

Industry Benchmark: Association Study on Members Only Web Efforts

Presented by:

Ellipsis Partners and the Center for Association Leadership

November 2004

Executive Summary

The notion of providing exclusive content, products and services, and a sense of community and involvement to a defined, membership-based market is nothing new to associations. It is, after all, the premise for many trade and professional organizations. Today's technologies now afford associations the opportunity to be in that business online, through the concept of a Members Only web section or exclusivity at the content level.

This study, conducted by Ellipsis Partners and sponsored in part by the Center for Association Leadership, sought to examine the current state of operations for Members Only web efforts. We wanted to provide the association market with a "collective intelligence" about how this work is being done, and to serve as a catalyst to associations—and the business partners that support them—to encourage more benchmarking and research of this nature.

This report reflects the initial phase of research, a national survey to associations to assess their practices and perceptions about Members Only. Over the course of three months in the Summer of 2004, 224 respondents from 190 organizations participated in this survey. From this work we offer the following observations:

- Members Only as a web effort has a strong foothold. While there are clear implementation challenges, there is reason to believe that Members Only content offers value to both the members and the organization. This value, however, is primarily anecdotal.
- Exclusive content in the form of not only published articles and reports, but also databases and work tools, and access to other members are what organizations find offer member value.
- Associations have to continually work on not only the technological barriers to access, like login procedures, but also ensure that they have clear guidelines for what constitutes Member Only content and that these guidelines are consistent with their overall strategic direction and mission.
- There has been insufficient attention paid to gathering market intelligence to support planning or enhancements of Members Only sections. Across the board, these organizations admittedly realize they need to do more "asking" before deciding.
- Similarly, associations need to bolster their marketing efforts to educate their market about what their Members Only area offers and put tactics in place to continually drive traffic back and reinforce its value.
- While all associations participating in this study intend to continue their Members Only efforts, there is a clear interest in expanding into more content, improved processes, online community tools, online communication options and member networking.

Ellipsis Partners and the Center for Association Leadership hope that this study inspires individual associations—as well as the association community as a whole—to engage in more research and information sharing so that collectively, we can benefit from industry "best practices."

Table of Contents

BACKGROUND 4
 METHODOLOGY 4

SURVEY DETAILS 5
 RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS 5
 COMMON PRACTICES 5
 Business Premise..... 5
 Set-Up..... 6
 SECURITY 7
 MEMBERS ONLY FEATURES 8
 Content 8
 Tools..... 9
 CUSTOMIZATION 10
 MARKETING 10
 VALUE 11

LOOKING AHEAD 14
 PEER RECOMMENDATIONS 16

SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS 20

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE? 21
 Individual benchmarking and strategy 21
 Industry research and benchmarking 21

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS 22

APPENDIX B: STUDY SPONSORS 25

Background

As consultants to the association sector and active participants in this community, we have a unique opportunity to “keep an ear to the ground.” In the latter half of 2003, we began to hear a pattern of emerging questions that seemed to grow more emphatic and pervasive the more we talked about it. Associations were asking:

- *“What are we really getting out of our Members Only efforts?”*
- *“Are we doing something wrong? Our members don’t seem to be responding to this offering?”*
- *“How much should we be putting into this? Is it worth it?”*
- *“Is anyone else having the same problems we are?”*
- *“We’re thinking of setting up a Members Only area, but have no idea what to do with it...what’s working for others?”*

We approached the Center for Association Leadership with the idea of collaborating on this inquiry. The Center has long been a champion of industry benchmarking and serves as an effective channel for communicating best practices out to the association community. It didn’t take much discussion to realize that this project would be an important step towards providing associations with much-needed benchmarks, and also encourage study in other areas of practice. Therefore, work began in Spring 2004 to plan this project.

Methodology

Ellipsis Partners and the Center for Association Leadership collaborated on the design of a national benchmarking survey. We narrowed the scope of this effort to first provide us with a general sense of the general practices currently in place and the association’s perception of their effort-to-value ratio.

This instrument was issued to an extensive email list of association executives, was posted on various industry listservs and bulletin boards, and was made available as a downloadable PDF from the Web. From these promotions, 224 responses were received over a three-month period in the summer of 2004.

Survey Details

Respondent Demographics

Of the 190 participating organizations, there was a fairly representative sampling across various types of associations. Not surprisingly, most were from professional membership organizations. The spread of participating organizations included:

54.9%	Professional membership association/society
30.4%	Trade association with organizational or institutional members
4.5%	Trade association with individual members
10.3%	Other (educational association, union, other nonprofit, honor society, foundation, recreation society, municipal organization, public power agency)

In terms of geographic scope of the participating organizations, most of the organizations represent an international perspective:

47.3%	International	12.9%	Region or State-based
22.8%	National	0.9%	Local
2.7%	National with regions	3.1%	Other (Canada, Mexico)
10.3%	National with state chapters or affiliates		

The organizations from this survey indicated that they are headquartered primarily in Virginia (34.8%), the District of Columbia (29%) or Maryland (10.7%), although 27 states were represented by at least one respondent.

Most of the respondents (51.8%) represented organizations that have 5,000 or fewer members (half of those under 1,000 members). Only 6% of these respondents represented organizations in the 100,000 – 1 million members category. Most of the respondents (35.7%) self-identified as department directors (or equivalent), although 10% indicated titles of CEO/President or CIO/CTO. There were no responses from the Board member or Volunteer categories. Interestingly, nearly 20% of the respondents indicated that their job responsibilities included the website, but not other IT issues.

