



How to grow your membership:

Insights from our team



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Introduction

In an ever-evolving landscape, maintaining relevance with your audiences is up there with the most significant challenges membership and association-led organisations face. Ultimately, relevance is critical to acquisition and retention but it requires the right insight-informed strategies to create and sustain that meaningful, mutually rewarding connection to your members.

In this guide, we explore the main challenges that membership bodies face, alongside some of the most powerful ways in which brands can strategise to stay on top of the challenge.



Client Partner - England Hockey

What do we already know about membership organisation priorities?

Based on findings from the 2023/24 [Memberwise](#) Annual Digital Excellence Report, combined with our own insights working with some of the largest membership organisations, we know that new member acquisition and member engagement are among the top priorities for across the sector.

Although the Memberwise report highlights that new member acquisition has increased for around **50 per cent** of organisations, this has, in turn, had a significant impact on internal workload, and has led to a decrease in planning and strategy development. In the short term, the increase in new members for a significant proportion of organisations is obviously positive, however the stats can give a false representation, with long-term trends and challenges still very much on the radar. Strategies to effectively future proof acquisition and retention are not in place, as highlighted by the report which states that only **27 per cent** of the sector has a member engagement strategy and **27 per cent** has a digital plan or roadmap.



Further challenges to consider

The Memberwise Annual Digital Excellence Report also highlights a number of key challenges that many membership organisations are facing today. Keeping in mind that new member acquisition sits at the top of the priority list, these challenges, if remedied, could go a long way in helping organisations improve their overall marketing strategy. Some of the main issues highlighted are:

- Poor data management and system integration - cost and incompatibility remain the two key reasons for non-integration.
- A relatively low number of automations are linked to online member behaviour.
- There has been a reduction in usage of free platforms (e.g. Facebook/LinkedIn).
- More virtual events continue to take place despite previous desire to return to face-to-face.

How important is data?

As a nation, we are more aware than ever of how our data is collected and used by brands and third parties. In the membership sector in particular, data collection is vital to be able to offer members the experience they expect, but it can also provide exceptional levels of insight into your members true interests and motivations. According to Memberwise, it's an area that needs attention: only **11 per cent** of small organisations, **14 per cent** of medium and **27 per cent** of large organisations have a data strategy in place (**15 per cent** of the overall sector). These are pretty shocking statistics.

Fully understanding (and being able to leverage) the data at your fingertips provides a host of benefits and can assist your objectives in several ways:

- Understanding existing customer behaviour and needs
- Recognising untapped opportunities to engage and delight
- Predicting trends that enable responses to be developed
- Developing campaign strategies that are informed by real intelligence

Overall, a well-considered, well-informed data strategy provides visibility of an organisation's activities, audience and current position so consider what data you have and look for patterns and trends. If you're struggling to reach your goals, consider what data you would need to better understand the challenge and where that data exists.

We know that data silos, poor system interoperability, and a lack of internal expertise are all relevant obstacles to overcome but help is out there. If you don't feel your team is ready, able or simply doesn't have the capacity, find a specialist partner which can guide and support your data journey. The truth is, you can't afford not to.

When you start to drill down into member expectations and motivations, you can uncover some truly insightful intelligence that can help you to personalise your member experience and build out effective campaign and data strategies that will facilitate the realisation of your objectives today and tomorrow.

Did you know?

The lack of personalisation on membership websites is one of the top 10 challenges for organisations.



AI's role in the future of membership organisations

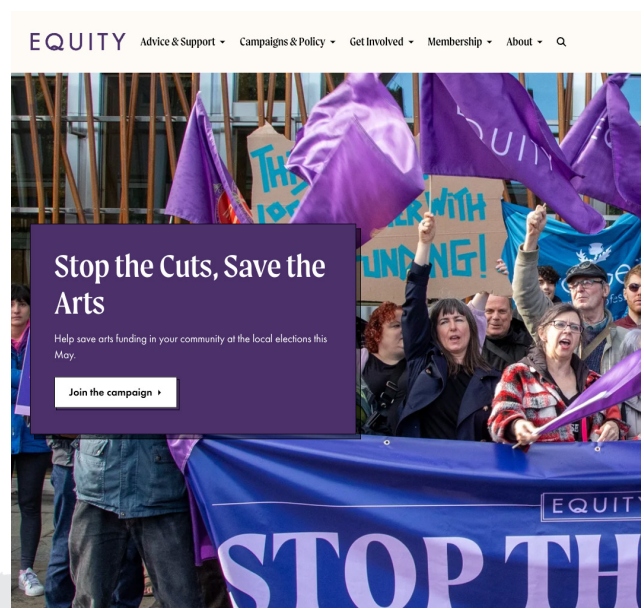
AI is another factor that cannot be ignored. With **100 per cent** of membership bodies expecting AI to have an impact on membership within the next three years, understanding the potential implications and opportunities of AI integrations needs to be considered.

