2026 ASSOCIATION TRENDS

The Six Imperatives You Can't Afford to Ignore

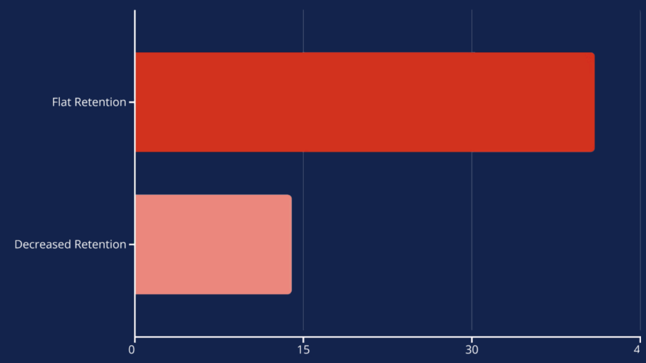
October 2025

SEQUENCE℠
ASSOCIATION GROWTH EXPERTS

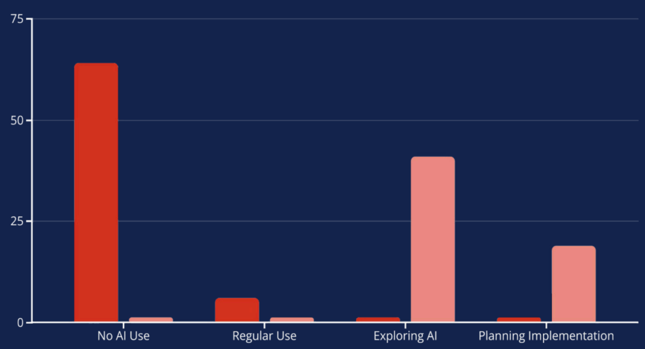
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A sharp paradox defines associations in 2025. Leaders are optimistic—63% **expect non-dues revenue to rise**—yet most face serious structural challenges. Overreliance on sponsorships, stagnant retention (**41% flat, 14% declining**), and fragile revenue models reveal a widening gap between confidence and capability. (GrowthZone 2025, MGI 2025)

FLAT AND DECREASING RETENTION



ASSOCIATION USE OF AI 2024 VS. 2025



Technology tells a similar story. In 2024, 64% of associations reported no AI use, and only 6% used it regularly. By 2025, interest surged—41% **exploring AI** and 19% **planning implementation**—but execution still lags behind ambition.

> **"Only 11% find their value proposition *very compelling*. That's not a metric, it's a mandate for change."**

Despite stable renewal rates, member perception of value has fallen sharply. Only 11% of associations describe their value proposition as "very compelling," threatening loyalty and long-term sustainability.

The market is sending a clear message: **traditional membership models are breaking down.** Habit no longer sustains renewals, events alone no longer anchor engagement, and sponsorships can't guarantee stability.

THE SIX IMPERATIVES FOR SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

Associations that thrive in 2026 will act decisively on **six imperatives** that define the next era of growth:

PROVE VALUE IN OUTCOMES

Demonstrate tangible results and clear ROI beyond basic offerings.

EXTEND ENGAGEMENT

Shift from episodic events to continuous, year-round connection.

OPERATIONALIZE AI

Integrate intelligence for smarter operations and personalized experiences.

REBALANCE REVENUE

Build resilience through diversified, scalable funding models.

TURN DATA INTO A SHARED ASSET

Create organization-wide data fluency and shared insight.

FRICTIONLESS MEMBERSHIP

Simplify joining, renewal, and engagement at every touchpoint.

These are not minor adjustments; they are **board-level imperatives**. Together, they mark a decisive shift: From managing membership as a **transaction** to leading it as a **transformation**. Associations that embrace them will grow faster, retain members longer, and command greater influence. Those who hesitate risk falling behind as relevance is redefined for 2026 and beyond.

Associations that embrace these imperatives will redefine relevance in 2026 and beyond. They won't just survive, they'll **grow faster, retain members longer, and command greater influence**. The leaders who act now will set the pace for the next decade of association success.