A complete list of all participating organizations can be found in Appendix A.

Common Practices

Prior to this study, we had heard—anecdotally—that many organizations launched their Members Only areas on the basis of only minimal market research, and often, without a clearly defined business plan or set of goals. In the Background section of the survey, we endeavored to determine what the business premise was for these web efforts.

Business Premise

Of this sampling, there was a solid base of history in managing Members Only sections. More than two-thirds of these respondents have maintained their Members Only efforts for two years or more (51.8% for more than 3 years). Twelve percent indicated that they

did not currently have a Members Only area but were considering one. In most cases, the Members Only section (78%) is managed as part of the overall website budget and staff, although a few organizations indicated that they have staff specifically responsible for portions of content or functionality within the Members Only area.

Referring to the genesis of these efforts, the survey asked respondents to indicate their **top three KEY reasons** for creating this private access. In order of highest priority, the responses were:

- 1. We wanted to offer member value by having products/services/information available only to members.**
- 2. We wanted to publish private/sensitive content to our members.**
- 3. We wanted an area where members could network with other members**
4. We wanted to control who has access to certain content.
5. We wanted to track how individual members use the website.
6. We wanted to use a private area for committee, board, or volunteer work.
7. We wanted to create a customized web experience for each member.
8. Our new web software offered this feature and we wanted to try it.
9. We wanted to create new revenue streams.

It is interesting to note that while these respondents indicated that “member value” was the highest priority—as we will see later in the report—very few organizations took the important step of surveying their membership about what they wanted, and many indicated that “asking the membership” was an important lesson learned in hindsight. In fact, 42% of those surveyed indicated that they did not have a specific web strategy for their Member Only efforts prior to launching--and wished they had. Only 9% indicated that they have a documented plan and benchmark their progress against it.

Set-Up

In this study—the first of its kind—we sought to include as many perspectives as possible. Not only did we allow organizations with active Members Only efforts to participate, but also those who are currently planning or building their Members Only sections. The survey instrument allowed the respondents to skip questions that did not pertain to them and allowed us to filter out respondents to look at cross-sections of the data. For the purpose of this survey, a Members Only section was defined as *any partition of your website that is protected from general public access and contains features or content unique to your membership market.*

In the following question, we wanted to get a sense for what are the most common constructs for Members Only efforts. Clearly, half of these organizations are going with the “private area” model.

- 52.8% Our homepage has a Members Only link that prompts the visitors to log into a private area where member-level content resides.
- 22.3% All content is displayed to all visitors, but if a member clicks on content that is marked “members only” he must login for that content to display.

- 8.1% We do not have a Members Only “area,” but certain content is not displayed unless the member has logged in.
- 5.1% We do not have a Members Only “area,” but rather, members must log into the site and once they do, the content presented—anywhere on the site—is customized to member-level access.
- 5.1% We use cookies to identify members and they are automatically given member-level access.

We were surprised at how few organizations (just 35%) are managing their websites using a Content Management System (CMS). Nearly half (49.2%) indicated that they do not have a CMS, but manually place content on either the public or member side, and 20.7% indicated that they are running a CMS but still make an individual determination on what appears in the Members Only section.

On an encouraging note, nearly half (48.8%) of these organizations indicated that their Members Only area is integrated with the membership database. This integration, however, appears to only support the login process as 36.7% also indicated that member information (name, address, etc.) does not carry-over from login to pre-populate forms or customize the online experience.

Another interesting finding was that while most of the respondents could report unique site visits per month (17% indicated between 1,000-5,000/month and 16% reported 25,000-50,000/month), a full 40% acknowledged that they have no idea how many Members Only sessions are realized each month.

Security

One of the cornerstone characteristics to Members Only is that it is exclusive to members. In order to maintain the value of that exclusivity, the organization must impose some kind of “gate keeper” functionality to control who has access and who doesn’t. This study found that there is a wide range of approaches to how Members Only access is managed.

From the following question, we learned that 86% of organizations require some form of login routine to access Members Only. In most cases (82%) the login routine for a member stays the same as long as membership status is current. Only a very small percentage of organizations reported that they have a practice of expiring logins.

16. What is the security procedure that controls access to your Members Only section or members only content?		Response Percent
Login with a username and password that the member selects		23.3%
Login with a username and password that we issued to the member		43.9%
Login with the member's ID number and a self-selected password		10.6%
Login with the member's email address and a self-selected password		9%
We use cookies to identify the member.		0.5%
We do not restrict access; anyone can get in or access member only content.		0.5%
<input type="button" value="View"/> Other (please specify):		12.2%

Of the 23 respondents who chose “Other,” most of those indicated that their organization issues a username and password to the member, but after the initial login, the member has the option to customize the login to a username/password of his choosing.

We found it particularly interesting—given results later in this report—how many organizations issue the specific username and password for the members. This report concludes that the login routine is the most pervasive implementation challenge for organizations with Members Only. That finding is supported by the fact that half of these respondents are processing at least 10—and up to 75—“I forgot my password” or “Reset my password” requests per week. And, as reported later, participants felt that one of the key areas for improvement was the login procedure. This presents an intriguing conflict when 66% also indicated that they think their current login procedures are working well.

