SENGii

Why Community?

For Online Community Approval & Continued Advocacy

This guidebook serves as a resource to gain support from your Board of Directors and stakeholders for the addition and continued advocacy of an online community. As associations increase their focus on member engagement, activity in a members-only community continues to top the list for quantifying member retention and combating member attrition. You will find key points and benefits to aid in discussions and presentations that are sure to hit home with decision-makers.

ENHANCE MEMBER RECRUITMENT

The addition of an online community to your organization means providing members a meaningful and engaging way to expand their network, skills and knowledge. Promoting the increased member connections and positive impact of community involvement can serve as a viable recruitment tool to attract new members to your organization and boost dues revenue. Additional ideas for prospect recruitment are included below:

Run a campaign giving non-members access to your community for 30 days to see what they're missing. You could also consider a discount to join during this time.

Consider hosting a series on a hot topic in your community with a well-known speaker. Open one session up to non-members.

INCREASE MEMBER RETENTION

Implementing an online community can also increase member retention by offering a unique benefit. It is five times more costly to gain members than to keep existing ones. Therefore, adding a tool to keep your members actively engaged in your organization means they are more likely to renew and fortify their dues investment.
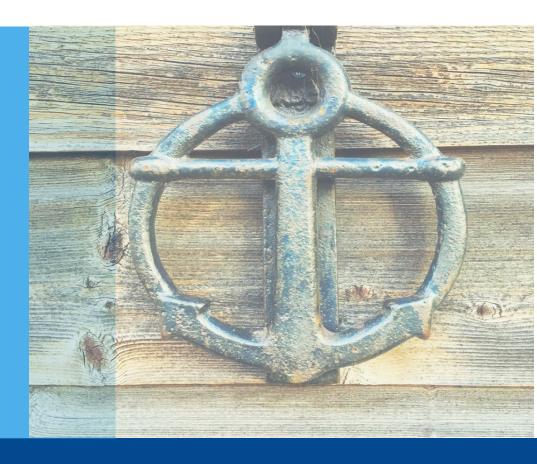
In order to keep your members interested, find out what they want and need. Member surveys are one way to gather information; however, with an online community you can see first-hand what's important in real-time. By accessing valuable member discussions, you can add relevant member offerings and resources.

Once your online community is launched, there are creative ways to keep driving members to your community:

- Run a contest with a giveaway to add a picture or update their profile.
- House all committee information in your community, driving members to the community.
- Host a speaker in your community after an event or webinar for additional discussion.
- Provide a new member orientation discussion in the community. Ask active members to help host it.
- Ask members to lend their expertise by being on stand-by to answer questions on a relevant topic in the community.

It costs five times as much to attract a new customer, than to keep an existing one.

MAKE THE MOST OF EVENTS & YOUR BOTTOM LINE

A great way to enhance events and save you (and your members) time is by integrating events into your online community. Many organizations spend time manually pulling and updating rosters to send to participants. With an online community, the roster and pre-event discussion can happen all in one place. You can create buzz around hot topics and encourage networking before the event begins.

The online community also provides the opportunity to create budgeted revenue based on hot topic conversations. The open forum is the prefect place to see what topics are getting the mosts posts and replies. If you can act in the moment by offering a continuing education course or event to help solve the problem, you will create additional revenue and fill a need of members.

Another potential way to create non-dues revenue is by developing fee-based communities for specialty groups. For example, if you have a group of boomer members who would like to prospect younger members in regards to succession planning, you could create a fee to belong to this specialty group. Another area where a fee-based group could make sense is a career development community.

CREATE COMMUNITY

Associations are often spread out across the state or the country making it difficult for members to connect face-to-face. Members may see each other once a year at the annual conference and fail to reconnect until the following year. Other associations have small towns where member connections are limited based on geography. An online community can create connections among members no matter where they live or work.

EXTEND YOUR
MEMBERS' NETWORK

Members can add virtual connections to their contacts via the online community. By filling out their profile and joining interest-based communities, members can connect with each other based on specified areas. Allowing members to connect virtually eliminates the need for a separate membership directory.

REACHING MEMBERS

According to the Community Brands' 2021 Association Trends Study, Professional organizations remain a beacon in uncertain times. The most important areas of value for members are industry news and information, training and advocacy.

With industry news and information being identified as the key reason that members join an association, it's imperative to provide excellent content. And we know that this lies at the route of ongoing member engagement. With an online community the responsibility for providing up to date information shifts from the association staff to the membership as a whole. Members are encouraged to start discussions about topical issues and other members can contribute to the conversation. Your membership has a wealth of knowledge which they are able to share.

Through discussion, it becomes easy for association staff to pinpoint areas that would make for relevant training. "Members are looking for a greater variety of learning modalities, including online courses via live webinar, webcasts of a live event, course recommendations and short videos."

According to Community Brands' 2021 Association Trends Study, 58% of members say that Industry news and information is most important to them.

ENHANCED DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

Associations are continuously looking for ways to enhance their diversity and inclusion efforts. One vital way is to provide an avenue for diversity of thought. According to Fredi Lajvadri, Vice President of STEM Initiatives a Si Se Puede Foundation, who recently spoke at the ASAE Annual Conference, "diversity of thought creates opportunities for innovation. You never know where the next great idea is going to come from." Your organization can provide open communication and diverse thought by providing an unmoderated open forum.