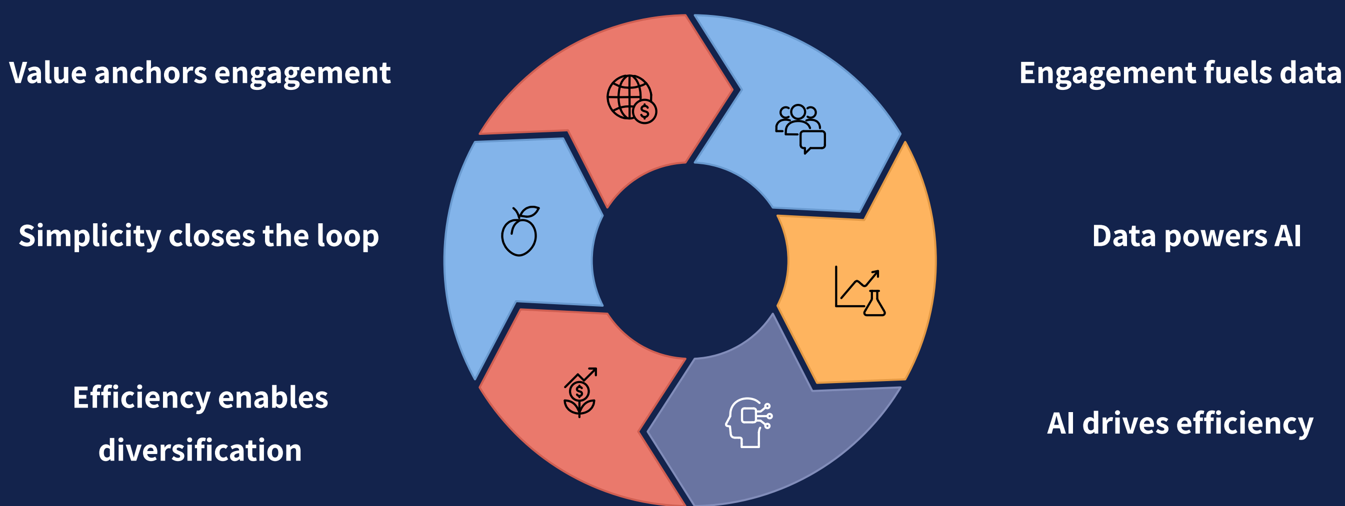
REDEFINING VALUE: FROM TRANSACTIONAL TO TRANSFORMATIONAL

The association landscape is shifting fast. The traditional value proposition is no longer enough. Members expect visible, measurable results from their investment, i.e., proof of progress, not just access or belonging.

This demands a new mindset: moving from managing membership as a **transaction** to leading it as a **transformation**.

Associations must show how membership directly drives professional growth, advances industries, and builds meaningful connections that lead to tangible outcomes. The challenge lies in making these results measurable and personalized for every member segment.

The six imperatives operate as a connected system for sustainable growth:



Together, they create a resilient growth engine for the next era of associations where insight, agility, and outcomes define success.

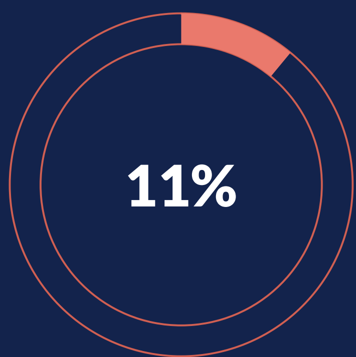
> **"The future belongs to associations that transform how they deliver and prove value."**

TREND 1: MEMBERSHIP VALUE REFRAMED

THE CHALLENGE

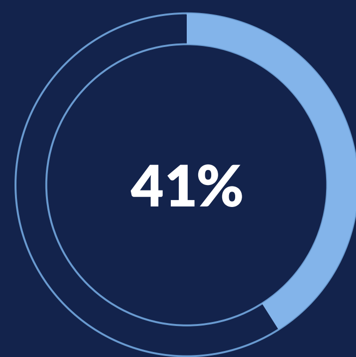
Only **11% of associations** describe their value proposition as *"very compelling"* (GrowthZone 2025; MGI 2025), a sharp decline from the prior year. The impact is immediate: **41%** report flat retention, and **14%** are losing members.

Members aren't leaving because dues are too high; they're leaving because they don't see outcomes worth paying for.



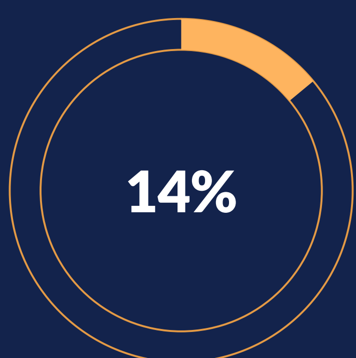
COMPELLING VALUE

Associations with a "very compelling" value proposition.



