



Member engagement

Why engagement with your
members is crucial



About the author

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Since launching the company in 2007, Ahmed has established **smart**impact as a leading provider of Dynamics CRM solutions.

Combining his understanding of business and membership needs with technical expertise he has ensured **smart**impact has high quality, robust, yet flexible software and a team of experts who support membership organisations through every part of the implementation process.

This leadership has led to ten consecutive years of significant growth and excellent reputation in the membership systems market.

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About this guide

This guide is written to help membership organisations develop an understanding of membership engagement as the key focus to the business.

It is for senior management, membership managers, marketing and communications officers, and anyone that has to look after day to day enquiries from members.

The engagement philosophy looks at a different way of thinking in which the small details are considered but the overall purpose of the organisation remains clear and at the forefront of strategic decision making.

Many member organisations can easily lose sight of the bigger picture, which results in a focus on the smaller tasks of making the organisation work. Effectively the organisation is worked *in* rather than being worked *on*.

Our focus in this guide is to look at how engagement plays a part in the long-term sustainability and viability of member organisations.

In recent times; numerous changes in business practice, technology and commercial competition have meant that organisations need to keep ahead of the curve just to stand still. You only have to look at the numerous free online educational materials and commercial networking events that have become the norm, to realise that it is time for member bodies to change if they want to compete with this.



Many membership organisations have poor retention rates which means a constant drive for new members

This is both costly and soul destroying at the same time. But raising the retention rate through understanding engagement of members would go a long way to helping the long term success of the organisation. In our experience encouraging members to join a member body is easier than retaining them year on year. Engagement needs to start being measured as soon as a member joins.

In each section of the guide we share some tips and pose some questions in our efforts to help you put member engagement front and centre of all your activity.

What is member engagement?

Engagement is a term that has emerged in recent years. It is one that has become common and is used in every day speech and writing, by numerous individuals and organisations.

If lots of people are using the term it should be easy to understand. But that is not the case. If you were to ask ten members of your organisation what engagement is, we believe you would have ten different answers. It's made more complicated by the fact that you can decide what definition of engagement you would like to have for your purposes.



Some member bodies argue that it's all about the money

Money becomes the definition of engaged members to them. But is this a false statement. Some members may have their membership paid for them. Are they likely to be engaged? It is hard to say with any degree of certainty. A paid for member may never turn up to an event. A member that pays their own subscription is more likely to be engaged but it's not clear as to whether they are. Therefore, money doesn't equal engagement.

Can attendance at your events be used as a definition of engagement? As with the money example we don't believe this goes far enough.

A member can attend numerous events but could be switched off at the event(s). Maybe the member has been told to go and doesn't want to be there in the first place. A member attending an event is a not a true measure of engagement. You have to dig deeper. Did the member enjoy the event or did that member think it was a waste of time? What were their feelings towards the event and the organisation?

In our definition of engagement we refer to the term of 'paying attention' in this guide. A member that pays attention is classed as one that is engaged. He or she will exhibit behaviours towards the member body which shows he (or she) is aware of the organisation's offering and is using the benefits. He knows what the organisation is doing, takes action to become involved and is immersed to the exclusion of everything else.



Tip 1 – Think of what tasks you get involved in where you don't notice the time passing by



Tip 2 – Observe members at your next event, what behaviours can you spot?



Tip 3 – For signals that demonstrate engagement keep reading this guide



What does your engaged member look like? How do you know they are engaged?

Why and how to measure engagement?

Engagement has a very important role to play in the strategic development of membership organisations.

By understanding member engagement at any given time and looking at past and future trends, the organisation can take actions that should result in an increase in revenue, growth and member happiness.

Simply put, if members are not engaged they are much more likely to leave resulting in a loss of income and perhaps damage to the organisation's reputation. The reputation issue is especially likely to become a negative issue if the member felt that they had a poor experience. Word spreads like wildfire and is only heightened by the numerous social media channels available that carry messages.

