

Membership matters

Lessons from members and non-members

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Executive Summary

The Wiley Membership Survey was sent to over 1.2 million research professionals, across 75 disciplines. It was sent both to members and non-members of societies and associations. In scope and scale, it is unprecedented in the academic and scholarly association market.

The goal of this project is to learn more about how research professionals view scholarly societies and associations. Wiley plans to repeat this study annually in order to gather trends in the market and changes in behavior over time.

With greater knowledge of members' needs and expectations, societies are better placed to work towards becoming more valued and relevant. And, by knowing more about why people renew, join, or don't join, societies can grow their membership communities.

Summary of findings

All respondents indicate the most appealing resources typically provided by societies are peer-reviewed journals, learning opportunities, and publications on techniques and trends. While these vary by rank, they remain constant across age, geography, and, crucially, member status.

Members say they're most likely to renew when they feel connected to the community. Engagement, then, is key to member retention. But our findings show there's scope for societies to engage members more fully.

A tranche of respondents, meanwhile, are not members only because they've never been asked to join. By marketing to this group, societies may be pushing at an open door.

Overall, members are satisfied more often than not, but most are not enthused enough to evangelize their society. A powerful benefit to societies from higher satisfaction levels is more member-driven word-of-mouth referrals.

Introduction

Wiley publishes around 950 journals for over 900 society partners, and our mission is to support scholarly societies as they endeavor to make meaningful contributions to their respective academic areas.

And so, in 2014 we sent out our Membership Survey – the aim being to learn more about why research professionals do or don't join societies; why they renew, or leave.

We plan to use these findings to help all societies:

- Understand the role they play in helping researchers advance science
- Identify the unmet informational and educational needs of research professionals
- Determine ways to increase their value and relevance to members

We applied no restrictions to participation in the survey – by research focus, membership status, location, or demographics.

The respondents' insights offer encouragement, surprise, and, in certain areas, give cause for concern.

Overview of respondents

13,929 respondents, 69% were members of a society or association during the prior 12 months.

The average age of the respondents is 45, with 23% living in the US; 39% working in a university or college; 37% completing a Ph.D.; and 35% having more than 20 years' work experience.



45 years old average age



39% work in university or college



35% more than 20 years experience



37% complete a PhD



23% living in USA



16% working in medicine

The majority of those surveyed are professionals in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and medicine.

Most and least valued society activities

We asked recipients to name society activities they felt were the most, and least, appealing.

The top-ranked benefit is 'A peer-reviewed journal that publishes academic/scholarly research' (27%).

The second most popular activity is 'Opportunities for continuing education and training' (26%). Conferences, grants, seminars, technical books, workshops, and LinkedIn are examples of such opportunities.

Third – though some way behind the top two activities – is 'Publication with latest techniques and trends' (9%), typically in the form of magazines. Members far prefer this form of content to newsletters (1%).

Other relatively highly valued activities include: field-specific standards and guidelines (7%); expert advice (5%); and leadership experience opportunities (5%).

Societies that invest heavily in member discounts on products not included in membership may wish to rethink: this was the least popular activity (0.1%).

Other activities with low popularity are peer mentoring programs (0.9%), connecting with local members (0.5%), and salary data (0.3%).

When comparing what is most and least appealing to members and non-members in order of importance, peer-reviewed journals, opportunities for continuing education, publications with techniques and trends were commonly considered the top three most appealing society activities for both members and non-members alike.

Interestingly, however, there were some major differences between both members and non-members in their order of priority. Notably, members stated that standards, guidelines and references were priority #4, whereas non-members considered this to be priority #6. Similarly, the capability to attend an in-person event was considered priority #5 by members, but priority #8 by non-members.

Both members and non-members agreed that local chapters to connect with other members, salary benchmark data and member discounts to products were all considered the least appealing activities.

Most and least valued society activities



Strongest reasons for joining

We asked respondents why they originally joined their society or association, by selecting their top three society attributes and features from a list of 12.

The most common reason is 'Quality of research-based content', with a mean rank of 1.94 (the lower the number, the higher the rank). This thirst for quality content echoes members' choice of journals and other publications as one of the most valuable society activities.