FLAT RETENTION

Associations reporting no growth in member retention.



DECREASED RETENTION

Associations experiencing a net decrease in members.

UNTAILORED COMMS

Associations failing to tailor communications for early-career professionals.

WHAT'S CHANGED

For decades, membership renewed on habit. Professionals joined and stayed out of **expectation, identity, and tradition.**

That habit is now broken. Today's members, shaped by on-demand digital experiences, expect **immediate, visible outcomes.** Yet half of associations still fail to tailor communications to early-career audiences, alienating the most value-sensitive segment.

> **"Loyalty no longer depends on identity, it depends on impact."**

This marks a **generational handoff** in what drives loyalty: from institutional trust to personal outcomes.

WHY IT MATTERS

When outcomes aren't clear, renewal becomes a **price decision**. For first-year members, that risk is critical. Early wins build loyalty; without them, engagement fades and members rarely return. Research confirms it: **first-year retention** is the strongest predictor of long-term success (MGI 2025).

> **"No perceived value, no renewal."**

WHAT SMART LEADERS DO

Leading associations focus on *proving* value, not just promising it.

- They design onboarding as a **30-day sprint**, ensuring new members achieve a tangible success quickly, e.g., earning a credential step, forming a key connection, or using a valuable tool.
- They build **outcome libraries** of metrics, stories, and testimonials that demonstrate impact clearly.
- They also tailor outcomes to each career stage, moving beyond one-size-fits-all benefits.

THE IMPERATIVE

Leaders must move from asking *"Do members see value?"* to demanding *"What outcomes do we promise, how do we prove them, and how fast can we deliver?"*

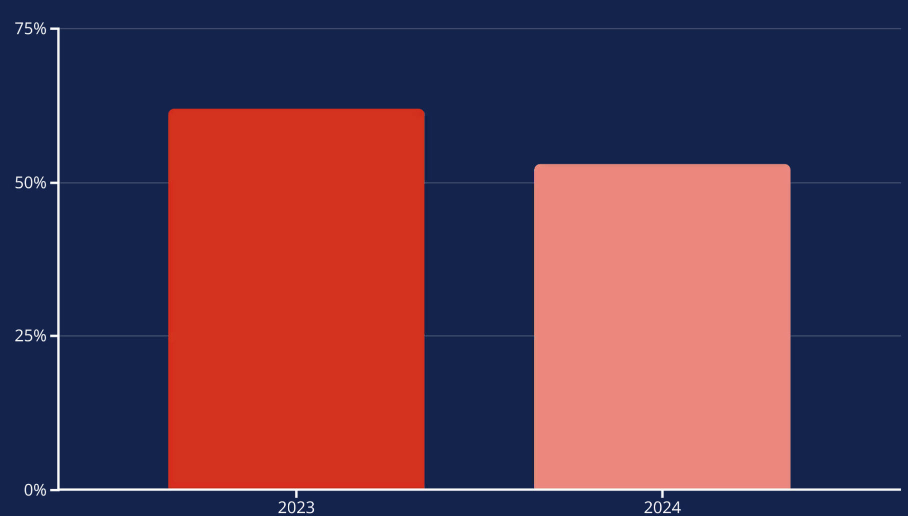
Associations that **compete on outcomes, not dues**, will win the loyalty and the future of their members.

TREND 2: ENGAGEMENT BEYOND EVENTS

THE CHALLENGE

In-person meetings are back, but their power to drive loyalty is fading. While **62% of associations** reported stable or rising attendance in 2023, that number fell to **53% by 2024** (GrowthZone 2025). Members are making it clear: **annual events alone can't sustain relationships.**

STABLE OR RISING EVENT ATTENDANCE



WHAT'S CHANGED

Events are still **peak experiences**, but no longer the *primary driver* of engagement.

Sustained participation now comes from **year-round opportunities**, e.g., mentoring, online communities, digital learning, and member networks that extend the conference experience into continuous value.

Members want a clear bridge from the energy of an annual meeting to their **next professional milestone.** Without that connection, momentum disappears quickly.

