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Members who are “active loyalists” will help your association succeed. In gearing up for the ‘02 campaign season, great associations wisely look at themselves first to prepare for the road ahead.

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Active Loyalty: The Key to Membership Building

No matter what the issue or industry, associations have two central membership issues: (1) How active are my members and (2) How loyal are they?

“Active Loyalty” is the sum of both virtues, the best of the group. Outstanding associations understand that their active loyalists fuel their organization and drive success. Without asking key questions of all members and then following up with these active loyalists, large associations may lose their way, and smaller associations may not grow as quickly.

Large associations usually have it easier than smaller ones. With comparatively little effort, potential members seek out and find large associations – donors want to give, and public officials are willing to listen. If you’re not that big, then you had better have money or be well organized. Although it may seem like one out of every three people you know is a lawyer, the fact is that their association simply knows how to leverage their strengths by energizing their most loyal members.

Yes, money can help an association with a relatively small donor base, but active loyalty is the key to long-term success. Great associations understand and track these members as their organizations change and grow over time.

Association members who are active and loyal do a lot beyond paying dues every year, regardless of economic downturns. They’re willing to do much more. Active loyalists will participate in your conferences, sometimes leading seminars. They will bring in other members and donors through their enthusiastic recommendations. Active loyalists will respond to your e-mail alerts, and they’ll type

the lobby e-mail or letter to Congress upon request. In short, active loyalists will help your association succeed. In gearing up for the campaign season, great associations wisely look at themselves first to prepare for the road ahead.

Why Track Membership Commitment?

Some of the best associations succeed without systematically finding out why they are so good. Most associations have an instinctive feel for how they are doing. Membership rolls may be growing, donations are increasing, issues they care about are on the agenda, and the public seems supportive. The word also is great from regional directors. But these factors are temporary. In a recession, membership rolls and donations may slide. When the agenda shifts, the association may find itself having trouble getting heard. And sometimes the opposition is simply better funded or organized.

One way to reliably mitigate these unhappy challenges is a growing membership of active loyalists. To understand them is to understand your success. You need to now how they view their relationship with the association in detail. Ad hoc methods are helpful, but they do not clarify the representation of your membership reliably. Testing your own perceptions or assumptions once a quarter – or at least once a year – is the best way to ensure long-term growth for your association and more active loyalists. With that valuable information, you can modify your strategies and tactics to be more in sync with those driving your association.

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Active Loyalty (Continued)

Basis for Loyalty

Associations do much more than provide information and services. They give members a sense of belonging, provide a forum for interaction with industry leaders, serve as a clearinghouse for best practices and latest news, and guard against or push for government action. Many professional associations offer their members access to services such as rental car discounts, health insurance and public policy literature. But the best associations recognize that access to timely and useful information is what drives loyalty.

In many ways, your members follow a hierarchy of needs not unlike the one first described by Abraham Maslow in the late 1960s. To reach the highest level of commitment to your association, these needs must be serviced. Since associations are in the business of information, Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs and Information* is particularly pertinent.

Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs and Information*:

- **Empowering information** (*Ego needs*)
- **Enlightening information** (*Social needs*)
- **Helping information** (*Security needs*)
- **Coping information** (*Biological/psychological needs*)

Coping information helps people deal with threats. Just after Sept. 11, it was clear that airlines and related industries would be in danger. Associations deployed quickly to defend the interests of those affected businesses and some were very successful.

Education and training programs are good examples of helping information. Each can improve how a person conducts business or engages in the public debate over important issues.

Enlightening information is directed toward people as social beings. Most of us need to be a part of something greater than ourselves – whether it's a softball team or an association. We like to meet the best and brightest in our field or in our policy arena.

Empowering information is all about you. Even the most humble among us has an ego. We want to feel good about ourselves, about the businesses we work in and the causes we advocate.

Surveying Your Active Loyalists – and Others

Therefore, the best questions to discern your active loyalists from the rest of your members are not just about who participates in the most programs or donates the most money. The questions should be focused on members' needs. In any membership survey, try asking the following five questions first before you ask about public policy issues, the strength of your lobbying efforts or the navigability of your Web site:

1. (**Coping**) How much do you trust [name of association] to promote and defend your interests to the government, courts and the public in [name of industry/cause]?

2. (**Helping**) How reliable is [name of association] as your primary source of information about current trends in [name of industry/cause]?

3. (**Enlightening**) How important is [name of association] as a forum for meeting other leaders [within your industry/with those who also support your cause]?

4. (**Empowering**) How important is [name of association] to your success [within your industry/in serving as an advocate for your cause]?

5. (**Empowering**) When [name of association] needs your help, how likely are you to actively participate?

Overall, the five questions measure different aspects of active loyalty. Questions 1, 2 and 4 are primarily focused on loyalty while questions 3 and 5 are more about how active members are.

The first question is asking your members their belief in your association's ability to advance its agenda. Depending on the circumstance, associations are either on offense (promoting an agenda) or on defense (defending against government action). How high the scores on this measure are is the primary indicator of a member's faith in the association.

Reliability is the next most important factor. Can a member depend on the association for its most valuable product: information? Will being a member of this association keep the person on top of the latest and most important information out there on the industry or issue? Is it viewed

as their "primary source of information" as opposed to other news outlets including broadcast, print, radio and Internet? A high score here signifies that the association is doing a great job communicating to its members.

Everyone likes to know the top leaders in their industry or cause. Access to these superstars is usually impossible for most people but associations do a very good job at providing such opportunities. Whether it's at annual meetings, in magazine articles or online chats, members can improve their lives by hearing success stories. If an association is providing this opening to its members it is delivering an important service of loyalty.

Note that we ask two questions under the heading of empowering. Ego is not only a function of an individual's success, but also the success of the organization to which that person is loyal. When my alma mater wins a football game it is not only their accomplishment but also mine. I can go to the office and show up my colleagues – and drive my car with specialty alumni plates with pride. The degree to which an alum or member goes out and actively supports the team or association is an important measure of active loyalty.

Interpreting the Results

How your association performs on each question says a lot about the commitment of your membership. High average scores on each measure show that there is something special going on at your association. Low ratings are a warning. There are many ways to improve these scores, but let us leave that subject for another day. Looking at members who give perfect scores on all five questions, versus those who do not, is a great way to discern your active loyalists from the rest of the members. After that, follow up with qualitative interviews – or focus groups if you're lucky enough to have active loyalists concentrated in one geographical region.

Where are your active loyalists on these questions? If you don't know, you need to ask. With this base of knowledge, tracked over time, you will know how often your members will answer the call when you make it, and how strong your association will be during challenging times.