Respondents were also asked to identify their greatest security risk associated with their Members Only section. The most pervasive concern expressed is an event most organizations have little or no control over: that members might copy and redistribute content or share their access with non-members.

Members Only Features

In this section of the survey we wanted to find out what is actually going on behind these member walls, what are the products, services or content being offered inside that would make the login step “worthwhile?”

Content

Over 90% of the respondents indicated that they use Members Only as an area to publish content exclusive to their audience, and what determines member content was primarily:

1. If the content is industry-sensitive or proprietary (51.9%)
2. If the content is free to members but for-fee to the public (45.5%)
3. If the content speaks to our position on an issue or solicits comments from members that should not be made public (32.1%)

A surprising one-third of these respondents indicated that their posting of Members Only content was either “random” or there was no set policy in place.

One respondent offered their very business-based treatment of exclusive content: *We put papers from our proceedings on our website, and each member is given a certain number of complimentary downloads. After these are used, members can purchase download credits at a reduced rate (over half of what non-members pay).*

This study did not specifically set out to determine the member's perception of value for Members Only content or sections; however, we can infer some measure of value based on usage. We asked the organization to report how often certain content assets are accessed and whether there was any particular pattern to that access.

	Frequently (daily activity)	Seasonal (use is seasonal)	Often (weekly activity)	Seldom (monthly activity)	Never (little or no activity)
Access to the Member's own membership record (read only)	42% (41)	9% (9)	14% (14)	25% (24)	9% (9)
Our magazine - (fully reproduced)	34% (27)	4% (3)	31% (25)	22% (18)	9% (7)
Unique (supplemental) articles or features	29% (25)	6% (5)	38% (33)	23% (20)	3% (3)
Member directory (text only)	52% (43)	6% (5)	22% (18)	12% (10)	8% (7)
Enhanced Member directory (with photos, email, links, etc.)	47% (27)	2% (1)	19% (11)	7% (4)	25% (14)
Individual member webpages	10% (3)	7% (2)	10% (3)	10% (3)	63% (19)
Vendor or resource directory	22% (12)	7% (4)	20% (11)	26% (14)	24% (13)
Virtual trade show	7% (2)	29% (8)	11% (3)	4% (1)	50% (14)
Virtual conference	3% (1)	23% (7)	13% (4)	7% (2)	53% (16)
Handouts from conferences, seminars or workshops	12% (9)	42% (32)	17% (13)	23% (18)	6% (5)
Transcripts from conferences, seminars or workshops	13% (7)	31% (17)	13% (7)	24% (13)	20% (11)
Powerpoint presentations from conferences, seminars or workshops	8% (6)	36% (27)	20% (15)	28% (21)	9% (7)
Association image library	20% (6)	0% (0)	10% (3)	7% (2)	63% (19)
Photo gallery or event scrapbook	9% (3)	18% (6)	9% (3)	21% (7)	42% (14)
Staff email addresses and direct phone numbers	27% (18)	11% (7)	26% (17)	26% (17)	11% (7)
Archived audio files	4% (1)	7% (2)	7% (2)	15% (4)	67% (18)
Archived video/webcast files	11% (4)	9% (3)	6% (2)	20% (7)	54% (19)

A recurring theme of value in this study appears to be using the Members Only area for access to other members. From this question we see a high activity for access to one's own member record, as well as the member directory (enhanced or text only). Interestingly, individual member pages were far less popular.

Not surprisingly, most of the conference/meeting content is accessed on a more seasonal basis and access to the organization's magazine ranked high. Virtual trade shows/conferences received a low response, as did vendor directories and various forms of online media (images/audio/video).

Tools

In the following question, we wanted to find out what the member can actually DO within the confines of the Members area and whether or not those tools are popular with the membership.

	Frequently (daily activity)	Often (weekly activity)	Seldom (monthly activity)	Never (little or no activity)
Ability for the member to update his own membership record	50% (58)	20% (23)	22% (26)	9% (10)
Topical bulletin boards for members to post or respond to postings	27% (23)	12% (10)	31% (26)	31% (26)
Special databases the member can query	44% (46)	24% (25)	13% (14)	18% (19)
Specific job aids, software, or tools	38% (35)	22% (20)	26% (24)	15% (14)
Scheduled, moderated, live Chats	10% (5)	6% (3)	17% (8)	67% (32)
Unmoderated, open chats	20% (10)	2% (1)	16% (8)	61% (30)
Instant Messenger member support	3% (1)	5% (2)	3% (1)	89% (33)
Web-based learning modules	23% (15)	25% (16)	14% (9)	38% (24)
Downloadable documents	52% (75)	36% (52)	10% (15)	2% (3)

Based on this set of options, the most popular functions appear to be downloading documents (88% weekly or daily) and updating their member records (70%). Special databases also ranked high (68% for weekly, if not daily, usage).

Customization

Given that only about one-third of these organizations are using some form of database driven Content Management System for their web efforts, it is not surprising that association’s progress with site customization is so low. Eighty percent of these organizations indicated that their process does not require the members to provide any information about themselves in order to customize their online experience. Only 36 organizations in this study appear to have any provision for customization. Of those, the most frequent profiling or segmenting criteria were:

1. industry or professional specialty
2. issue or topic
3. geography
4. member type

The data that can be derived from monitoring the users’ experience does not appear to be adequately mined. Most frequently, this small set of respondents indicated that they either “monitor the members’ selections and preferences but don’t yet use that data to change how they work” (36%) or they “don’t use that data at all” (30%).