Furthermore, those that are able to integrate AI technologies effectively into their organisations will likely be ahead of the curve, and will benefit the most. Details from the Memberwise report highlight the current state of AI adoption within the industry:

- A relatively low number of automations are linked to online member behaviour
- AI take up is currently in its infancy and only used by the minority of larger organisations
- A blocker from harnessing AI is likely to be the key integration/data related challenge

To begin exploring AI's potential, membership organisations can start by identifying a clear business case – whether that's improving member engagement, reducing churn or streamlining acquisition processes – before testing small-scale AI pilot schemes aligned to those goals. For instance, predictive analytics tools can help identify at-risk members and automate personalised re-engagement campaigns, while chatbots can provide real-time support to prospective members.

As teams gain experience and trust in these use cases, they can gradually adopt more advanced AI solutions, ensuring robust data governance and privacy compliance remain central throughout. By approaching AI step-by-step, and seeking expert guidance where necessary, membership bodies can innovate confidently and transform how they attract, engage and retain members.



Client Partner - Equity



What are membership and association sectors doing well?

The report expresses several positive steps that the sector is already implementing to make improvements across the board. For example, membership bodies are increasingly measuring online engagement, and there's been a steady rise in personalised content and personalisation in general is becoming more sophisticated. It is also reported that larger membership bodies have more recently adopted higher, or more advanced levels of integrations, such as content management systems, mobile apps and email marketing tools. These points highlight that many in the sector are moving in the right direction on many fronts, and key challenges are already being addressed to aid in member growth and retention..

That said, it's important to highlight that we appreciate that these steps may be more accessible for larger membership organisations with bigger budgets, but even the most niche brands should explore the growing range of free-to-use or subscription-based SaaS products that can help them keep pace and enhance member growth. Sometimes all that's required is time.

Audience research: a priority for planning and membership growth

As strategy and formal planning continue to decline for many membership organisations, comprehensive audience research is set to become a defining priority in 2025 and beyond. By truly understanding who your current and prospective members are, and what drives them, you can develop more impactful strategies, attract like-minded individuals, and deliver the right experiences that lead to better engagement, as well as higher conversion and retention rates.

Why it matters

- **Informed decision-making:** Effective growth plans hinge on accurate audience insights. Data-driven decisions help you refine messaging, tailor member benefits, and highlight the most compelling reasons to join or renew.
- **Optimised acquisition and retention:** A clear picture of why people join (or leave) your organisation supports more targeted engagement strategies - ultimately boosting both acquisition and retention figures.

Getting started: Practical steps

1. Leverage all the relevant research

methods: Not all data already exists. Online surveys, social listening, qualitative primary research (e.g. focus groups, in-depth interviews), and industry intelligence tools can all provide new perspectives on member behaviour.

2. Know your existing audiences:

Before scouting new markets, a deep dive into your current membership is essential. Map out:

- **Competitor landscape** – Identify overlapping or alternative organisations your audience might consider.
- **Brand salience** – Understand how and why your brand resonates with key segments.
- **Member motivations** – Pinpoint what drives members to join, engage, and renew - or to walk away.
- **Analyse demographics and psychographics** Capture data on age, profession, location, values, and interests. This helps you pinpoint who is most likely to benefit from your offerings and tailor content to their specific needs.

Refine your value proposition

Use insights from member feedback, usage patterns, and competitor reviews to sharpen the benefits you promote. When your offerings are clearly aligned with audience needs, your membership value proposition becomes far more compelling.



What are the best research platforms and approaches you can use to understand your audience?

Google

Whilst the #1 recruitment tool you have is your website, Google Search and Adwords can help with passive audience recruitment, aiding you in targeting the content you plan to promote.

Google Search Console (GSC)

This helps you see what your search visitors were actually looking for when your website was listed in results vs. what you think they want.

AdWords & Google Keyword Planner

AdWords allows you to try new areas of attracting audiences quickly by running tests to small groups of targeted visitors and Google Keyword Planner helps you research keywords for your search campaigns.

