

A Long-Lasting Welcome: How to Keep Young Professionals Actively Engaged

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So you had some of your young professional members attend their first meeting. That's great, but how do you get them not only to attend more but to stay actively involved in your association?

Before they join.

That, say leaders at the 7,300-member Entrepreneurs' Organization (EO), is the best time to draw in young professionals and make them feel like part of an association, encouraging active involvement. But how?



It's a challenge faced by associations around the world: As the dynamics of young professionals change, how does a group translate that initial contact into real involvement?

For EO, it means drawing in young entrepreneurs before they join the organization.

"We get them involved through our Accelerator Program, which is a feeder program for EO," says Recruitment Director Miranda Barrett. "It's a way for young members to want to get involved before they qualify to join." EO members must own businesses with annual revenues of \$1 million or more and must join before they turn 50.

The Accelerator Program is run through EO's local chapters around the world. Business owners who bring in between \$250,000 and \$999,000 in annual revenue and who haven't yet reached their 47th birthdays are invited to apply for this mentoring program, which involves 12 local meetings per year to discuss specific, relevant topics—strategic plans, taxes, and so forth.

Each year, 12 participants are chosen for each local program. Barrett says the program introduces participants to EO chapters and fosters the relationship between the person and the

organization. Frequently, that later translates into national membership and increased volunteer involvement in the future.

That kind of relationship building not only attracts young association members to volunteer, but is useful to prevent new members attending their first conference or meeting from feeling out of place and disconnected—and then vanishing, never to volunteer.

The disappearing new member is a common phenomenon but one associations can circumvent by thinking a bit differently about young professionals.

Getting Their Attention

For members of previous generations, conferences and in-person association gatherings meant pinning on a name tag and putting themselves out there, so to speak. There was no point in going if attendees weren't going to be forward about introducing themselves and meeting new people.

But for the current generation of young professionals, extending a hand to a stranger may not be on the agenda.

"The hardest part about these meetings for first-time attendees is that they don't know anyone," says Barton G. Tretheway, CAE, managing partner at Bostrom Consulting Associates. "You go, and everyone else is standing there yakking it up. So you're standing by yourself wondering if someone will talk to you."

Members of generation Y (aka the millennial generation) are more comfortable being approached than doing the approaching, he says. And even then, they like having some kind of relationship established before they get onsite.

"I tell associations to take lessons from the way churches do things," says Tretheway. "Have a first-time attendee brunch, where first timers are together and greeted personally by volunteers. Identify them on their registration form, and invite them to something special just for them. It makes them feel welcome, and it's an opportunity to give them tips for navigating the event."

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—Sarah Sladek

Another tactic is to use email and phone to personally invite young professionals to specific events or places at the conference and then have a more established association member there to greet them when they show up.

"It's a tremendous challenge for associations and organizations out there," says Sarah Sladek, who runs Limelight Generations, a consulting firm specializing in marketing to, recruiting, and retaining younger generations. "Younger professionals really crave relationships, to the point that if they don't have a relationship with a group, they disengage from it. They want to be initially invited to the table; they want someone to reach out to them and establish that relationship."

Sladek says that one of the biggest ways to draw new attendees into an association event and encourage involvement is to bring their comfort zone to the conference. In other words, embrace technology and have it all around, in the face of every member.

"If you're successful in getting younger people to attend a conference in the first place, there are great ways to keep them engaged by using technology to your advantage," she says. "They thrive off technology."

Sladek says establishing a Facebook page for a specific meeting will allow new members to get involved before they arrive onsite and keep them tied in long after they go home.

Others agree, saying that providing areas onsite where attendees can network via Facebook and Twitter can be a great way to get them involved. "In the last five to 10 years, there's been a real boom in online options for engagement," says Katherine Loflin of Loflin Consulting Solutions. "You need to consider how well your organization presents itself and provides opportunities for involvement that are basically online. Some organizations look to these things as a way to get people involved—'Would you like to help maintain our Twitter account?' It's a way to find something up that person's alley without their having to physically be at your location."

Allowing young attendees to update organizational Facebook pages and send Twitter updates from a meeting in some kind of official capacity (on the meeting's dedicated page or fan site, or via a Twitter account set up just for the event) can make them feel they are part of the event. And it helps draw in their peers; they see their friends talking about how great things are onsite, what they're learning, and that they've been invited to participate on a tangible level.

And that brings up another great point: Experts say that millennials are simply not willing to hop on a plane and travel to regular meetings or seminars. To draw them in, associations are going to have to change the way they structure such opportunities.

Going Virtual

"A lot of groups think younger people don't want to be involved," says Cynthia D'Amour, president of Power People Unlimited. "You want to let go of that and ask how you can create a dynamic experience no matter how these younger people want to be involved."