Marketing

In much of the market research work that we do with associations, we find that the question of why members aren’t more fully utilizing the site and its content is more attributed to Awareness rather than Interest. In other words, the organization hasn’t sufficiently made its membership aware—through marketing and promotions—what their website offers, how to use it and what is worth their time. Members tell us, “Sure, I would use that, I just didn’t know they had it (or I couldn’t find it).” Because this appears to be a common pattern, we asked these respondents about their efforts to promote and educate their markets about Members Only.

First, we asked the respondents to gauge—albeit subjectively— how familiar their membership was with their Members Only efforts.

Nearly half (48.8%) believed that their members were aware of a few things in the Members Only area, but they don't explore all of what exists in that area. A full 40% gave indication that they have insufficiently marketed this member benefit by offering that either:

- I think only a minority of members know we have a Members Only section and use it (17.4%)
- I think most of our members know we have a Members Only section but there's no clear reason to access it (14.5%)
- I'm not sure they even know we have one (8.1%)

Of those organizations who have realized the importance of "bringing their membership to the site," we asked them what tactics they have used and to assess the relative effectiveness of those tactics. Not surprisingly, the "killer app" push technology of email emerges as the single most effective marketing tactic.

	Have used and Very Effective	Have used; Somewhat Effective	Have used and Not Effective	Have used, but I Don't Know
All new members receive information about the Members Only section in their new member packets.	20% (24)	52% (61)	5% (6)	23% (27)
We publish articles or newsletter features to highlight what's available on the site.	19% (22)	63% (71)	4% (4)	14% (16)
We issue email blasts to highlight new content on the site.	45% (44)	42% (41)	1% (1)	12% (12)
Our site displays Members Only products and content to the public but they cannot access or purchase without membership.	32% (25)	39% (30)	6% (5)	22% (17)
We have "Tell a Friend" links in the Member Only section to encourage members to market to other members.	12% (3)	28% (7)	20% (5)	40% (10)
We have a page on the public side of the site that describes what's available in the Members Only section as an incentive to membership.	14% (10)	51% (36)	11% (8)	24% (17)
We offer temporary membership in the Members Only section as a "teaser" for enrollment.	10% (2)	15% (3)	35% (7)	40% (8)

There is an intriguing study from the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, *The Effects of Banner Advertising on Consumer Inter-purchase Times and Expenditures in Digital Environments* that might suggest another tactic for associations to promote Members Only. This study revealed that current customers who were exposed to banner advertising are likely to spend more money than customers who were not. Extrapolating these findings out, associations might consider using banner (web ad) technology as part of an intra-site marketing campaign. Strategically-placed banners could be used to cross-promote products, services and content available in the Members Only area.

Value

There appear to be very few quantitative or qualitative measurements in practice to assess the use and value of Members Only sections. What has been surprising for us was how many organizations are not adequately tapping into the few sources of business intelligence that they do have available. Without question, a culture shift is needed within associations to gather, mine, and make web management decisions based on data.

We asked what measurements are used *regularly* to assess the value and usage of the Members Only section. 35.6% indicate that they have not been measuring the impact of this web section. The remaining suggested that they:

- 46% monitor web statistics to quantify the number of monthly logins
- 46% monitor web statistics for the Most Requested/Downloaded Files
- 14.1% watch the amount of new traffic on bulletin/message boards.
- 12.9% track the number of purchases coming from the Members Only section.
- 35.6% we have not been measuring the impact of this section.

Most of the write-in entries for how organizations regularly measure value and usage were commentary about how little measurement is in place at their organization. Only “page views,” “number of conference registrations” and “source of referral to the website” were offered as additional measurements.

Surveying the membership is perhaps the most common way of gathering market perspective. And while a vast majority of respondents indicated that they wished they had surveyed their members prior to offering Members Only—and many also suggested they intend to survey in the near future—as many as 70% indicated that they have not ever surveyed or polled their membership to specifically assess the value of their Members Only offering. Of the fewer than 45 respondents who have surveyed, approximately half of them have surveyed within the past six months; one-third within the past two years. Of this small subset (approximately 40 responses), their survey efforts indicated that:

- a majority of the members found value and made use of the Members Only section (25%)
- some members found the Members Only section valuable (62.5%)
- there was not a significant, positive response (12.5%)

Write-in entries for “What do you hear anecdotally from your members about *what they value* with your Members Only section?” were many and could easily be grouped into the following general points. Members appear to value:

- ability to register for events/conference online
- access to a member directory
- tools to update personal membership (directory) information
- searchable newsletter archive
- searchable journal articles






Other value offered—

- Contact information for committee members
- Legislative action tools
- Ability to sign up for news broadcasts and listservers
- The content they need for their meetings/events is all in one place; ability to access past conference materials
- Email notification of website updates
- Education materials available free to members only
- Contact list of their peers in the same fields across the country

- Student member area
- Promotional calendar, talking points for responding to the Media
- Downloadable logos, PSAs and print ads
- A place for members to share documents, procedures, job descriptions, etc.
- Ability to register and reserve hotel rooms online for our annual conference

One measurement used by associations to track the value of Members Only is to correlate member activity with product sales. In fact, there are not a few association CFOs and membership directors who would like to believe that establishing member exclusivity and providing content value will lead to bottom line results, or in other words, “if we build it, they will buy.”

