

Magnetic Attraction

Using your magazine to make membership irresistible





By Jen Smith

What is the role of an association magazine?

At its best, an association magazine is THE premier venue for insights and information within your industry or field. It covers all the pertinent topics, gives a voice to the industry's leaders and up-and-comers, and consistently acts as the bellwether of future trends and directions. Take it a step further, and it can provide a platform for the association's thought leadership and mobilize readers into action that directly shapes the future of a field.

All of this — made possible by the work you put into it — makes a flagship magazine unique. It serves its members in a way they just can't get anywhere else. And they know it. Member surveys regularly report that the magazine is perceived as the chief (highest ranking, most valuable) member benefit for associations that publish one.

When you have a tool this valuable, there are two things you can do with it:

1. Brag on it as an ongoing, exclusive member benefit that keeps on giving, thus enticing your members to renew.
2. Use it as a marketing tool to show nonmembers what they're missing.

Within association publishing, teams spend so much time and effort focused on creating a quality magazine that delivers this kind of value to their members that they often overlook — or underestimate — item No. 2: **the opportunity to use it as a marketing tool to attract new members.**

In fact, a well-done association magazine is the *perfect* ambassador for an organization. It demonstrates what you're about and what you're up to better than any marketing collateral ever could. You're already producing the content and going through a print and mailing process. Why not leverage that effort to drive new membership growth?

Need some ideas for how association editors and publishers can team up with their colleagues in membership and marketing to do this? Read on.



Up the Quantity

For one issue each year, print extra copies and mail them to qualified prospective members. A single, unexpected issue that arrives in a prospect's mailbox gives that individual a tangible opportunity to experience the advantages of membership.

Don't forget to include information about how to quickly and easily join the organization. A visually engaging cover tip is a great way to do this. For example, include a $\frac{3}{4}$ -page cover tip-on (positioned just below your masthead). This both entices readers to open the cover to see what's underneath and gives you an opportunity to send a specialized message to this group. In the messaging, appeal to people's FOMO (fear of missing out): "This is what you've been missing because you're not a member!"

Tracking is key. Create an exclusive landing page or provide a promo code for this particular path to membership so you can track the performance of the mailing and measure your ROI.

Not sure how to cultivate a list of prospective members? Search your organization's data for people who have purchased a product from you or registered for one of your events (live or online) at your nonmember rate.

You can also pull a list of people who have let their membership lapse. For these folks, try another FOMO-based tact. Appeal to them with a "We miss you" or "Let's get back together" message. (Bonus points if you can tie this to a February issue to coincide with Valentine's Day.)

If your magazine carries advertisers, they will be thrilled with this additional annual reach.

Make an Introduction

Create a stand-alone "introductory issue" of your magazine targeted specifically to prospective members. This abbreviated issue (possibly formatted in a different trim size) can include representative content from your magazine. Consider these types of ideas:

1. Reprint the top three articles from the previous year. Look for articles that attracted the most engagement from members, whether in online user activity, letters to the editor submissions, or anecdotal feedback.

2. Find ways to repackage select content around a theme — like “Key Insights You’ve Missed.” Use a forward from the current board president to add insightful perspective from the association.
3. Create a special profile of a member who has reached some distinction or created notable industry disruption. Touch on how the association has impacted his/her career and achievements.

Print enough copies to distribute at industry events (perhaps in partnership with a complimentary organization) and during career fairs at universities with programs that are entrees to your field. Knowing your distribution plan will help you determine what kind of shelf life your content will need.

Based on the content and reach of this introductory issue, consider integrating a single sponsor. This can help defer some of the production costs while giving the industry supplier an opportunity to showcase its support of the association.

Open Access, Limited Time

Similar to extending your print run, consider allowing open access to a select digital issue of your magazine once each year. Direct your prospects to it via an email campaign, social pushes, and your association website.

Work with your marketing team to determine which issue will be most attractive to your target group. This could be the issue published in sync with your annual meeting or a themed issue that covers sought-after information.

Take advantage of the opportunity this platform offers to enhance the print content with digital features like video. According to research from inbound marketing giant HubSpot, even using the word “video” in an email subject line boosts open rates by up to 19 percent.

In addition to content-related videos, consider creating video messages, such as one from a high-profile member of the association. Capture that person speaking directly to prospective members about why membership is so important and what the magazine means to members. Deliver the video directly within the email message itself (using a tool like BombBomb), along with links to the digital edition and membership enrollment.

When you promote this freely accessible digital issue on your social media channels, catch people’s attention by including a short animated GIF of the magazine’s cover or an inside spread. And if not animation, at least an image. People react to information more often when it’s paired with relevant images. According to a research test by Buffer, for example, tweets with images received 150 percent more retweets than those without images.

As with the print bonus distribution concept, don’t send the complimentary digital edition along without a clear, upfront message and call to action. Craft an email message that touts this exclusive opportunity to get a taste of information and insight that’s otherwise reserved for members. Highlight a clear offer to join, include a discount or promotion code, and track your results.

Open Access, Limited Content

Many media outlets like The Washington Post are experimenting with metered gateways that allow readers access to a limited number of articles every month. Along these lines, some association publishers are giving access to their cover story (or similarly defined content pieces) for every issue. This is certainly a way to tease prospective members with the highest quality insights your organization offers, but it can also be argued that it gives away your most valuable content for little to no return.

If you do choose to make some digital content freely accessible each month, structure your access setup so there’s a fair exchange of value. For example, require that users complete a simple form before they can access the content. Keep this very basic — just enough information to enable you to identify these prospects — so you don’t scare them away. Then, once a user has navigated through the freely accessible content, prompt them with a gateway that explains the value of membership, provides a link to join, and, of course, includes a mechanism to track conversions.

Showcase your magazine to prospective members. Your effort to create a top-notch publication can only further its reach and the mission of your association and the industry or profession it serves.

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