

IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS

"For the first time in the survey's history, the challenge of generating non-dues revenue topped all other obstacles faced by associations. The value of traditional conferences, trade show and face-to-face events increased 10 percentage points from last year, ranking as the most valuable member engagement tool, while virtual events declined in popularity. Associations shifted away from social media when communicating with members, preferring to connect with members via direct email blasts and through the association's website."

—2023 Association Benchmarking Report

The numbers vary from source to source, but there are easily more than 100,000 individual professional associations in the United States. Some associations serve materials scientists and engineers (e.g., TMS). Others serve cardiologists, magicians, court reporters, and any other profession that you can think of, including the professionals employed by professional societies (e.g., the TMS staff). One thing at which association professionals excel is sharing best practices. An example of such collaboration is contributing to the report referenced above—an industry-wide survey conducted by Naylor Association Solutions.

I'm a keen reader of survey results, so here are a few of my takeaways from this year's Naylor report. (Percentages do not total as respondents could give multiple answers.)

- **Everyone has challenges.** The leading headwinds for associations are (1) "generating non-dues revenue" (58%); (2) "communicating member benefits effectively" (56%); and (3) "engaging young professionals" (54%), which leads to . . .
- **Engaging young professionals is the association grail.** Many tactics are employed in this regard with the three most popular being (1) "invite participation on volunteer committee" (59%); (2) "events geared toward young professional development and education" (49%); and (3) "providing mentoring programs" (47%). All of these and more are part of the TMS emerging professional engagement portfolio; indeed, they are points of pride within the Society.
- **How does one quantify member engagement?** Respondents identify the three most important criteria for assessing member engagement as (1) "attendance at events" (92%); (2) "participation on committees" (65%); and (3) "length of membership" (63%). My bias is toward length of membership, and the average length of membership for a TMS member is 14 years. Thank you!
- **Do I tweet? Like? Follow? Not bother?** Respondents report that association use of social media is on the wane. In fact, the use of 12 out of 13 platforms dropped, some significantly. Special "ouch" to X (née "Twitter"), which dropped 9 percentage points. The sole exception? LinkedIn, the use of which was up by 8 percentage points. An example in action: I switched my dominant social media participation from X to LinkedIn a few months ago.
- **Everyone's favorite song: "I've Got the Bandwidth Blues":** I was intrigued by the answers to a "what if" question: What would you do if you received an unplanned 50% increase in the annual budget? Of the respondents, 69% say that they would "hire more staff." A distant second (49%) say that they would "improve quality of existing member engagement vehicles." Good answers, but . . .

. . . what would I do? If I was awash in fresh revenue from *the current budget year only*, I would invest in improving the quality of existing member engagement vehicles. If the fresh revenue was *ongoing and sustainable year after year*, I would invest in more staff and then set them to work bolstering our member engagement vehicles. In either surplus scenario, however, I would find a way to reward existing staff for their dedication over the last few difficult years *and* invest significantly in our reserves for a rainy day. As the last four years have taught us—painfully—rainy days can come quickly, heavily, and unrelentingly.



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