To determine if this is a valid measure, we asked how organizations are treating product sales relative to Members Only. Approximately two-thirds indicated that they show all products to all web visitors, but offer preferred pricing or discounts as the benefit of membership.

We have products for sale only in the Members Only section.		3.1%
We have products for sale in both the public and Members Only section, but the pricing is different in the Members Only section.		16.9%
All site visitors can see all products, but only members can purchase.		2.5%
All site visitors can see all products but we offer preferred pricing/discounts for members.		60.6%
We do not sell products on our site.		11.2%

To further examine the correlation of Members Only to sales, we asked if they had noticed an increase in overall sales stemming from Members Only. Roughly 41% indicated no change in sales and about one-third indicated that their product sales are about the same overall, but that more consumers are using the web to make their purchases. Only 9% could effectively link product sales to their Members Only sections but this should not infer that those sales occurred because of their Members Only section.

Looking Ahead

Overall, we were curious whether this sample of associations felt their Members Only efforts provided business returns. We asked: “Does your organization realize a direct benefit from supporting a Members Only section of your website?” Their responses were:

32.3%	Yes, overall
27.5%	Yes, in some respects
12.6%	The members benefit more than the organization does.
2.4%	The organization benefits more than the member does.
9.6%	No benefits that are directly evident
2.4%	No, not at all
13.2%	I don't know

By and large, the general impression is favorable, but again we draw attention to the percentage of respondents who have insufficient business intelligence in order to form an opinion.

Based on their experiences with Members Only thus far, we were also curious what respondents thought was in their future for enhancing or changing their efforts. We provided some options and they were invited to select all that they forecast:

64.1%	We will be adding more content to the Members Only section.
37.7%	We will develop a marketing campaign to better acquaint our members with what's available in the Members Only section.
34.1%	We will be adding more online community tools (BBS, chat, IM, etc.) to our Members Only section.
32.9%	We will be issuing a survey to our members to seek their feedback on the Members Only section (and/or the website in general).
30.5%	We will be exploring vendor/product relationships (e.g., content partners, distance learning, clippings or news services, etc.) to add value to our Members Only section.
26.9%	We will be implementing a CMS that will help us better manage Member Only content.
15%	We will be implementing more stringent guidelines internally for what is posted on the public side versus Members Only.
12.6%	No change.
10.2%	We will be moving away from a Members Only “section” and moving towards access restrictions at the content level.
5.4%	We will be shifting more of our web efforts to Members Only and reducing our efforts on the public side.
1.8%	We will seriously consider discontinuing our Members Only section.
0%	We plan to eliminate the Members Only section

Other planned enhancements included:

- *add functionality that will allow members to login and change their member data and preferences*
- *require all users to register with our site (i.e., non-members) in order to access certain "public" content*

- *doing a major IT review with a consultant*
- *begin to track traffic and revenue generated from the member only content*
- *add ability to pay dues & register for seminars; add member photos to member directory; improve search interface for document library*
- *provide more material available to the public and reducing the amount of "member-only" content; providing additional secure*
- *open our members only section*
- *add a Members' Directory and a password system that ties into our member database*

We also asked them what they hear anecdotally from members about how their Members Only efforts could be improved. The “broken record” that kept playing throughout these results was “fix the login procedure, make it easier to login in; eliminate passwords; streamline access.” Following that improvement were things like: more content that is searchable and specialized, online communication tools, bulletin boards, and searchable member directories.

In the August 2003 article *News Sites Still Figuring Out What to Do With Online Communities*, the Annenberg Online Journalism Review (OJR) cited a McKinsey study that detailed how participants in online communities on newspaper and media sites were more frequent visitors and active users. [The study](#) showed that frequent contributors to bulletin boards, online chats and product reviews at [CNN.com](#), [Cnet.com](#) and [Weather.com](#) visited almost five times as often as those who did not use these interactive features, they looked at four times as many pages each session, and were twice as likely to return the following quarter.

Many associations have attempted to extend their existing culture of “community” to the online environment. The OJR article would suggest that these tools would enhance site value and visitor frequency. Implementing community tools is one of the top three planned improvements respondents according to this survey, and in our own professional opinion, we believe that these tools--combined with ongoing assessment of how to manage them, and a continued focus on content development--will result in further engagements and more return visitors to association sites.

Peer Recommendations

The participants of this study were exceedingly generous in offering their experiences to the benefit of others. Here are just a few of the “lessons learned” they offered to pass along.

Plan: Have a Strategy

- *Plan ahead. It takes time and money to start and maintain (and members almost always want more (and more)).*
- *Develop a specific action (business) plan to guide spending, achieve goals, and measure success*
- *Have a plan for why it is being done. Designate a person or team to have responsibility for the site. Have policies for what can and cannot be included in the site. Plan ahead, design the site so that it has room to grow.*
- *Commit staff and budget to it; get ED support for putting unique content on it; you must maintain it and keep it fresh*
- *Have clear, measurable goals for all web development, including the Members section. Offer content of real business value, rather than mere window dressing. Do NOT let a designer have a free hand if it results in graphic density which requires long download time for access.*
- *Make sure you have clear goals for the section -- don't just throw content on their because you think it should be in the protected section*
- *Ask...the question, 'why?'*
- *You can use a member-only area to increase the perceived value of membership. You can use member websites to deliver services at a cost savings. However, you should know what your goals are and how you plan to measure success.*
- *Be careful of any vendors you select to do the work. Make sure that the right people (i.e., the tech people that will need to run the system later) are involved in vendor selection, discussions of features, etc. Don't give away the farm trying to appease members. It's much easier to add more benefits later than take away a service or benefit that members have grown accustomed to.*

