SEQUENCE℠
ASSOCIATION GROWTH EXPERTS

2027 Association Trends

Would Your Members Choose You Again?

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Grading Our Own Forecast

Last year we named six imperatives for 2026 and told association leaders they could not afford to ignore them. A full year of data is now in. Before we make new calls, we owe you an honest accounting of the old ones.

Much of it held. We said artificial intelligence would move from the edges of association work to the center of it, and it did. Membership marketers have crossed from talking about AI to using it: current use in membership marketing rose to 23% this year, up from 18% last year, and another 23% are actively exploring or evaluating it (MGI, 2026). The mood shifted with the behavior, from defensive to decisive. We said value had to be proven in outcomes, and the gap we pointed to is still wide: only 12% of associations call their value proposition very compelling, and even paired with "compelling," confidence slipped from 57% to 51% in a single year (MGI, 2026). We said membership had to become frictionless, and the year's most cited growth playbook now reads like a restatement of that idea.

> ***So the tactical calls were sound. The framing was not.***

We presented 2026 as an execution problem, six things to do better. The deeper signal in this year's research is that the problem is not how well associations execute. It is whether membership still earns a place in the member's life at all. Association leaders are reporting something more structural than a performance dip. They are describing a membership that has quietly become optional (Association Laboratory, 2026). We were treating the symptoms of a relevance shift as if they were gaps in our own performance.

That is the correction this edition makes. We begin not with a checklist of what to do, but with a diagnosis of what changed. The six imperatives still follow. They simply make far more sense once you see the forces they are answering.

This Is Structural, Not Cyclical

Four forces are reshaping how members decide whether an association is worth their money, their time, and their attention. None is fully within an association's control. All of them change what the work of membership has to accomplish. Read together, they explain why the familiar levers (better programs, sharper marketing, more events) are producing diminishing returns. The levers still work. They are just fighting forces they were not built for.



Force One: Membership Has Become a Choice, Not a Default

For a long time, membership in the association of one's field was close to a reflex. You finished your training, you entered your profession, and you joined. That reflex is fading.

Association executives describe it plainly. In a study of 124 association CEOs, the recurring theme was that membership is no longer the default. It has become one discretionary purchase among many, reconsidered at every renewal (Association Laboratory, 2026). The benchmarking data tells the same story from a different angle. The share of associations reporting membership growth fell from 47% two years ago to 38% this year, while the share reporting decline climbed from 21% to 30% (MGI, 2026). Among associations surveyed at the end of 2025, only 17% saw retention improve over the prior year (GrowthZone, 2026).

Listen to members directly and the picture sharpens. Asked why they never joined, members do not cite ideology or loyalty. They did not know the association existed (39%), it cost too much (34%), or they could not see the return (28%) (Higher Logic, 2025). These are not the objections of people rejecting their profession's institution. They are the objections of consumers who were not persuaded.

A stable renewal rate can hide a weakening reason to belong. Retention measures whether members got around to leaving, not whether they would choose you again if they were deciding fresh. More of them are deciding fresh than ever.

Force Two: The Competition Is Structural, and the Employer Holds the Budget

When associations think about competition, they tend to think about other associations. That is no longer where the real pressure comes from.

Asked to name the forces shaping member behavior, association CEOs point to a competitive set that barely existed a generation ago: for-profit training companies, online platforms, informal peer networks, and the member's own employer (Association Laboratory, 2026). For professional associations, one competitor sits above the rest. The employer has become the most prominent force shaping whether a member participates at all, because the employer increasingly controls the training budget, the conference approval, and the recognition that makes a credential worth holding.

Members confirm it from their side of the relationship. The most common way members discover an association is through their workplace (Higher Logic, 2025). And when members leave, one of the leading reasons is not dissatisfaction but a withdrawn check: their employer



stopped paying, which accounts for 19% of departures (Higher Logic, 2025). The same channel that brings members in is a common way they fall out.

There is a sharper edge to this. Nearly half of association CEOs say their members are being substituted by differently trained professionals, people entering the work from adjacent fields and nontraditional credentials (Association Laboratory, 2026). The competition is not only for the member's dues. It is for the definition of who counts as a member of the profession at all.

For an association that still recruits one individual at a time, this is the most consequential shift in the diagnosis. The decision to belong is moving up, from the professional to the organization that employs them.

Force Three: AI Is Changing the Member's Work and Commoditizing What Associations Sell

Most association conversations about AI look inward, at efficiency, staff productivity, and which tools to adopt. The more important story is happening outside the building, in the member's job.

Eighty percent of association CEOs say adapting to AI is affecting their members (Association Laboratory, 2026). It is changing what members do, what skills they need, and how quickly both go out of date. That alone would raise the bar on what an association must provide. But AI does something more pointed to the association business model. It erodes the scarcity of the two things many associations sell: information and credentials. When a member can get a competent answer, a summary, or a draft in seconds, the value of access to content drops. When skills can be acquired and signaled in new ways, the value of a traditional credential softens.