This trend highlights a critical shift. Events remain valuable, but their standalone impact has diminished. The future of engagement lies in what happens before, between, and after those moments.

> **“Events don’t anchor loyalty; the real fight happens between them.”**

WHY IT MATTERS

Associations that rely too heavily on events risk losing members to **always-on competitors**: digital platforms, online learning communities, and professional networks that deliver relevance every day.

Fragmented experiences weaken loyalty. Continuous engagement strengthens it. Within the next three years, the most loyal members will come from associations that enable **12 or more meaningful interactions per year outside of events.**

> **“A ballroom is not a business model.”**

WHAT SMART LEADERS DO

Smart leaders don’t treat events as endpoints, they treat them as **conversion engines.** Immediately post-event, they guide attendees into **next-step actions**: joining online communities, enrolling in credential programs, or connecting with mentors.

They use **activation calendars** that transform event energy into ongoing engagement, ensuring that relationships grow long after the conference ends.

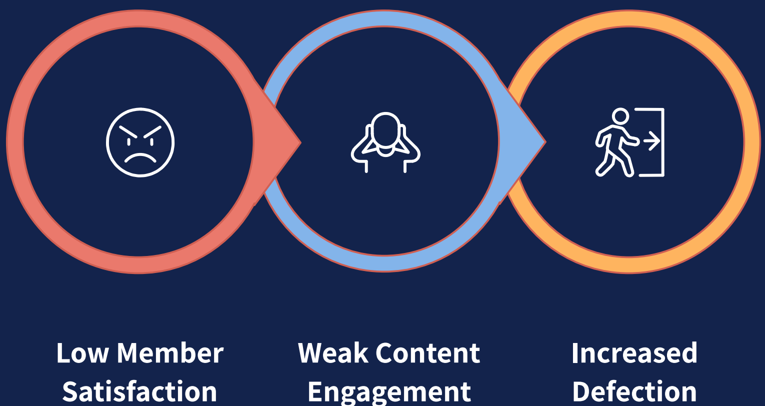
TREND 3: OPERATIONALIZE AI

THE CHALLENGE

Most associations are stuck in "pilot mode." Interest in artificial intelligence is soaring, but implementation lags behind. While many are experimenting with AI tools, few have embedded them into core systems that drive member experience, marketing, and decision-making. The result is a widening gap between potential and performance.

WHY IT MATTERS

Every month of delay means **lost capacity and unmet expectations.** Without AI, associations struggle with:



Those that stay in "pilot mode" risk falling behind. The associations that integrate AI now will **set new service standards and redefine responsiveness** across the industry.

> **"AI is becoming the operating system of association performance."**

WHAT SMART LEADERS DO

Smart leaders link AI directly to performance. They ask, *"Which metrics will AI improve in the next 90 days?"* then measure results:

- Reduced response times.
- Accelerated content delivery.
- Improving satisfaction and retention scores.

They invest in **staff readiness and governance** so AI enhances, not overwhelms, operations. They treat AI not as a tool, but as a **new operating system for association relevance.**

THE IMPERATIVE

AI is transforming how associations make decisions, not just how they perform tasks. Leaders must move from pilots to **production** by embedding AI into the systems that drive member experience, marketing, and growth.