Ask: Gather Data

- *Simple: Ask your members what content they want and provide it.*
- *Survey your members first to find out if they want it, and if so, what content would they recommend populating it with. Also, as an association, determine if you will have enough potential contact to make it worthwhile.*
- *Know what your members want, not what your staff think the members want.*
- *Survey members first to see what features they would like to see, and how they feel about having to supply a password to see certain content*
- *Get feedback from your members as to what would be valuable for them to be able to access and/or do on the site before you make any final decisions on site structure, content, functionality.*
- *Explore integration of both bottom-up (member record data uploads to web) and top-down (member can update their record in database). Survey membership first as to what their web-based member-only needs are, then develop strategic plan.*

- *Be prepared to be flexible and lose a little bit of time and money. If they say they want chat, or discussion, or document sharing, offer a trial version without spending much money to see what activity you really get. What users say they want and what they actually use are often two different things. Invest your time and money in the things that they will actually use.*

Communicate: Explain the Value

- *Think it through carefully and strategically before starting; communicate consistently and often to members about what's in there; give members a reason to go there regularly*
- *Establish regular communication/education to ensure members understand the value of the Members Only section. Also, make it easy for members to use.*
- *EDUCATE members about it! Make it easy for them to access it and make sure there is valuable information there. Make sure they know it exists*
- *Consider the sophistication of the membership with regards to technology. Due to the nature of our membership, the average age of our members is in the mid-50s and for the majority, they are not accustomed to using sophisticated web modules (bulletin boards, chats, online classes, online ordering). Every year we gain new members who are younger and earlier in their careers and they are more accustomed to a variety of web services. So realize that in some cases, it may take a few years to train your members to think differently about how they access information.*
- *A members-only section creates added value for members. It's another reason for them to become part of your association. Fill the members-only section with valuable articles and information so that they search your site for information before going elsewhere. This makes your site a valuable resource and adds to the value of a membership.*
- *The content must be valuable enough for a member to want to enter a user name/password to get it, which is not an easy feat. Once you have the valuable content in place, then you need to let your members know about it.*
- *Distributed content is more intuitive for the members, resulting in fewer calls to staff for information that is already online. Creating 'teaser' articles with the (cont.) section available to members only has done more to drive membership than any other identifiable online effort.*
- *Members seem to expect something extra for paying for membership, over the general public who do not pay for membership. Members Only area is the easiest way to give that something extra. It keeps the members satisfied and is a minimal amount of work for the association.*
- *Make it easy, make it immediate, make it valuable for the member. The benefits in 'perceived value' to the member are worthwhile. Members find value in something that is 'exclusive' to them. Sometimes 'perceived value' is what keeps them as members.*
- *Carefully consider what is member only and what is not; carefully consider how you'll present the difference - as different methods can cause different levels of frustration to the user - whether member or not.*

Enable: Minimize Technology Barriers

- *Don't inconvenience your members by hiding content behind a password unless you offer them a clear benefit in return for their effort of logging on, such as a discount or *really* exclusive content. It's most effective to entice users with a public link or 'teaser' description of the *specific* content that is behind the password. If you have content that would be devastating or embarrassing (or both) to the organization if a non-member got a hold of it, then you should not post this content, even in a password-restricted area. We found early on (mid- to late-90s) that we vastly overestimated the willingness of our members to logon just to look around at a members-only section. It became more effective when we shifted our mindset away from a members-only 'section' and instead password-restricted specific members-only 'content.' What your internal organization and staff considers priority content to post for members only is not always what your members consider important. Measure and evaluate usage and traffic as much as possible to figure out what's most important to your users. The results will probably surprise you.*
- *Need to find a way to overcome the reluctance of members to enter their Member ID# to log in. We are close to launching a back-office functionality that will integrate our web and our database. Our plan is to send individual emails to members, and once they click through from the email message, they will be registered and allowed to enter the site without authorization for future visits.*
- *Approach it differently by restricting access by level of membership instead of putting all members only content behind 'the wall.' In that way the public can see part of an organizations rich content, but when they click the link to read or participate, the message pops up that it is restricted to members only. Also, develop different levels of access based on either member type and/or subscription levels*
- *I would only do it if there was a compelling business reason to do it. We used to have more protected content but eliminated our Members Only section and went to restricted access to some areas of the site (e.g., directories), because members were annoyed at having to login. We have far fewer complaints now.*
- *Make sure nonmembers can see what they are missing and make it easy to join and get access instantly.*
- *Have password system automatically check that dues are current Automated method of dealing with 'I forgot my password'*
- *Be sure the guidelines and workflow for supplying content are well worked out and stick with them. I really think having a separate section is counterproductive and we hope to switch to have content visible to all even if only accessible by members.*
- *Make sure that you and your technical consultant are all speaking the same 'language,' make sure you're fully informed as to what's involved in building the section and maintaining it over time, make sure you are shown how to easily edit and create new content, make sure the system will be adaptable to your existing member benefits/ pricing structure, and TEST the site with members!*
- *It provides value to the current members and incentives to join for the non-member*
- *Be sure to offer as much as you can to all. The value of your site is weighed on what you can give; not what you can get.*
- *Carefully consider the password options. That is our biggest complaint.*
- *Get the technical issues fixed from a customer perspective BEFORE heavily marketing the content that you have to offer to MEMBERS ONLY!*