If the warning signals (later section) can be seen through measuring engagement and the membership body acts on that information then poor outcomes can be avoided.

More engaged members can lead to more spending, greater advocacy and more willingness to volunteer in some capacity. It is clearly better to have members that are 'paying attention' to your organisation.



Understanding that you want engaged members is fine but how can you measure engagement?

Few organisations can actually analyse engagement in a meaningful way. Money is often used as method of measuring engagement.

For example, member subscription increases year on year and that could be seen as successful engagement. But is it? It might be that lots of new members are joining; disguising the fact that existing members are leaving. Would that be a good model for an organisation? A better model would be where renewal income increases **and** new member income increases.

Some organisations measure everything they can. They gather data but miss on knowing what to do with it. The basis of effective management is that it all needs to relate back to the overall objectives of the organisation. Looking at the objective of improving engagement needs to be further developed to define exactly what success will look like.

Some Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for engagement could be:



KPI - To have a retention rate of over 15%



KPI - To have a 20% increase in the number of questions submitted to speakers at the annual conference



KPI - To gather at least 50 photos from members which can be used in marketing the organisation

MEASUREMENT

You will need to choose your own KPIs for your member organisation.

Every organisation is different which means you have your decisions to make on what 'paying attention' means to you.



Tip 1 - Let's take the example of a member that freely promotes the organisation to non-members. That shows a level of engagement and one that can be measured. Don't forget these important influencers



Tip 2 - Set a date aside to schedule in work for deciding on your 'engagement indicators'



Tip 3 - Ask 10 members what activities make them feel engaged with your organisation

*How is your organisation making strategic decisions?
What data are you using and what gaps, if any, do you have?*

BENEFITS

Benefits

What are your benefits?

To stand out from competing membership bodies, you have to offer benefits to attract members.

If the benefits are not compelling enough then less people will join. Equally if a member joins and then doesn't use the benefits they are unlikely to renew as they are not making the most of the benefits.

Once the member has joined how useful will your benefits prove to be? Will they live up to expectations and do they even exist? There are some organisations that have benefits in their menu that have long since ceased to be available. It sounds extreme but we have come across it. Make sure that situation doesn't happen to you.

If you have different levels of membership are you refreshing the benefits that apply to the level?



Always keep the benefits fresh; never let them go stale

Find out through focus groups, polls or surveys what it is that members want. Everything changes and your thinking has to be about how engaged your members are through the provision of benefits.

BENEFITS

How easy is it to find your benefits on your website?

It's your biggest opportunity to share how good your organisation is, which means ensuring that you need them to be front and centre. Benefits hidden on a cluttered website is no good at all. If you need to highlight them to make them obvious then do so now.

Are the benefits relevant to the focus of your organisation? Maybe some historic benefits really no longer serve any purpose. It's time for a review if you have any doubt about the value of your benefits.



Tip 1 – Ask 20 members what they understand the benefits of being a member are and see how that correlates to your offering



Tip 2 – Look for new strategic partnerships that would add to your menu of benefits



Tip 3 – Analyse your competitors and other similar organisations and see what they are offering



Are the benefits being used by your members? If not then your membership isn't engaged as they cannot see the value

COMMUNICATION

Communication

How do you communicate?

How much communication happens with your members? Is it enough? Is it timely, is it relevant and, just as importantly, is it delivered in a way that is useful to members?

When was the last time you asked your members about their communication preferences? With the changes in technology that are available is it time to switch from phone calls to direct messages? Or should it be the other way around? What are your communication points?

Using a sophisticated email system can help communication with members as much as it can obstruct communication. Making sure the system works to the benefit of your organisation can sometimes be forgotten and then the machines end up in charge.

Once you have established how to communicate, it is then a case of working out what should be communicated and how often should this be done?

Are you communicating through direct mailings, emails, the website, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and other social media channels? And do your members know where to go and which channel to use?



How often and where are you holding events to enable members to meet on a face-to-face basis?

