

Attraction, Not Promotion: Winning Member Loyalty and Enhancing Member Engagement

By: Christine Umbrell

While taking the time to meet face to face with prospects can be time consuming, such an approach may be just what's needed to boost member and sponsor recruitment efforts. That's what executives at the Massachusetts Hospital Association (MHA) learned a few years ago when they revamped their recruitment program. The results have been beneficial not only in terms of members added but also in terms of increased understanding of constituents and their unique needs.

The Massachusetts Hospital Association—the trade association for hospitals in Massachusetts—has about 80 hospital members and 42 members of other types, including law firms and consulting firms that are in the healthcare business. MHA also has a Center for Education and Professional Development (CEPD). Up until a few years ago, these two entities approached their recruitment efforts separately. Then senior staff members realized that combining efforts and adopting a softer-sell, one-on-one approach could be mutually beneficial.

"In the education area, we seek sponsors, and in the membership area, we seek members," says Patty Crowley, MHA's vice president of member relations and governance. However, these prospects—each one worth a significant amount in terms of membership dues or sponsorship dollars—often come from the same pool. "So we decided to team up and create a new way to recruit," Crowley says.

"The old approach was that our organization was more siloed," says Kirsten Singleton, executive director at MHA's CEPD. The silo approach created more work by having two parallel systems of recruiting sponsor and member prospects. The decision to combine efforts "put a better, more cohesive vision of our association out to prospective members and sponsors," Singleton says.

With the new approach, staff members from MHA and CEPD work together, spending time getting to know prospects and learning their business goals. "Each has a different reason for investing in the association," Crowley explains. "We work hard to understand each prospect's particular needs and provide personalized service."

In-Person Meetings Trigger Understanding

Crowley and Singleton drive the membership initiative and are the main staff members who research and then meet with prospects. They also send each prospect a membership packet.

"Before the meeting, we generally review information about the company or organization but find that we learn much more when we meet in person," Singleton says.

Usually the meetings turn more into a conversation as opposed to a sales pitch on either end. They are "are mutually beneficial because we are able to promote the work of our association, and [prospects], in turn, are able to share with us more about their business and how they interface with hospitals," Crowley says. "We use the meetings to assess whether or not an organization is a fit for either membership or sponsorship—sometimes both—and we offer them guidance on how they can best leverage their networking opportunities, using MHA as their platform."

Coming away from the meetings with a new understanding of the industry or information concerning a new trend is another important outcome. Crowley and Singleton frequently learn something important regarding innovations in the healthcare marketplace. "It's helpful for us to stay on top of those trends so we can do a better job for our members," Crowley says. "We are also able to spread the word about MHA as an industry leader."

Worthwhile Meetings—Even When Prospects Don't Commit

Crowley says the time and resources put into them are well-justified, regardless of the prospect's decision.

"Meeting with healthcare vendors, consultants, or law firms can actually be extremely informative for us," she says. "Kirsten [Singleton] often leaves the meetings with an idea for a program based upon something we learned in the meeting. The vendors typically spend time with our hospital members and are often very aware of issues they are facing and are able to share some of that perspective with us."

Tangible and Intangible Results

MHA's in-person approach to meeting prospects has resulted in a robust recruitment program for the association, and has brought in significant nondues revenue, according to Crowley. "We also have a group of thought leaders among those sponsors and members who are able to teach top-notch education programs for us or work with our policy staff on emerging healthcare issues," she adds.

"It has enhanced our association in many ways," Singleton say. "It's fairly seamless to members, and because it's a soft-sell approach, we feel that it works well for our members. Our sponsors and members are able to meet their business goals, too, so it's a win-win."

Crowley encourages other organizations considering a hands-on recruitment approach to "give it a try." She also suggests using a team structure similar to MHA's, with two dedicated staff members combining efforts. "We have different styles and personalities, and we're able to bring out more information that way," says Crowley.

"Having the support and encouragement of our CEO is also helpful," says Singleton. "If done well, this approach can bring in a good deal of revenue, which helps associations offset dues."

Christine Umbrell is a freelance writer based in Herndon, Virginia. Email: umbrell1@verizon.net (<mailto:umbrell1@verizon.net>)

Christine Umbrell

Christine Umbrell is a freelance writer based in Herndon, Virginia.

[Email \(mailto:umbrell1@verizon.net\)](mailto:umbrell1@verizon.net)

READ THESE NEXT

From Practice to Profession

There's No One Way to Become an Association CEO

Making Innovation Accessible

Laying Global Groundwork



The Center for Association Leadership

**American Society of Association Executives™ (ASAE), 1575 I St. NW, Washington, DC 20005, P.
888.950.2723, F. 202.371.8315 or P. 202.371.0940 (in Washington, DC).**

© Copyright 2016 ASAE. All rights reserved.