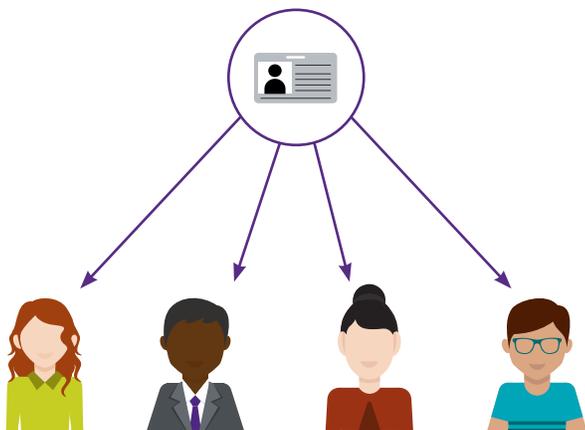
One Data Point vs. Many Data Points

Based on the data shown in Figure 15, 81 percent of organizations use type of membership as the primary – and, oftentimes, the only – data point around which to plan and execute member communication campaigns.

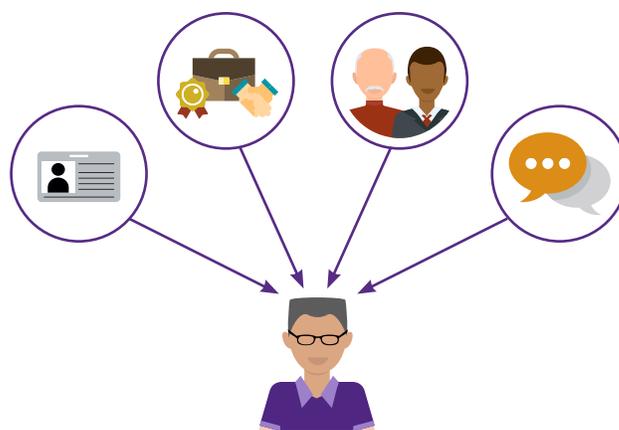
We know from experience, using one data point to target many members widens the gap between the members' expectations and the organization, and creates an environment where organizations rely on the volume of communication to drive conversion and retention rates, rather than targeted communication that can generate a higher return.

Members are telling organizations their channel preferences, as well as their interests and content preferences. Using those multiple data points to target the individual member will improve the overall member experience, as well as increase engagement and retention – matching the experience they have with other entities in their daily lives.

ONE DATA POINT



MANY DATA POINTS



Section 5: Where Do We Go From Here?

For the most part, organizations do a good job providing a valuable service to their membership. Members are satisfied. But, truly optimizing growth, retention, and engagement means digging deeper to understand members and eliminating the gaps between what members want and what organizations deliver.

First and foremost, organizations need to have a sharp, well-defined understanding of where members are in their career journey, and cater their content and communication strategy to address the needs and desires of their members based on age and/or career stage. A “one-size-fits-all” approach no longer works in the targeted, highly personalized, and technologically advanced world in which we live.

In addition to building the right content for the right age group and/or career stage, delivering it through the appropriate channels cannot be overstated and should be an area where organizations look to invest time and energy.

We hope you take something valuable from this study and use it to move your organization forward. Below are some specific tips organizations can use to get the most out of the data in this study:

- **Create meaningful segments with your data – and use them:**

This study attempts to capture member perspectives across a number of different generations, and highlights several differences with regards to their respective points of view and preferences. Yet, when asked, most organizations surveyed limit their targeting to membership type, which may or may not relate to an individual member’s age or life stage. Explore the data in your association management system (AMS) to understand what attributes can be leveraged to create new, more meaningful segments. These can help inform everything from key strategic decisions to daily communications, making each more successful.

- **Develop a strategy specifically for early careerists:**

More than any other segment studied in this report, those early in their career express unique preferences. They need more from their organization, actively looking to them for job assistance, training to make them stand apart in a sea of applications, and ways to create long-lasting connections with one another. Focusing on this segment and ensuring their engagement from day one creates greater opportunity for sustained growth and a brighter future for your organization.

- **Understand member communication preferences:**

Create multiple programs that provide the right content to your members at the right career stage, through the right technology and/or delivery channels. While it might be great to get younger members to attend conferences, for many that is simply not a priority or a budgetary reality. For older generations, oftentimes less is more in terms of communication. Take the time to build sophisticated, segmented programs that benefit your members where they are in their careers, to deepen their engagement and to maximize your spend.

- **Don’t overlook the basics:**

Even when presented with a broad variety of appealing benefits, all segments expressed a strong interest in something very fundamental – standards and codes of ethics. These guides serve as the cornerstone for

many organizations in terms of daily operations. But, don't underestimate their value to members. Ensure this information remains relevant, engage members in conversations around these regulations, and involve members in work to improve them, as appropriate.

- **Review your education offers:**

Survey respondents were clear in their preference for training, especially those in the early- to mid-stage of their career. Ongoing opportunities for learning foster engagement and create the means for your members to differentiate themselves professionally. That being said, organizations deliver multiple kinds of education, from online learning to continuing education and conference workshops. Audit the training you provide to your members. Message the benefits of each clearly and distinctly.

- **Know your members:**

While this study summarizes our findings from a diverse group of members and provides important insights, each organization is unique. The best next steps involve creating a dialogue with your own members and understanding how their distinct perspectives and preferences can improve your acquisition, retention, and engagement. Put together a member survey and let them know why you want the information – so you can communicate with them in the format they prefer and provide them with the content in which they're most interested.



Survey Methodology

Commissioned by Abila, Edge Research conducted two online surveys. One was among 1,030 association members who reported they are currently a member of a “professional membership organization,” or have been so within the last two years. Professional member organizations were defined in the survey as “a group of persons seeking to further a particular profession, the interests of individuals engaged in that profession and represent the profession, in discussion with the public and other bodies.” The survey was fielded using a commercial panel.

A second survey was conducted among 149 association professionals. Qualifying professionals reported being employed full- or part-time at a professional membership organization and at least somewhat involved in making decisions about member communication and engagement for their organization. Abila provided lists, and professionals were sent an email invitation to participate.

Surveys were fielded April 7-25, 2016.

About Abila

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