COMMUNICATION

Is the frequency of events sufficient for members? Is the annual conference (or regional event(s)) always in the same location or is it rotated to enable members from all over to attend it?

But it is not just about the method of communication you use. You can have the best systems and processes at your disposal which will not make any difference to engagement if the tone from your organisation is patronising or arrogant. It's probably never the intention of any membership body to come across in such a manner but it can be easily done. Every member has a voice and the best organisations that understand engagement know exactly how to listen to members. What do members feel when they hear from you? What emotions or sentiments are you evoking?

Communication is a two way street. When a member has a moan or suggestion make sure you listen to it attentively. There are nuggets of gold in every message.



Tip 1 – Most surveys are way too long, just ask a few questions only



Tip 2 – Issue an event survey at the end of the event don't leave it a few days



Tip 3 – Use SMS as a means of gathering survey responses as it's quick and simple

How often do you carry out membership surveys? Is it on an annual basis or after each event? How much intelligence are you gathering? When it comes to engagement being aware of communication signals will lead to a deeper understanding of what is really happening with your membership and how engaged they are.



In the next sections we highlight signals to celebrate and warning signals to look for

SIGNALS

Signals

Signals to celebrate

If members feel good about your organisation there will be a number of ways in which they express their sentiments. By capturing their feelings you will be able to understand and use the data to benefit your organisation.

Let's have a look at how members express their emotions when they are positive.

Social media sharing

- Taking part in LinkedIn discussions
- Liking posts on Facebook
- Retweeting posts on Twitter
- Following the organisation on various social media channels
- Mentoring and volunteering
- Mentoring provided by experienced to new members
- Active involvement through getting involved in committees, teams and project groups

Speaking and content

- Giving speaker feedback (as it all takes time and effort)
- Creating content
- Sharing content across a member's own network
- Posting comments on content
- Using the 'members only' section of the website

Money and general conduct

- Paying promptly
- Playing an ambassador role
- Helping the organisation with its professional image when talking about it to non-members



How many **celebratory** signals apply to your member organisation right now?

Warning signals to look for

If members feel that your organisation is not doing a good job there will be a number of ways in which they express their feelings. By capturing their feelings you will be able to understand and use the data to benefit your organisation.

- Not renewing on time
- Hesitancy to renew subscriptions
- Having to be chased for renewal payments, event payments or payments for products and services
- Unsubscribing from all newsletters and updates
- Implicit behaviour online, e.g. not using the 'members only' area of the website
- Bad mouthing (whether in public or in private) your organisation
- Refusing to present at events or getting involved in teams or social media activity
- Making an enquiry about down-grading membership
- Returning goods or requesting a refund for services provided
- Cancelling attendance at an event
- Frequently cancelling going to events



How many **warning** signals apply to your organisation right now?

Member journeys

Every person that joins a member organisation will begin their own journey. These journeys may be broadly similar for a certain level of membership. For example, student members will be on a different journey to an experienced professional.

Organisations need to consider the different levels of membership they have and the journey that the member will be set on. How engaged they will be may easily depend on where they are on their journey.

If we look at the example of the individual that joins for personal development, they will come in as a new member and are likely to be overwhelmed by the resources and information that the organisation has to hand. They will find too much to choose from. They start by taking in a lot of information and in doing so may decide to become more actively involved and take part in a team or committee. From there they could easily move up and become one of the leaders. It's a familiar path for members in many associations. The individual could move from a local to a regional to a national or international role (it all depends on the actual scope and size of the association).

Having served as a leader and having absorbed much of the resources available the member may decide that the organisation has served its purpose. And the member may then lapse their renewal or they may still be a member but with a much smaller level of engagement.

Some members may decide to renew year on year as they want to 'give back' to the membership body (that has helped their development) and they become loyal members rather than engaged ones.

Engagement of members will fluctuate throughout the period of being a member of an organisation. Sometimes it will be intense and other times it will be more relaxed.