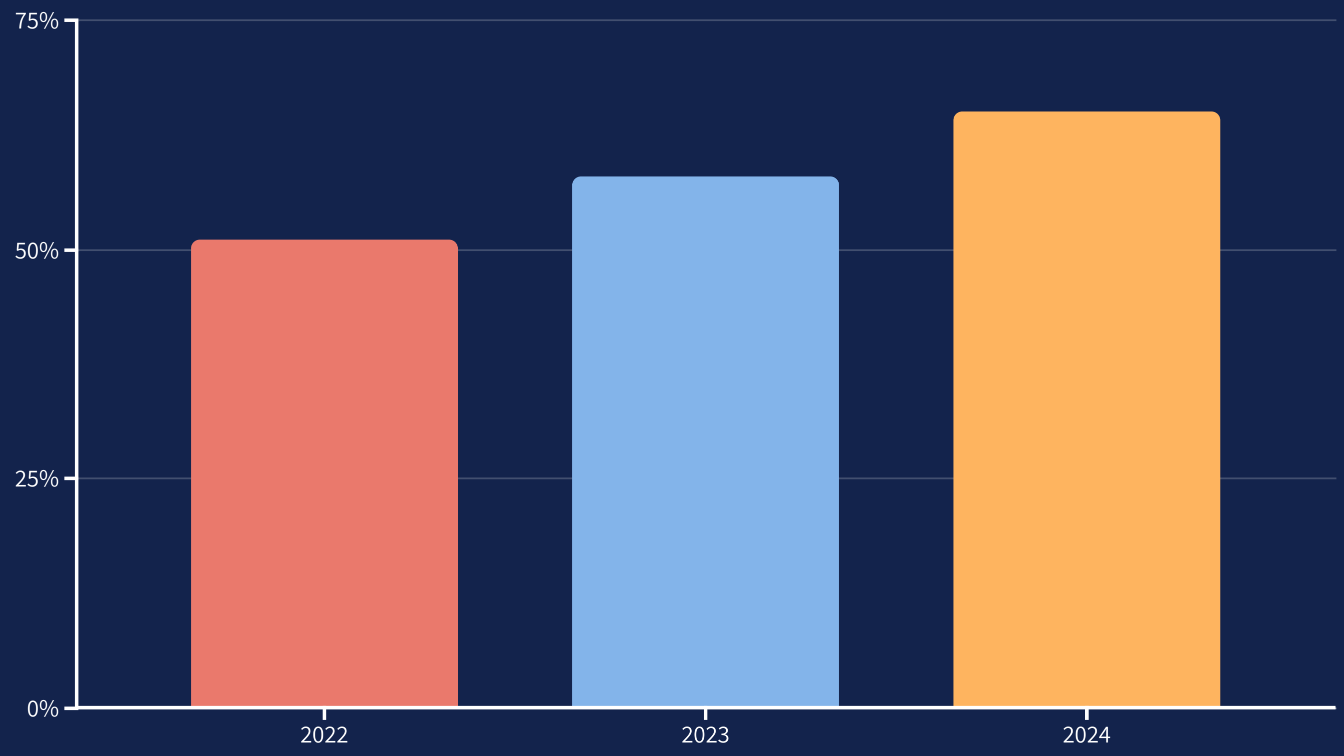
TREND 4: REVENUE MIX REBALANCE

THE CHALLENGE

Concern over non-dues revenue surged in 2024 and remains high in 2025, making it the top financial challenge for the third straight year. Sponsorships and exhibits still dominate income streams, but they are **cyclical and event-dependent.** When conferences falter, so does financial stability.

This overdependence exposes organizations to risk and limits innovation. The future requires revenue systems that are **predictable, scalable, and member-aligned.**

NON-DUES REVENUE AS TOP CONCERN



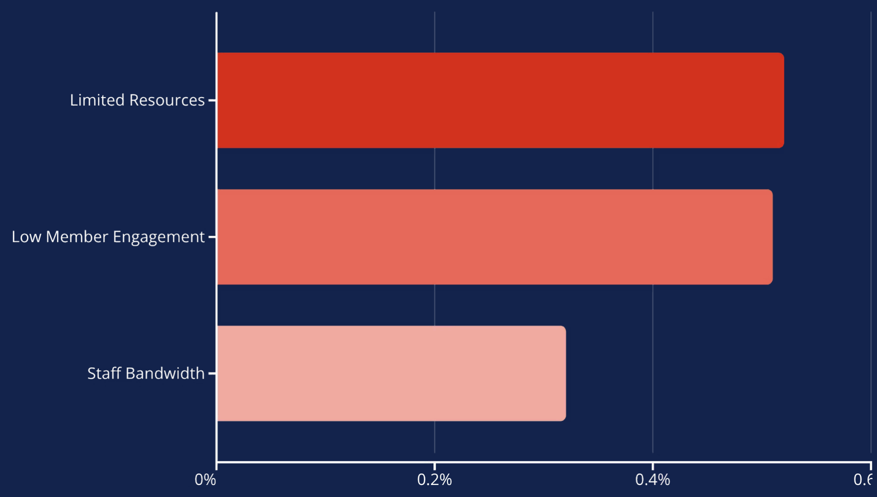
> **"What got us here won't fund what comes next."**

WHAT'S CHANGED

Associations remain optimistic—**63% expect non-dues revenue growth in 2025**—yet few have built the infrastructure to deliver it. The barriers are familiar: limited staff capacity (**52%**), low member engagement (**51%**), and underdeveloped product models (**32%**) (GrowthZone 2025; Naylor 2024).