- *Keep materials that only members can receive in this section, so non-members will want to join. Also consider a 'teaser section' so they get a taste of what members are receiving.*

Summary Observations

- It appears clear that while many associations are struggling to find that right mix of content and exclusivity and trying to resolve certain implementation challenges, Members Only is a web concept with traction. It is certainly consistent with the very premise of membership organizations. Associations committed to making this work perhaps need to think about this less as a technology initiative and more as a wholly-integrated part of what it means to be a member.
- Content exclusivity remains the “golden nugget” to be found in Members Only sections. While there are not consistent or uniform guidelines for what goes “behind the wall,” it is incumbent on each organization to set forth clear parameters to staff and communicate the value of that exclusivity to the membership.
- The login process continues to be a bottleneck in the process. This is not unique to associations and Members Only work; online retailers and subscription services battle the same. Associations should expect that the technology options will continue to evolve and at the same time, these associations should be continually assessing this as an obstacle and work to create a process that is as user-friendly as current technology and business concerns allow.
- Evidenced by both the objective data and the comments offered, few responding organizations set out to define a clear business strategy—supported by market intelligence—prior to launching their Members Only efforts. A smattering of organizations have begun to realize the customer-centric nature of Members Only and recently initiated or plan to initiate specific market survey and research measures to ensure they are providing the value their market desires
- Consistent with what we see in consulting with the association market on its Internet initiatives, far too few organization realize the need to marry their web efforts with marketing. In this study we learned that organizations have not done enough to bring their markets to their offering and many plan to bolster those efforts going forward. The new mantra must become, “if you build it, go out and bring them to it.”
- It is interesting to note that “providing a place for members to network” was the #3 goal or business premise for Members Only, and “adding web community and communication tools” also ranked high as a future enhancement. Certainly the popularity of such tools as searchable member directories would indicate that members are interested in seeking out one another. At the same time, a significant number of anecdotal comments suggest that those who are currently offering tools like bulletin boards, discussion forums, etc. are having problems “getting them off the ground.” We believe that this is indeed an area of future growth for association websites and encourage the industry to closely monitor—and publish—best practices and implementation guidelines.

Where to Go From Here?

Individual benchmarking and strategy

There is clearly a dearth of quantifiable information about the usage and value of Members Only sections. Nearly half of these organizations lack information about visits, usage, and value and an overwhelming majority indicated that they do not regularly (if ever) seek feedback from their members for either planning or enhancements of Members Only. If Members Only is intended—as expressed by most of these organizations—to be offered as a member benefit, then organizations need to take a more business-based approach to managing it as a customer-driven service.

Association executives should take the lead in insisting that measures be put into place and success criteria be established so the organization can more effectively benchmark its efforts. Many peers echoed the value of regularly surveying your market to ensure that you keep a pulse on their needs and preferences. Without question, each organization should have a clearly defined web strategy that articulates how this tool is to be used to serve the larger goals of the organization and substantiate that strategy with market intelligence.

Industry research and benchmarking

This study was clearly an initial attempt to quantify and understand the prevalence and business value of the Web in association work. Within the context of Members Only sections, this study gave us some broad-strokes understanding of how these efforts are managed and provide value to the organization.

The Internet—including the Web and Email—is an immensely powerful tool that continues to change and offer opportunities for associations. But we have to be more than reactive to it, and do more than rely on “best guess” or “what’s everyone else doing?” As an entire industry, we must sponsor and participate in studies like these that will provide substantive guidance and help to define true best practices so that all associations can benefit.

Our goal with this study was twofold: one, to provide the association market with a snapshot of “shared intelligence” about one prominent application of this technology; and two, to inspire the association industry to encourage more examinations of this nature.

We hope that we have fulfilled these two objectives. We welcome your comments, reactions, and suggestions for further studies. Please feel free to contact either sponsoring organization as noted in Appendix B.

Appendix A: Participating Organizations

AcademyHealth
Advanced Medical Technology Association
Aeronautical Repair Station Association
Aesthetic Surgery Education & Research Foundation
AIA New York State Inc.
Air Conditioning Contractors of America
American Academy of Allergy Asthma & Immunology
American Academy of Audiology
American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons
American Academy of Otolaryngology
American Academy of Physician Assistants
American Alliance for Health Physical Education Recreation and Dance
American Association for Clinical Chemistry
American Association for Clinical Chemistry
American Association of Anatomists
American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy
American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators
American Association of Museums
American Association of University Women
American Bankruptcy Institute
American Bus Association
American Chemical Society
American College of Cardiology
American Council of Life Insurers
American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages
American Foreign Service Assn
American Hospital Association
American Immigration Lawyers Association
American Industrial Hygiene Association
American Meat Science Association
American Medical Informatics Association
American Moving & Storage Assn.
American Music Therapy Association
American Nurses Association
American Occupational Therapy Association
American Orthotic & Prosthetic Association
American Physical Therapy Association
American Press Institute
American Public Health Association
American Public Transportation Association
American School Food Service Association
American Society for Information Science and Technology
American Society for Public Administration
American Society for Training and Development
American Society of Civil Engineers
American Society of Health-System Pharmacists
American Society of Interior Designers
American Society of Landscape Architects
American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
American Women in Radio and Television
Americans for the Arts
AMT - The Association For Manufacturing Technology
AMTDA
APICS--The Educational Society for Resource Management
Architectural Woodwork Institute
ASCE
Association. of Home Appliance Manufacturers
Association for Childhood Education International
Association for Healthcare Philanthropy
Association for Information and Image Management (AIIM)
Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology
Association Management Company
Association of Air Medical Services
Association of Independent Corrugated Converters
Association of Performing Arts Presenters
Association of School Business Officials International
Association of Science-Technology Centers
Association of Washington Cities
Building Owners and Managers Association International
Cable & Telecommunications Association for Marketing
Career College Association