This puts associations in a hard position, because most are not yet equipped to respond. The capability that would let an association personalize, anticipate, and prove its relevance depends on data, and the data is stuck. Only about 43% of associations say they can easily access their own member data (ASI, the developers of iMIS, 2026). The information needed to defend the value proposition is trapped in disconnected systems at the exact moment the value proposition is under pressure.

Associations do not need to adopt AI faster. They need to aim it at a different target: not cutting cost, but protecting the scarcity of what they offer.

Force Four: Volatility Is Now a Planning Assumption

The last force is the one associations can least control and most need to plan around. The external environment has become a source of operating risk, not background noise.



When association professionals rank their challenges, the political environment now sits third on the list, and federal funding ranks among the top five (ASAE Challenges poll, 2025). For associations tied to public funding or federal policy, scientific, medical, and higher education societies in particular, this is not abstract. The sector's net financial outlook remains negative, with more associations expecting decline than improvement, and professional societies are absorbing the hardest hit (ASAE State of Associations, 2026).

The pressure is already changing behavior. The share of associations raising dues more than doubled in a single year, from roughly 14% to 34% (ASAE State of Associations, 2026). That is a sector reaching for its most familiar lever, the dues increase, at the precise moment members are most sensitive to cost. It is an understandable move and a risky one, and it sets up a tension the revenue imperative will have to resolve.

Volatility of this kind does not resolve into a single action. It is the weather the other five imperatives now operate in. That is why it belongs here, in the diagnosis, rather than as an imperative of its own.

What the Diagnosis Changes

Put the four forces together and the shift comes into focus. Membership is now chosen rather than assumed. The competition for that choice is broad, and the employer often makes it. AI is raising the bar and lowering the scarcity of what associations sell. And all of it is happening in an environment that punishes slow adjustment.

The question facing association leaders has changed accordingly. For years the operative question was one of execution: are we running the association well? The forces above replace it with a harder one: are we still relevant, differentiated, and worth choosing?

The six imperatives that follow are the answer to that question. Each one responds to a specific force. Together they describe what it now takes to be chosen, not merely renewed.

The Six Imperatives

The order is deliberate. The imperatives build from the value you offer to the people who pay for it, and the sequence is itself part of the guidance.



Imperative One: Prove Differentiated Value

The first imperative follows directly from the first force. If membership is a choice, the association has to win that choice on the merits, and the merits have to be ones a member cannot find cheaper or faster somewhere else.

For years the value conversation centered on whether members could see the value an association already provided. That framing is no longer enough. Members can see value in plenty of places. Only 12% of associations describe their value proposition as very compelling (MGI, 2026), and when prospective members decline to join, more than a quarter say they simply do not see the return (Higher Logic, 2025). The problem is rarely that the value is hidden. The problem is that it is not distinctive.

The evidence points to where distinctiveness comes from. In a study of more than 2,000 members across 14 associations, the associations members rated as innovative earned markedly higher loyalty, and members judged their association against the alternatives available to them, not against an absolute standard (ASAE Research Foundation, Innovation Impact Study, 2025). Value is relative. It is measured against what else the member could do with the same dollar and the same hour.

Name the two or three outcomes only you can deliver: the ones rooted in your community, your data, your standards, or your standing in the field. Build the value story around them. Retire the generic benefits from the lead of the pitch, since a discount program or a webinar library invites exactly the price comparison you will lose. Then rebuild the proposition by career stage, because what a first-year member cannot get elsewhere differs sharply from what a 20-year member cannot. The stakes here are rising fast: Gen Z and Millennial members together made up 21% of association membership in 2017. Today they make up 36%, and most associations still pitch them the same value story built for members twice their age (MGI, 2026).

> ***Differentiated value is what lets you hold or raise a price. Undifferentiated value is what forces you to defend one.***

Imperative Two: Win the Competition for Attention

If the first imperative is about what you offer, the second is about whether members ever engage with it. Engagement has long been measured in volume: opens, logins, registrations, program counts. That measure mistakes activity for relevance.

The diagnosis reframes the problem. Members are not disengaging because associations run too few programs. They are disengaging because their attention is contested by employers, platforms, and the simple scarcity of time. Engagement is now a competition for attention



against everything else a member could be doing, and the association is often not winning it. Chapter participation makes the point concrete: only 35% of members took part in a chapter program in the past year (Mariner Management and Whorton Research, 2025), even though chapters are where many associations assume their deepest engagement lives.

Shift the engagement strategy from generic participation metrics to behavior-based pathways that move members from passive consumption to active contribution. A member who only reads is a member you can lose quietly. A member who posts, mentors, presents, volunteers, or helps shape a standard has given the association a place in their professional identity that a competitor cannot easily dislodge. Map the specific behaviors that predict retention in your own data, then design deliberate steps that pull members along that path, rather than scattering activity and hoping some of it sticks.

Engagement, done this way, stops being a soft metric. It becomes the leading indicator of whether a member will choose you again. The contribution is the commitment.

Imperative Three: Make Intelligence the Operating System

Last year we treated artificial intelligence and member data as two imperatives. A year of evidence shows they are one. AI without good data produces confident nonsense, and data without AI sits in reports no one reads. The capability that matters is the combination, and most associations do not yet have it.