Optimism without execution is not a strategy. Many associations are betting on growth without the operational foundation to support it.

EXPECT INCREASED NON-DUES REVENUE



63% EXPECT GROWTH

in non-dues revenue in 2025.

> **"You can't starve the present, but you can't mortgage the future either."**

WHY IT MATTERS

Event-based revenue makes associations **reactive**; scalable revenue makes them **resilient**. Credentials, subscriptions, and learning products create recurring income that grows with member needs rather than event cycles.

By 2026, associations that shift even **15% of non-dues revenue** from sponsorships to scalable learning or credential programs will see higher renewal stability and stronger partner ROI.

> **"Sponsorships pay the bills, credentials build the future."**

WHAT SMART LEADERS DO

Smart leaders manage a **dual horizon**, protecting today's sponsorships while building tomorrow's revenue engines. They allocate dedicated capacity to growth innovation, investing in scalable models such as:

- Credentialing and microlearning programs
- Subscription-based education
- Year-round partner engagement models

They treat revenue diversification not as a side project, but as a **strategic imperative tied to mission and member value.**

THE IMPERATIVE

Leaders should expect measurable progress toward a balanced portfolio, tracking:

- Credential revenue CAGR
- Non-dues revenue per member
- Sponsorship share of total income

The goal is not diversification for its own sake, it's **dependable growth** grounded in value creation.

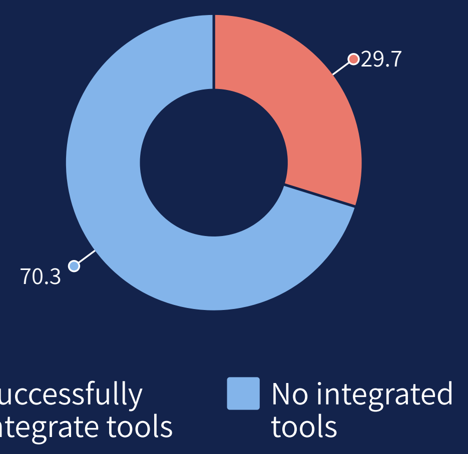
Associations that build resilience into their business models now will weather disruption and fund innovation for the decade ahead.

TREND 5: TURN DATA INTO A SHARED ASSET

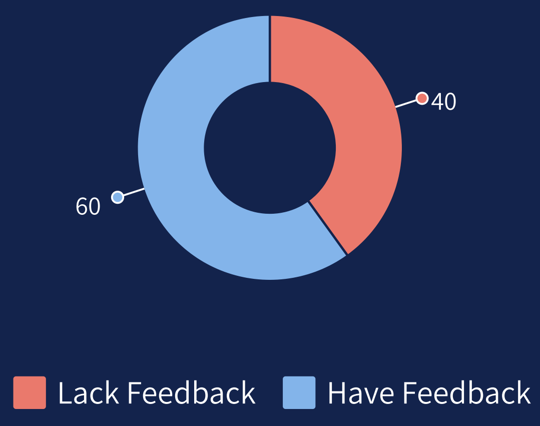
THE CHALLENGE

Associations are drowning in data but starving for insight. Only **29.7%** integrate their engagement tools effectively, and **40%** lack regular member feedback loops (Naylor 2024).

Fragmented systems, inconsistent reporting, and data silos create a widening gap between what associations know and how they act. When data lives in isolation, strategy drifts.



Only a small percentage of associations successfully integrate their engagement tools.



40% of associations lack regular member feedback.

> **"Without integration, engagement doesn't scale, and 70% of associations are stuck there."**

WHAT'S CHANGED

Data streams are multiplying faster than the capacity to manage them. Understaffed analytics teams and fragmented systems make integration slow and costly. As a result, **reporting lags behind reality**, and opportunities are lost in the noise.

The problem isn't lack of data; it's a lack of clarity, coordination, and confidence in what the numbers mean.

Three barriers now define the challenge:

FRAGMENTED SOURCES

Multiple disconnected systems and datasets.

INTEGRATION BARRIER

Tool gaps and slow reporting pipelines.

POOR DECISIONS

Limited insight stalls strategy and action.

WHY IT MATTERS

This data lag is expensive. Without integrated intelligence, associations can't:

- Identify at-risk members before they lapse.
- Optimize campaigns in real time.
- Personalize content and engagement at scale.