Asking new members what they'd like to do and what their interests are and then making these things more accessible (outside of specific dates and times) are ways to engage younger professionals beyond that first conference experience.

"I remember having the entire board of my Junior League online at midnight on a Friday," says D'Amour. "You need to find a way that people can volunteer at five in the morning or the middle of the night. They want to do something fun and exciting, they want to be recognized for it, and they want to feel really good about it."

"That flexibility is critical," says Loflin. "The organization wants you to be part of the group in a way that makes sense for you. And starting out with 'This is what we want and that's what we expect' isn't the best place to kick off the conversation. Instead, try, 'This is what we can offer you.'" That flexibility, she says, extends to the kind of commitment volunteers are asked to make.

"Nonprofits are notorious for demanding that people commit to a year," she says. "Especially for younger folks, that doesn't work anymore."

Tretheway agrees. "Good governance involves reducing the number of committees down to more critical core committees and making everything else a task force," he says. "These people want to get in and get out. They don't want to be on a committee for the rest of their lives."

"Ask them to be on a task force—that can be helpful," says Sladek. "But there has to be a real challenge and a real opportunity involved with anything they're asked to do. They need to have the opportunity to influence or change or develop a plan or do something that's meaningful to

the organization. Let them lead a student outreach program—find a way they can really influence change and have a voice."

Others say part of that means letting go of notions that only established industry members should sit at the board table or that members need to be involved for so many years before they can vote on things.

That carries over to seminars and meetings, where younger members often feel pushed aside by older, more established professionals. Making new members feel their opinions are valued encourages their future involvement, before they go missing after just one or two events. Creating interactive seminars and convincing people to really participate, and not just listen, can be key to meaningful involvement down the road.

"You need to get your leadership to run meetings where people are allowed to participate and it's not just someone spouting out information," says D'Amour. "If a young person is paying a babysitter to attend a local two-hour event, that person could be paying \$50 just to attend. The experience for them has to be huge. Would an established leader pay \$50 to attend a committee meeting?"

She says you have to make part of the experience social by letting new members connect with other people and launch relationships that go beyond that of speaker and audience.

"You need to have fun, you need to be welcoming with food, you need to allow people to speak up," says D'Amour. "Ask them questions. I see so many leaders who tell me the younger people didn't want to be involved, that they came to one meeting and didn't come back. Well, what were you doing to make them not want to stay? Taking ownership and being welcoming is huge."

Put Out the Welcome Mat

"A lot of times, it starts with a personal invitation," says D'Amour. She encourages associations to ask established volunteers to pick up the phone and reach out to new people before their first meeting, to welcome them to the group, give them the opportunity to ask questions, and find out what they might be interested in contributing.

"You should get a phone call," she says of new members. "You should be asked what you're interested in and attracted to, you should be invited to a live event, and you should see board

members and committee members who know what the opportunities are and who's in that room."

Tretheway says this can also happen onsite, where a special welcoming table should be set up at registration and where first-time attendees are identified by a sticker or badge or other visible sign. Then, he says, established members should be encouraged to introduce themselves to the newbies and strike up conversations about what they might be looking for.

"You should have ambassadors there who engage first-time attendees," he explains. "Identify opportunities for them to get involved in ways that make the most sense for them. And then reach back out to them after the event. Send an email or a phone call—but not a blast email, something personal. 'I'm such-and-such person, we met at this event, here are some ways I think you'd enjoy getting involved.' It needs to be one-on-one marketing."

That might include setting up special events after the main conference that are exclusive to new members or young professionals.

"You tell young members that they've attended the conference so they get discounted or free registration at a follow-up webinar series," says Sladek. "You offer distinguished speakers and the chance to learn from successful people in their field. Younger generations crave the idea of exclusivity and access. If they've come to an event, it's a great way to sustain momentum, keep them informed, and keep them networking through those mediums."

Those kinds of events can also be structured for people who weren't able to attend an in-person meeting, to draw them in the same way in-house attendees were. "You have this distinguished webinar series where people can learn from some of the big speakers at the conference," says Sladek. "If you couldn't chat with them onsite, here's your opportunity to learn from them. You let them have a conversation, ask questions through live chats and message boards. Young people will see this as an opportunity to learn and feel engaged with the association."

All of this, she says, means a shift in thinking, particularly for members who might resist giving up face-to-face committee meetings in favor of web-based events or accepting input in ways they're not necessarily used to.

"The value felt by younger people has to come from the organization's leaders themselves," she says. "They have to be open and willing to say that they want younger people on board and that

they're going to plan virtual conferences and get involved with social networking and be cutting edge. The culture of the organization has to foster that kind of inclusion, and that's sometimes easier said than done. But it starts with empowering younger people in decision-making roles."