

A WELCOME ROLE FOR THE MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE



BY JOE ROMINIECKI / SEP 14, 2016

One association puts its volunteer membership committee to work in calling all new members to welcome them to the association—a rewarding effort for members, volunteers, and the association alike.

A common refrain among association governance experts is that a board of directors should focus on strategy and leave the execution to staff. Crossing those lines, they say, results in mixed messages and mixed results.

At the committee level, though, there seems to be no hard and fast rule. Some association volunteer committees fill an advisory capacity, while others are charged with hands-on work. Always crucial, then, is clarity for those volunteers about what is expected of them.

This is no different, of course, in the case of associations with volunteer membership committees. An association's membership strategy is bigger and more specialized than what a committee of volunteers—typically people with day jobs and without expertise in membership business models—is capable of producing, and yet member input is vital. Meanwhile, executing a full-fledged membership operation is beyond the scope of a volunteer role, but member-to-member connection can be invaluable to recruitment, retention, and engagement.

So, what's the right mix? What role can a volunteer membership committee sustainably provide to an association?

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The Academy of Managed Care Pharmacy offers a good example. Its 15-person membership committee takes on a mix of advisory and hands-on work, and those duties are designed to involve the committee "in a way they can feel the impact they're making," says Betty Whitaker, MBA, CAE, senior director of membership engagement and publications at AMCP.

CALL TO ACTION

The committee's most active work is calling all new non-student members to welcome them to AMCP. Each committee member is asked to reach out to between five and 20 members each month (depending seasonal recruitment activity) via phone and via an email follow-up if they can't connect by phone. The job isn't glamorous, but the welcome from a colleague is worthwhile, Whitaker says.

"The member-to-member communication is so key. They know what they do more every day than any staff person is going to or anybody I hire in a full-time role. So, they really know how to make somebody feel welcome," she says. "And a member saying why they want to be a member of the association is always much more impactful than a staff member saying why they should be a member of the association."

Volunteer members calling new members is alternative to models like the one at the California Dental Association, whose member concierge, Terry Fong, was profiled in 2013 in *Associations Now* for her full-time staff role in calling every new member of CDA. Even in that case, though, Fong was a 25-year veteran of CDA with a background in family in dentistry, giving her about as close an understanding of members as an association staffer could have.

At AMCP, Whitaker says the member-calling campaign "pays for itself," especially the twice-a-year outreach to lapsed members. That effort, in which volunteers call members who still have not renewed after the full series of mail and email renewal notices, earns back between 3 and 8 percent of lapsed members called.

SET UP VOLUNTEERS FOR SUCCESS

Cold-calling new and lapsed members can be intimidating even for volunteers who sign up, but they are not sent out into the wild unprepared. AMCP staff provide the volunteers with talking points for the calls and message templates for the email follow-ups. And those materials are all developed to complement and carry

through the same messaging used throughout AMCP's membership efforts. From there, volunteers are encouraged to be creative or, more important, to be themselves.

"We want it to sound like it's from the member. They want the talking points and the template because some of them are not totally sure where to start, so this helps them on that end," Whitaker says.

The committee's role is not all hands-on work, however. It also serves as a sounding board for AMCP staff's membership operations. "What any membership committee gives an association is the ability to hear firsthand from members when you want to talk about membership," Whitaker says.

To make it all work, Whitaker says AMCP provides a clear job description for committee members at the start of the volunteer recruitment process. The AMCP volunteer application asks those interested to provide a short written statement about why they'd like to contribute.

"We do look for an enthusiasm about the membership process," Whitaker says. "Most of what our members do, they interact with people all the time, so that's not necessarily something to worry about, somebody not being comfortable with that. Really, we just look for an excitement for membership and a willingness to help it grow and see it succeed."

AN ESTABLISHED ROLE

The membership committee volunteers typically find the member outreach rewarding, Whitaker says. For instance, many maintain connections with the new members they call and arrange to meet up at AMCP events. "Once the committee members get into it, they really enjoy it, because networking is such an important part of why our members belong to the association," she says. "This is a way for them to connect with their peers outside their normal work experience."

AMCP has deployed its membership committee in this way for many years, Whitaker says, as a key part of its overall onboarding and retention process. And it doesn't suffer the same "what do we do with our membership committee?" woes that seem to beset many other associations.

The staff support for the calling effort consists mainly of generating and dividing up lists of new members each month, updating talking points periodically, and sending reminders to the volunteers. For other associations looking to get their membership committees involved in the same way, Whitaker suggests starting small, with a certain member segment, for instance. And the volunteers can bring their advisory and hands-on roles together to help staff develop the talking points for their new-member calls.

"They're the ones who have to talk from it, so you want to get buy-in on that end," Whitaker says.

How does your association involve members in membership operations? If you have a membership committee, is its role advisory, hands-on, or both? Share your thoughts in the comments.