CFA Institute
Child Life Council
Consortium for School Networking (CoSN)
Council for Advancement and Support of Education
Council for Exceptional Children
Credit Union Executives Society
CREW Network
Electronic Transactions Association
Employee Relocation Council
Energy Northwest
Equipment Leasing Association
Executive Women's Golf Association
Florida Press Association
Greater Washington Association for Financial Professionals
Institute for Supply Management
Institute of Navigation
International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions
International Association of Chiefs of Police
International Downtown Association
International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans
International Life Sciences Institute
International Pharmaceutical Excipients Council of the Americas
International Safe Transit Association
International Sleep Products Association
International Society for Pharmaceutical Engineering
International Technology Education Association
Internet Society
IPC - Association Connecting Electronics Industries
Kappa Omicron Nu Honor Society
Local Government Insurance Trust
Maryland Association of Certified Public Accountants Inc.
Maryland Association of Counties
Massachusetts Dental Society
Medical Society of the District of Columbia
Metropolitan Chicago Healthcare Council
N.A.D.A. Official Used Car Guide Co.
NAADAC The Association for Addiction Professionals
National Apartment Association
National Association of Independent Schools
National Association for Law Placement
National Association of Broadcasters
National Association of College and University Attorneys
National Association of College and University Business Officers
National Association of Counties
National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials
National Association of Industrial and Office Properties
National Association of Industrial and Office Properties Northern Virginia Chapter
National Association of Legal Assistants
National Association of Mortgage Brokers
National Association of Mutual Insurance Companies (NAMIC)
National Association of School Nurses
National Association of School Psychology
National Automobile Dealers Association
National Chimney Sweep Guild
National Council of Nonprofit Associations
National Council of State Housing Agencies
National Court Reporters Association
National Ground Water Association
National Health Council
National Older Worker Career Center
National Paint & Coatings Association
National Restaurant Association
National RV Dealers Association
National Society of Professional Engineers
National Spa & Pool Institute
National Wood Pallet & Container Association
NCTM
New York Press Association
North American Folk Music & Dance Alliance
North Carolina Pediatric Society
NTEU
Oregon Entrepreneurs Forum
Oregon State Pharmacy Association
Organization for the Promotion and Advancement of Small Telecommunications Companies (OPASTCO)
Packaging Machinery Manufacturers Institute
PCI Industrial Computer Manufacturers Group
Pennsylvania Association of Notaries

Printing Industries of America/Graphic Arts
Technical Foundation
Private Practice Section APTA
Produce Marketing Association
Product Development and Management
Association
Project Management Institute
Regulatory Affairs Professionals Society
Renal Physicians Association
RISE (Responsible Industry for a Sound
Environment)
Risk and Insurance Management Society
Inc.
SC Pharmacy Association
Sigma Theta Tau International Honor
Society of Nursing
Society for Marketing Professional Services
Society for Neuroscience
Society of American Florists
Society of Interventional Radiology
Society of Manufacturing Engineers
South Carolina Pharmacy Association
SSPC:The Society for Protective Coatings
Synthetic Organic Chemical Manufacturers
Assn.
Tennessee Association of Mental Health
Organizations
Texas Medical Association

The Adhesive and Sealant Council Inc.
The American Business Women's
Association
The American Network of Community
Options and Resources
The Aspen Institute
The Florida Bar
The International Association of Chiefs of
Police
The International Society for Performance
Improvement
The National Association for Home Care
and Hospice
The National Council on the Aging
The Society for Cardiovascular Angiography
and Interventions
The United States Parachute Association
The Wildlife Society
Three Rivers Association of REALTORS
ULI-the Urban Land Institute
United Cerebral Palsy Associations
Urban Institute
US ASEAN Business Council
Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police
Washington Association of Criminal
Defense Lawyers
Women Chefs and Restaurateurs
WPAS

Appendix B: Study Sponsors

This work was a collaboration between Ellipsis Partners and the Center for Association Leadership.



Contact: Reggie Henry
reggie@gwsae.org
(202)
www.centeronline.org

The Center for Association Leadership is a portal to powerful and unparalleled learning experiences and resources that have the potential to transform you and the entire association profession. It offers an extensive array of programs, knowledge resources and community networks that provide unlimited opportunities to find new ways to achieve personal and professional success.



Contact: Dina Lewis, CAE
dlewis@ellipsispartners.com
(202) 320-3060
www.ellipsispartners.com

Ellipsis Partners is a strategic consulting firm that serves the associations, nonprofits and local government organizations in their exploration, decisions and deployment of Internet technologies. A technology-neutral firm, Ellipsis Partners specializes in web and email strategy development, market research and feasibility studies, web usability studies, requirements definition, RFP development and vendor selection support.