An open forum is an area online where members can discuss various topics freely and the ideal way to launch our online community. The recommendation is to introduce your open forum in a moderated mode for the first four weeks as you become familiar. Then, open it up as unmoderated for members to express their thoughts and opinions. If the thought of this gives you heartburn, remember there should always be guidelines to complement any online community. The guidelines outline your code of conduct which members have to "accept" in order to participate.

With an unmoderated open forum, it is still important to have a staff member watching the conversations and ensuring questions are being answered. Staff should not act as the "community cop" but rather look for ways to use the thoughts and opinions being shared to enhance the organization's offerings. Staff should also have a list of members, based on topic, to respond to questions not being addressed. The last thing you want is a member putting themselves out there only to have no response.

In addition to ideas for relevant offerings, an open forum can also help you develop new interest-based communities. For instance, if you see tax is the hot topic and generating a majority of the conversation, you could create spin off groups for various tax topics. You can also allow members to suggest non-technical interest areas that are important to them. Perhaps it's a "working mothers" community or a "firm administrators" community, the sky's the limit as long as there is activity and interest.

BECOME THE ONE-STOP SHOP

Most associations have various committees, task forces, and groups to help guide their organization. There are typically staff liaisons to help with coordinating and corralling the groups to stay focused. Traditionally , the staff liaison also needs to facilitate the rosters, take minutes and distribute all materials.

You can create committees as groups within your community and house everything in one place. No more creating and updating rosters - they will automatically be created with profile pictures included. Members can get contact information for other members with a simple click. Materials and minutes can all be uploaded to a library and shared with the group. Discussions around important topics or meeting details can all happen within the community eliminating multiple emails chains.

However, if a member would like to get email update, they can opt-in to receive email alerts

when an item is posted, still cutting their emails in half.

You may think that this all sounds great, but how do I get my committees on board? Start with your Board of Directors. Your top leaders need to set the example and the expectations. If your Board of Directors is using the online community for all of their communication and materials, it will be an easier sell to your other groups.

It is also recommend to use an all or nothing approach. If the communication roster, and materials are housed in your community, members will be forced to use the online group to stay up-to-date. In order to stay relevant, members will have to create their profile and add their picture. These groups will drive them to your online community where they will become more comfortable using the system in other ways.

MEASURING MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

Before implementing your community, the Board of Directors will want to know how you are going to measure success. Success will look different for each organization, so you will want to identify 3-5 key criteria relevant to your association. You'll want to re-evaluate or add to that criteria year after year. In the first year, consider measuring success by identifying touch points that show the effectiveness of your online community. The chart below shows an example of what might be important to measure after the launch of your community.

Criteria	Percentage of Members
Accepted code of conduct (agreed to terms)	25%
Created a profile	10%
Added a profile picture	5%
Posted a discussion in open forum	15%
Replied to a discussion in open forum	20%

Sengii can provide stats from other organizations similar in size so you can compare what success looks like across the board. You'll want to continue to adjust and increase these percentages year after year to show success. Once your community is thriving and you add more communities and groups, you'll want to implement other success metrics to show how your community is increasing member engagement holistically.

One way to do this is to measure retention rates by members who actively participate in your community. First, you'll need to define "active members". An active member could be a person who has agreed to the terms and created a profile. Next, pull how many active members you have in the community and compare to how many of those renewed during your dues season. Typically, members who are active in the community are most likely to renew. To go a step further, look at the age of your active members. Are those who are active millennials or baby boomers? You'll probably be surprised. You can use this date to show how you are engaging various age groups and increasing member retention.

Once your community is established, you can even consider an engagement scoring tool to quantify overall member engagement. How are your members active across the various offerings and engagement platforms which could include continuing education, volunteering, donating and online community participation?

PAYING FOR YOUR ONLINE COMMUNITY

Adding an online community to your member benefit portfolio all sounds great until it's time to pay the bill. Even if you sell the value to your Board of Directors it won't carry as much weight if you don't also show how you are going to fund and support the community

One obvious way is to raise membership dues. Don't stop reading here .... there are strategic ways to raise dues. However, it can't be done haphazardly. Along with your strategic plan to add member value, you also need a plan for raising dues consistently year after year. If you are raising dues by 3-5% each year, your members won't feel the increase as dramatically.

Show your Board of Directors. Breakdown the value by comparing the dues increase to the value add for members. For instance, if you raise your dues by $10 for 2,500 members, you will increase your revenue by $25,000. These funds can go towards investing in your online community and increasing your value proposition. We have a blog on other ways to pay for the community. We'll send you a copy if you email us at help@sengii.com.

Tell your members. If you are going to increase your dues, paint the story for them. Let them know how their dues are tied to the strategic plan and will enhance their member experience through connection to members.

PAVE YOUR ROAD TO RELEVANCY

Associations are constantly traveling the "road to relevance" with members who demand a return on their dues investment while seeking a personalized membership experience. They crave connection with a purpose and the ability to obtain relevant information quickly. Associations want to provide that optimal member experience, on that will build member loyalty and retention.

Use this guide to show your Board of Directors and key leadership how an online community can increase member engagement, recruitment and retention. It can fill the most important need of your members by providing a pathway to learning from peers in an online open forum and connecting members regardless of their proximity. It can save your staff time, provide invaluable insight into your membership and bolster revenue to increase your bottom line as well as offset the cost of implementation. Let the addition of an online community help continue your path to relevancy and member satisfaction.