The second-placed reason is 'Prestige of organization in my field' (2.28). Other popular answers include:

- Required to attend conference (2.33)
- Required certification for career (2.35)
- Networking opportunities (2.4)
- Value of Member benefits (2.5)

Why members renew

We asked research professionals their primary reason for renewing society membership; 'I feel connected to the community' (41%) topped the list.

Member engagement, then, is vital for renewals. Yet worryingly, over one third of members (34%) say they feel disengaged. (We'll examine the wider member engagement picture in the next section.)

The second most popular reason to renew is value for money (24%); members are inclined to be loyal to societies that give them a healthy return on investment. Given that expense is the main reason for not joining societies, this is unsurprising.

Third, is 'I am in a leadership position' (11%). It's possible that the

importance of *being seen* to belong to a society grows with seniority. But peer pressure might also be a factor, regardless of rank: in write-in answers under 'Other' (8%) many respondents reveal they renew only because 'it's normal to do so in my field'.

Societies would need to canvass their own memberships for data for their specific field.

Curiously, many respondents seem to renew on autopilot, with 9% giving no thought to why they do so. The key question here is whether these members will continue to renew indefinitely.

Why people don't join societies

Roughly 26% of all participants were not affiliated with a society during the 12 months prior to taking the survey. We asked them to give their reasons for this.

As expected, high cost (24%) was the most common. But the second, third, and fourth reasons may give society marketing teams pause for thought:

- 'I've never been invited to join' (15%)
- 'I don't know what's available in my field' (12%)
- 'It never occurred to me to join' (12%)



This means that 37% of non-members are either waiting to be asked to join, or might be persuaded to join.

A society that can identify these groups of non-members within their wider community, and who then markets effectively to them, is likely to grow its membership. With so many non-members who are just waiting to be asked, societies may find they are often pushing at an open door.

As well as communicating more broadly, societies might also do so more powerfully: many see no reason to join (9%), and others, no value in doing so (4%).

They might also adjust their marketing efforts to target student groups more effectively. Under 'Other' (10%) a number of write-in respondents say they've not joined because they're still studying and/or they don't believe they are qualified to join an association. So although many societies have student/early career memberships and programs, awareness amongst students is low.

How engaged are members?

As noted above, engagement drives renewals, and membership renewals are important for societies' long-term vitality. But how engaged are members overall?

Just over half (57%) say their level of society engagement is 'About right'. However, many say there's either 'Too little' engagement (28%) or 'Far too little' (6%). Societies who wish to increase their renewal rate might begin by looking at ways to improve member engagement levels.

Our survey contains findings that can help here: we asked members to state all activities with which they'd engaged in the past 12 months.

The most common activity was 'Reading my association's publications' (72%). It is clear that high-quality journals, books and magazines are important not only for attracting and satisfying members, but for keeping them too.

Next, with 58%, is 'Attended annual meeting / trade show', followed by 'Attended regional/sectional events (49%)'. We noticed that all respondents place high value on continuing education opportunities. Members' high level of engagement with events is a good example of this.

Participation on society websites features heavily across multiple activities. The fourth most popular activity is 'Visited members-only section of website (46%)'. Among other online activities are:

- Attending webinars (28%)
- Participating in association's social media networks (25%)
- Posting content on society social media networks' (21%)

There is strong evidence that on-site and off-site engagement is an important way for societies to drive member engagement levels.

It follows that a society that encourages a digital culture internally – and embraces best practice in this area – can work towards optimum member engagement via digital and social media activities.

Other engaging activities include:

- Voting in elections (44%)
- Maintaining association's certification (30%)
- Volunteering on committees (28%)
- Using membership directories (26%)

A society that communicates the value of these and other activities to members, and encourages action, is more likely to achieve higher engagement levels than those who do not. We hope that these benchmarks will encourage societies to evaluate the success of their own engagement activities, whether formally or informally, in order to retain existing members and attract new ones.

How satisfied are members?

12% of members are 'Very satisfied' overall with their membership experience, and 60% are 'Satisfied'. Yet there are 23% who are 'Neutral' regarding overall satisfaction, and a disgruntled core who are 'Dissatisfied' (4%) or 'Very dissatisfied' (1%).

Member satisfaction regarding society resources could also be higher, with 9% who are 'Very satisfied', and 55% who are 'Satisfied'. But 30% feel 'Neutral' about their satisfaction levels, and a disenchanted minority are either 'Dissatisfied' (5%) or 'Very dissatisfied' (1%).