Each missed opportunity erodes member value and growth potential. Integrated data turns guesswork into guidance, driving smarter decisions and stronger outcomes.

> **"Without a single source of truth, reporting lags and strategy drifts."**

TREND 6: FRICTIONLESS MEMBERSHIP

THE CHALLENGE

Member expectations have shifted dramatically. First-year members, already the most vulnerable segment, now compare their association experience to seamless consumer models like Netflix, Spotify, and fitness apps. Manual invoices and outdated systems make associations feel out of step with modern expectations. Renewal should be invisible, not inconvenient.

WHAT'S CHANGED

This isn't just a technology issue, it's a mindset issue. Renewals are no longer back-office transactions; they're **moments of member experience** that shape perceptions of value and trust.

> **"If Netflix can auto-renew, why can't you?"**

WHY IT MATTERS

Retention drives growth, and payment design drives retention. Every renewal interaction communicates what the organization values: **simplicity, trust, and continuity.**

The easier it is to stay, the more likely members will.

Streamlined Renewals

- **Reduced Lapses**
- **Improved Cash Flow**
- **Extended Member Lifetime Value**

WHAT SMART LEADERS DO

Leading associations design **renewal as an experience, not an invoice**. They:

DEFAULT TO AUTO-RENEW **WITH TRANSPARENT OPT-OUTS**	**OFFER DIGITAL PAYMENT FLEXIBILITY**
USE SMART RECOVERY CAMPAIGNS **TO RE-ENGAGE MEMBERS BEFORE LAPSE**	**TREAT RENEWAL MESSAGING AS** A MARKETING CAMPAIGN**, NOT A REMINDER**

They view frictionless renewal as part of their brand promise and an extension of the value they deliver every day.

> **"Renewal is not billing, it's belonging continued."**

THE IMPERATIVE

By 2026, associations must make **staying easier than leaving**. Renewal design is member experience design: the more friction you remove, the more loyalty you retain.

> **"In the new membership model, convenience is loyalty."**

CONCLUSION: FROM IMPERATIVES TO ACTIONS

Associations stand at an inflection point. Members no longer renew on habit, events no longer anchor loyalty, and sponsorships no longer guarantee stability. The old model isn't eroding, it's already gone. What remains is a rare opportunity to rebuild around what matters most: **outcomes, engagement, intelligence, and trust.**

11%

COMPELLING VALUE

Of associations find their value proposition "very compelling".

55%

RETENTION DECLINE

Experience flat (41%) or decreased (14%) member retention.

65%

NON-DUES REVENUE

Cite non-dues revenue as their top challenge.

70%

INTEGRATION GAP

Cannot integrate engagement tools effectively.

40%

FEEDBACK DEFICIT

Lack systematic feedback mechanisms.

> **"Relevance isn't inherited, it's earned. One measurable outcome at a time."**

The data is clear: fewer than one in five associations describe their value proposition as compelling, half face stagnant retention, and two-thirds cite non-dues revenue as their top challenge. Optimism remains high, but optimism alone won't create results. The future belongs to associations that turn intent into measurable impact.

THE SIX IMPERATIVES FOR FUTURE GROWTH

Associations that thrive in 2026 will not simply adapt, they will lead. Their success will hinge on their ability to embody these six critical imperatives, transforming their operations and value delivery:

PROVE TANGIBLE OUTCOMES

Demonstrate measurable results that members can clearly see and connect to their personal and professional growth.

EXTEND ENGAGEMENT BEYOND EVENTS

Cultivate continuous interaction and community, moving beyond episodic event-centric models to sustained member relationships.

OPERATIONALIZE AI FOR INSIGHT

Integrate AI tools into core operations to elevate service personalization and generate deeper, actionable insights from data.

REBALANCE REVENUE FOR RESILIENCE

Diversify and optimize revenue streams to build a more stable and resilient financial model, reducing dependence on single sources.

TURN DATA INTO A SHARED ASSET

Transform fragmented data into a cohesive, accessible, and shared resource that empowers informed decision-making across the organization.

DESIGN FRICTIONLESS MEMBERSHIP

Create an effortless member experience, making loyalty intuitive and participation as convenient as leading consumer platforms.