For a member organisation to understand what lifetime engagement means to them, it would have to look at the value offer it is making. There are some organisations where people will join, stay for a couple of years (having received the value they needed) and then leave. If that is good for the member body and it understands that cycle of activity it will know that the lifetime engagement is two years and anything more than that is a bonus. But if the same organisation believes that members should be renewing year on year, then it would be time for the body to look at the offer for the senior members to attract them back (keep them).

After all, what can they do once they have scaled the dizzy heights of leadership? There would need to be something to keep them engaged



If you are interested in looking in greater detail at member journeys then we suggest you take a read of *Managing the Member Experience* (which uses Membership Mapping to engage members and give them experiences they want and value).

The book is written by Sue Froggatt and Mark Levin.



Tip 1 – Establish what type of members you have. Are they the ones you need for the long term viability of the organisation?



Tip 2– Explore the demographics of your membership



Tip 3 – Review your recent events and find out who came along and identify any trends



Ask 10 members in each level of membership to summarise their journey. How closely does this correlate to the journey you think they are on?

Culture

A culture of engagement

Every organisation, whether it realises it or not, has a culture through the actions of its people and those it comes into contact with.

For example, there are some businesses that have an easily identifiable sales culture. Everything they do is focused on the single goal of making sales. In fact, having air to breathe comes a close second to making a sale. Some organisations have service or customer excellence as their cultures. When it comes to member organisations we believe that the long term successful ones will be those that display and undertake a culture of engagement. You can have the best CRM system there is but if it is not member centric then it will not help to uncover the engagement challenges and opportunities.

When you focus on serving members it's the little touches and thoughts that make all the difference

Organisations look at small things, maybe even the wrong things. They can measure in isolation and interpret in a way that doesn't help them grow. And rarely do they look at the emotional connection of their members. What sentiment is in the tone of the emails? Capturing the phone calls, what was the tone? Are they positive or are they negative? In a culture of engagement every piece of information is useful. Nothing should be dismissed if your organisation is one that has engagement as its culture.

What is the culture of your membership organisation?

- How would you describe it? What words or phrases would you use?
- How could it be more engaging?

Capturing engagement – The *smartengagement*® index

In this guide we have looked at signals to celebrate; warning signals to look for; how you communicate; what type of member journeys you have; and we have asked you to question the value of your member benefits. Now it is time to capture all of that data and information together in one space to enable you to interpret the results and take strategic actions that will develop your organisation.

We have mentioned sentiment, feelings and emotion as engagement is inextricably linked to these words. You could be forgiven if you think this all sounds very nice but surely it's not possible to measure such terms. Well, now you can.

Everything we have covered can be brought together under the *smartengagement*® index, which is a platform that has been specifically designed with you, the membership organisation user in mind.

It looks at all the elements mentioned and (because of the in-depth knowledge and experience of member organisations which the *smartimpact* team has) it takes account of 'behind the scenes' science to enable you to capture the true engagement picture of your organisation at any one time.



The *smartengagement*® index can also be used as a moment in time 'sensor' enabling you to keep your finger on the pulse of the feeling and engagement levels in your organisation.

What trends exist, how engaged an individual member is and how engaged a set of members in your organisation are; all questions that can be addressed through the system. From the individual, to a member set, to the entire member body you can discover engagement in a multitude of ways.

If you would like a demonstration of the capability of the *smartengagement* index platform to see how it would benefit your organisation, please contact us:

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One of our core values is being able to help you with your member growth. We provide internal and external advisors, as well as our technology, for every step of your engagement journey

About smartimpact

smartimpact is a dynamic CRM agency founded in 2007. We are experts in providing and supporting elegant and effective CRM systems for organisations of all sizes where members are at the heart of your business.

We understand the unique needs of membership organisations, whether your members and companies themselves or individuals, but we don't adopt a 'one size fits all' approach. We learn what is important to you and create solutions that solve your problems.

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