A valuable by-product of high satisfaction levels is word-of-mouth marketing, which is driven by happy members promoting that society. (It is highly prized because it's free and has a viral element.)

We asked members how likely they were to recommend a society or association to a colleague. To measure this, we used a Net Promoter Score (NPS) - a loyalty metric that tracks how customers represent an organization to their friends, families and associates. The research suggests that higher NPS scores indicate more loyal customers, which leads to higher revenue and profits.

Their scores were expressed on a scale of 1-10.



9-10: Promoters (38%)

Promoters are members who are loyal and enthusiastic. They proactively buy products and refer others.



7-8: Passives (41%)

While generally satisfied, passive members are unlikely to make referrals, and are less loyal than Promoters.



0-6: Detractors (21%)

These are dissatisfied members, and they can be dangerous to a brand: negative publicity can go viral in the same way as positive publicity.

Societies who are able to identify dissatisfied members are well placed to address the issues causing discontent.

This is important, because – as we've seen – the prestige of a society is people's second-strongest reason for joining. It follows, then, that negative publicity will reduce a society's appeal to many non-members.

Summary

Our Membership Survey shows there to be a trinity of society activities that are most valued by members and non-members alike:

- Peer-reviewed journals that are discipline specific
- Opportunities for continued education, with a view to career advancement
- Specialist publications with leading-edge content

For societies to be attractive to both members and non-members, these features are an essential offering. Other activities can perhaps be used by societies to differentiate their offering from others, or to drive market repositioning.

As for non-members, respondent insight suggests there are significant numbers of member prospects that are amenable to joining. Societies who can identify these groups within their wider community, and reach out to them, might well grow their membership.

Member retention, meanwhile, is fuelled by member engagement, which in turn is driven by people feeling connected to their membership communities. A society that works to build strong communities – both physical and digital – will encourage many members to renew.

Member satisfaction is a concern. Too few members are enthused enough by their membership to evangelize it to others. And too many members are dissatisfied, meaning societies are at risk of being damaged by negative word of mouth.

Societies that are motivated to measure member satisfaction levels, and, critically, to act on the results, will benefit from more positive – and less negative – word-of-mouth.

Key Takeaways

The insight and knowledge provided from this research will hopefully enable societies to work towards becoming more valued and relevant. There are five key areas we have identified in order for a society to grow and engage their membership community:



Retain

- Connect members to your society's community
- Continue to provide valuable resources, including peer-reviewed journals and learning opportunities to keep members up-to-date with current trends and techniques



Attract

- Provide members with high quality research-based content
- Focus on the value of a membership rather than cost
- Encourage and incentivize members to refer their network and contacts to the society
- Canvas those with similar demographics as existing members through formal invitation
- Target and communicate with student groups and graduate programs in order to make them aware of the society and the benefits a membership can offer



Engage

- Engage members with high-quality journals and magazines with relevant content
- Invite members to networking events that offer continuing education opportunities



Grow existing

- Look at ways to improve member engagement levels
- Examine the satisfaction of members in order to find out how they can improve
- Focus on providing members with clear ROI from their membership to encourage renewals

Appendix

Methodology

All respondents had earlier opted-in to receive communications from Wiley. Respondents received one emailed invitation to complete the survey, followed by a subsequent reminder email. A total of 13,929 people completed the survey. A further 27,976 partially completed the survey. We excluded their results from this analysis.

Net Promoter Score (NPS)

A Net Promoter Score is a loyalty metric that was used to track how customers represent an organization to their friends, families and associates. Research suggests that higher NPS scores indicate more loyal customers, which leads to higher revenue and profits.

Maximum Difference Scaling (MaxDiff)

MaxDiff is a statistical instrument, and was used to frame questions in this survey. It is widely used by companies to determine what customers want. With MaxDiff, survey respondents are asked to indicate the best / worst options from a list of items.

MaxDiff assumes respondents will evaluate all possible pairs of displayed items, and then choose the pair that reflects the maximum difference in preference or importance.

We used this form of questioning to determine which society activities and resources respondents found most appealing.

About Wiley

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Societies across all major academic, scientific and professional fields value our publishing services and through Wiley Online Library and other products, we disseminate their journals to the research community.

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