



Bill Carney

# Membership Recruiting: A Primer

By Bill Carney, Director of Business Development at Drohan Management Group

## The Marketing Continuum

Before a discussion of membership recruiting can carry any relevance, every association leader needs to fully understand and buy into the notion that membership marketing doesn't begin and end with a specific campaign. It is an ongoing process that requires attention throughout the year.

Sound recruiting begins with effective retention activities. After all, what sense does it make to bring new members in the front door when you're leaking them in comparable numbers out of the back door? It's much less expensive, and it takes far less effort, to retain an existing member than to recruit a new member.

It's best to think of your recruiting efforts, then, as a continuum. The continuum consists of four stages:

- **Awareness Stage** – Do prospective members know who you are? Essentially, this is a product of your branding efforts. If you are recognized as “the voice” of your industry or profession, chances are a target prospect will know who you are. If the prospect does not know who you are, there is little chance they will join, no matter how good your recruiting campaign is.
- **Recruitment Stage** – The process of getting a prospect to “try” your association. Direct marketing is the cornerstone of most recruiting efforts. This stage will be the focus of this article.
- **Engagement Stage** – Successfully taking a member to a second transaction within the association, which might be joining a special interest section or attending an annual meeting. An association that actively engages members at a number of levels is much more likely to realize higher membership retention.

- **Renewal Stage** – The quantitative evaluation of how successful you have been with the other components of the continuum. Now here's a fundamental truth about renewals: The number one reason that people leave an organization is not that they are unhappy with the services. **The number one reason most people do not renew is that they forgot!** Every association must take full advantage of the multiple channels available in going after renewals: mail, e-mail, telephone, the website, publications, social media, and the list goes on.

## Recruiting: The Direct Mail Formula

Despite the revolution in technology over the past several years, direct mail, when supported by effective e-mails and an interactive website, remains the backbone of effective membership recruiting.

Here's a formula to keep in mind when you are building a direct mail campaign:

- 40% of the success of your campaign will be attributable to the message – how well are you explaining the value proposition and member benefits in order to compel a prospect to join?
- 40% of the success of your campaign will be attributable to the list – are you reaching out to the right prospect targets, are the lists current?
- 20% of the success of your campaign will be attributable to the design – are you packaging the message effectively and allowing the message to get through?

Many association leaders are surprised to see that the design plays such a minor role, compared to the other two elements. Far too often, however, when an association is struggling with recruitment they turn to a graphic designer to solve their problem. That is, they are convinced that beautiful graphics and clever design devices will turn the tide. That's analogous to getting into your car, starting the engine and hearing a knock, and deciding to take the car to the carwash for a “fix.” The car may come out looking better, but the problem is definitely not solved.

## Recruiting: The Direct Mail Package

An effective, efficient direct mail recruiting package is built on a sound message delivered to a receptive target audience. It's best to hire a professional to help construct and conduct the direct mail campaign.

The first step is to understand, and to have your association board understand, that there are no guarantees in direct marketing. This is an art, not a science. Having said that, you can improve your chances for success considerably by following some tested marketing guidelines.

The direct mail package/campaign should be built around three important elements:

- **The marketing message...** what is it that sets your association apart and makes it an essential organization for a prospect to join?
- **The offer...** what value-added proposition do you provide at this particular time that will compel the prospect to join?
- **The targets...** who are your most likely prospects, including prospects who have never had direct contact with the association before?

In order to be able to build the target lists and to write effective copy for the direct mail package, the supporting e-mails, and the website, you have a number of questions to be answered. These questions include:

- What is the association's unique selling position?
- What are the personal and professional benefits of membership?

- What are the competition's strengths and weaknesses?
- What is the mission statement?
- What are the membership categories?
- Are members individuals, companies, or a combination of both?
- What are the most common job titles or job functions among members?

Actually, there are many more questions to be answered, and in most cases it's a good idea to conduct a survey of the association's leadership to get the answers to these questions.

This is not a terribly time consuming process. With the survey completed, you can have a marketing professional develop the lists and produce a budget. With approval of the budget, you can proceed to develop the campaign.

**Recruiting: E-mails in Support of the Direct Mail Package**

E-mail blasts to the target lists are an important component of the campaign. A day or two before each roll-out of your direct mail package, an e-mail is sent to the recipients. This e-mail serves as an alert that a special offer is coming their way in the form of a direct mail package. Historically, this pre-emptory notice improves response rates significantly.

Two weeks after each roll-out a second e-mail is sent which reminds the prospects of the offer and lets them know there is still time to take advantage of the value-added proposition. Six weeks after each roll-out a third e-mail is sent which offers prospects a last chance to join with the special offer and tells them the deadline is looming.

**Recruiting: Tracking the Responses**

Your marketing professional and your mail house will help you set up a coding system to allow for tracking your responses. You may be testing different messages, different offers, different lists, different roll-outs, etc. Tracking these variables will allow you to modify subsequent roll-outs of a current campaign and to make better decisions on future recruiting campaigns.

There's much more to know about recruiting and about direct marketing campaigns, of course. I hope this primer gives you some direction and provides some advice you can use in growing your membership. Now get out there and recruit!

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