These are not merely trends to monitor; they are urgent imperatives that demand proactive leadership. The next era of association growth will belong to those who are bold enough to move first, smart enough to lead with intention, and disciplined enough to consistently measure what truly matters.

> **"Future-ready associations won't just adapt, they'll reimagine how value is created and delivered."**

ABOUT SEQUENCE CONSULTING

Redefining member value, engagement, and impact for associations worldwide.

For more than two decades, Sequence Consulting has partnered with the world's leading associations to solve their most complex growth challenges, helping them grow membership, revenue and impact.

Founded in 2001 by **Chris and Lisa Vaughan**, both former Big Strategy consultants, Sequence brings the rigor of corporate strategy to the mission-driven world of associations.

Their firm combines deep sector expertise with a proven ability to turn insight into outcomes by translating strategy into transformational growth.

OUR EXPERTISE

Sequence helps associations of every kind reimagine their future, redefine their value, and lead their fields with confidence.

MEMBER AND MARKET RESEARCH

Uncovers what truly drives **value, loyalty, and growth**, turning insight into confident, data-driven strategy.

ASSOCIATION GROWTH STRATEGIES

Aligns programs, products, and experiences with **member and market outcomes** to accelerate sustainable growth.

ASSOCIATION STRATEGIC PLANNING

Clarifies purpose, focus, and priorities, **amplifying influence and brand relevance** in a changing landscape.

MEMBERSHIP MARKETING

Targets the right audiences with **precision and timing** to deepen engagement and deliver measurable results.

> **"We don't just help associations adapt. We help them lead."**

Learn more at www.sequenceconsulting.com

APPENDIX: REFERENCES

Data and insights drawn from the following benchmarking reports and proprietary research:

BENCHMARKING & RESEARCH REPORTS

- **GROWTHZONE 2024 AND 2025 ASSOCIATION TRENDS REPORT**
- **MARKETING GENERAL INCORPORATED (MGI) 2023–2025 MEMBERSHIP MARKETING BENCHMARKING REPORTS**
- **NAYLOR ASSOCIATION SOLUTIONS 2024 ASSOCIATION BENCHMARKING REPORT**
- **ASSOCIATION LABORATORY 2024 AND 2025 LOOKING FORWARD SERIES**
  - Impact Report (2024)
  - Challenges Report (2025)
  - Solutions Report (2025)

SUPPLEMENTAL INSIGHTS

- **SEQUENCE CONSULTING PROPRIETARY ASSOCIATION BENCHMARKING DATABASE, 2015–2024**
- **SEQUENCE CONSULTING CLIENT RESEARCH AND CASE STUDIES, 2020–2025**

SOURCES SUPPORTING DATA POINTS

Redefining Member Value	MGI 2024; GrowthZone 2025; Association Laboratory 2025	• Members increasingly expect measurable ROI and career impact. • Personalization and outcomes now drive renewals more than benefits or belonging. • Associations must link membership to visible progress and advancement.
Revenue Mix Rebalance	Naylor 2024; GrowthZone 2025; Association Laboratory 2025	• 65% of associations (2024) cited non-dues revenue as their top concern up sharply from 2023; 61% in 2025 (still #1). • Sponsorships and exhibits remain dominant but are cyclical and event-dependent. • Sustainable growth requires diversified, member-aligned revenue systems.
Technology and AI Integration	GrowthZone 2025; Naylor 2024; Association Laboratory 2025	• 70% of associations investing in AI to improve efficiency, engagement, and insight. • Fastest adoption in marketing, member service, and content delivery. • Data readiness and digital governance now define competitive advantage.
The Next Generation Workforce	Association Laboratory 2025; GrowthZone 2024; MGI 2024	• Workforce capacity and leadership development rank among top operational challenges. • Staff burnout and digital skill gaps threaten execution. • High-performing associations prioritize upskilling and alignment across teams.
Governance for Agility	Association Laboratory 2024 Impact; Naylor 2024; GrowthZone 2025	• Agile governance and faster decision cycles correlate with stronger performance. • Many boards still slow innovation due to structure and process. • Data-informed strategy and empowered leadership are critical to adaptability.
Relevance Through Purpose	Association Laboratory 2025; MGI 2024; Naylor 2024	• Purpose-driven positioning strengthens engagement and retention. • Associations with clear mission alignment outperform peers in loyalty metrics. • The strongest brands link purpose directly to modern member outcomes.