You don't have to be running paid ads to use Keyword Planner. This free tool can help you discover new keywords related to your business, see the demand of terms/content ideas and how competitive they are.

Top tip

Don't forget the Bing equivalents (found in webmaster tools) as these can prove very insightful too.

Brandwatch

Dive deep into online conversations on social media platforms to discover who's talking about your brand or its ethos. Brandwatch allows you to build detailed user personas based on real interactions and user sentiment. This tool can help organisations gain useful insights into customer sentiment and identify emerging trends..

SparkToro

SparkToro is an incredibly useful tool that brands looking to grow their membership should consider. It allows insights into who your audience is, what they talk about, and where you can reach them. Similar to Brandwatch, SparkToro utilises social media to analyse your audiences, crawling over 80 million social profiles across billions of web pages. It provides comprehensive intelligence into audience demographics, interests, behaviours and text data.

Agility

This platform offers comprehensive insights on media, journalists, and influencers to help ensure your PR comms are effective. Agility offers both real-time and historical data, allowing your organisation to track trends and changes over time in the media landscape. It helps brands to understand who is important to its audience and how best to engage them. Features include sending content, monitoring results, measuring social media impact and analysing effectiveness, all in one place.

TGI (Target Group Index)

For in-depth consumer insights, TGI from Kantar is another useful audience research tool. Providing information on consumer behaviours, preferences, and attitudes, it can help membership organisations uncover detailed information about who your consumers are, how they behave and the drivers behind decisions that they make.



GWl (GlobalWebIndex)

GWl's research platform gives you the answers you need for your target customers. Some of the world's biggest brands rely on GWl to shape their thinking, as it's a powerful platform that gathers data on the behaviour and perceptions of consumers across the globe. Its vast, survey-led research provides brands with deep, actionable insights on their audience, making them an ideal research tool to help membership organisations.

Data Science

This is a service offered to client partners of The MTM Agency, whereby we use [Data Science](#) to leverage existing audience data and identify future trends. We can predict website interest and key content topics before needing to react to the market, make informed decisions utilising market data at scale, allowing membership organisations to stay ahead of trends.

Did you know?

The inability to effectively communicate member value is one of the top 10 challenges for membership organisations.



Client Partner - The Solent Cluster



The steps for member growth success

It is important to ensure you get the basics right before diving into new audience acquisition. By planning and strategising effectively, not only will you have the best chance of increasing your members, but you will also be in the ideal position to retain existing ones. As a roundup to our guide, we have put together a three-step process that helps membership organisations achieve success.

1. Comprehensive data

Gather and organise as many data points as you can on your existing members, including demographics, preferences, and engagement history. If you don't have these insights, work out how you can get them before you start considering your future strategies.

2. Clear strategy

Leverage these insights to develop a clear strategy that reflects your research findings. Outline your goals, the key messaging you want to convey, and the channels you'll use. Consider the complete member journey, from on-boarding through to renewal and lapsed or former members. If your membership isn't monolithic, you will need defined strategies for each audience group.

3. Tools for communication

Equip your team with the necessary tools, such as the previously mentioned Brandwatch, SparkToro, Agility, TGI, GWI, and data science capabilities. However, you may not need ongoing access to some or all of these platforms so identify an external partner or agency that can provide access on a pay-to-play or project basis, thus avoiding the cost of licensing and training. These tools can augment your owned data and help validate your thinking, or highlight discrepancies, ensuring your strategies are informed by robust and validated intelligence.

At the end of the day...

There's one thing we know with certainty: The membership sector is going to continue to evolve and ignoring that fact isn't an option. Membership organisations need to know, with clarity, what it will take to stay relevant, what they need to do to delight their members, and how they can engage the next generation.

By investing in robust audience research, leveraging both free and paid tools, and integrating innovative technologies, membership bodies can stay one step ahead, developing more informed strategies that drive stronger results. Importantly, even smaller or niche organisations have opportunities to align with evolving member expectations, often by refining their understanding of existing members' needs, then scaling those insights to reach new audiences. By prioritising data, planning for the future, and continually testing, brands across the membership sector can position themselves for long-term, sustainable growth.



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Recommended Rating

+ 9.4 out of 10

Benchmarks

Value for Money	9.6
On Time	9.9
On Budget	9.8
Client Services	9.8
Creativity & Innovation	9.8
Effectiveness	9.8
Strategic Thinking	9.8

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