The gap is foundational. When membership professionals name their biggest operational obstacles, the top three are the same every year: systems that do not talk to each other, data that is incorrect or incomplete, and information scattered across silos (ASI, 2026). Only about 43% say they can easily access their own member data, and very few have a defined plan for using it (ASI, 2026). An association cannot personalize, anticipate, or prove relevance on a foundation it cannot reach.

This matters more now because of Force Three. AI is commoditizing the content and credentials associations have long sold. The defense is not to publish faster than a machine, which is a race associations will lose. It is to do the one thing a general-purpose model cannot: know this member, this field, and this community well enough to deliver something tailored, timely, and trusted. That requires intelligence as an operating system, not a side project.

Fix the foundation before the front end. Integrate the core systems and clean the data first, because AI applied to bad data scales the error. Then point the capability at defense, not just efficiency: personalized guidance, early signals of who is about to lapse, and recommendations that feel like they came from someone who knows the member. The internal use case is real and measurable: among associations already using AI, 79% report gains in staff productivity and 73%



report faster content creation (MGI, 2026). But it is still the smaller prize. Only 9% of associations using AI feel fully ready for what comes next.

> ***Data discipline is no longer back-office hygiene. It is the precondition for staying differentiated in an AI market.***

Imperative Four: Engage the Enterprise

This is the imperative the prior edition missed, and it is the one most likely to define which associations grow in the next decade.

Return to the second force. For professional associations, the employer has become the most prominent influence on whether a member participates (Association Laboratory, 2026), and the member data confirms why: the workplace is the most common place members first discover an association, and a withdrawn employer payment is behind 19% of the members who leave (Higher Logic, 2025). The budget that funds participation, and the manager who approves it, increasingly sit inside the member's organization, not in the member's own wallet.

An association that recruits and renews one individual at a time is fighting that current. Every join is a fresh persuasion, every renewal a fresh risk, and the most important decision-maker, the employer, is never in the conversation. The structural answer is to change the unit of membership from the individual to the organization. Engage the enterprise directly: build organizational and group models, sell to and through employers, and align the association's offer with the workforce outcomes employers are trying to produce.

Done well, this does three things at once. It converts the gatekeeper into a channel, so the employer who once blocked participation now drives it. It stabilizes revenue, because an organizational agreement renews as one durable relationship rather than dozens of fragile ones. And it deepens relevance, because an association embedded in how an employer develops its people is far harder to cut than a line item an individual pays personally.

Start with the employers who already concentrate your membership, the organizations that quietly account for an outsized share of your members, and treat them as accounts rather than as a sum of individuals. Design an enterprise offer around the employer's problems: onboarding, upskilling, retaining their own talent, covering a credential across a whole team. Price it for the organization, not per head. Then build the internal capability to manage those relationships like the strategic accounts they are, since this is the piece that most often goes missing.

The implication is the largest in this report. Enterprise engagement does not just add a revenue line. It moves the association from competing for the individual's discretionary spend, the spend most exposed to every force in the diagnosis, to partnering with the institution that holds the



budget. It is the most direct answer to a membership that has become optional: make the association indispensable to the organization, and individual membership stops being optional in practice.

Imperative Five: Build Resilient Revenue

The fifth imperative inherits a tension the diagnosis left open. Associations face a negative financial outlook, a real risk of funding loss in policy-exposed sectors, and a non-dues revenue problem that has topped the challenge list for years: 61% call it their leading challenge, down only slightly from 65% the year before (Naylor, 2025). The instinct under pressure is to raise dues, and many have. The share of associations increasing dues more than doubled in a year, to 34% (ASAE State of Associations, 2026).

That instinct is where resilience and the rest of this report collide. Raising dues on a membership that has become optional, against members who already cite cost as a top barrier (Higher Logic, 2025), is a short-term fix that can accelerate the long-term problem. The associations that raise prices safely are the ones that did the first imperative first. They earned the increase with differentiated value, rather than asking members to pay more for the same.

Sequence the response across three horizons. Stress-test the budget now against a sudden funding loss, especially where public or federal dollars are in the mix, and know which programs survive if that money disappears. Next, shift the non-dues mix toward revenue that scales without a room full of people, since the most common barriers to growing non-dues income are limited staff capacity (52%) and members' resistance to new costs (50%) (Naylor, 2025), and event-dependent revenue strains both. Longer term, price dues against proven value by segment rather than applying an across-the-board increase, so the members who get the most pay accordingly and the price-sensitive are not driven out.

> ***Revenue resilience is not a finance problem solved in the finance office. It is the downstream result of getting value, engagement, and enterprise relationships right. Diversification buys time. Differentiation is what makes the revenue durable.***

Imperative Six: Design Frictionless Membership

The last imperative is the one that changed least, because it was right, and because the diagnosis only makes it more urgent. If membership is a choice, every point of friction in choosing it is a reason to choose something else.



The barriers members name are mundane and fixable. They did not know the association existed (39%) or found it too expensive to start (34%) (Higher Logic, 2025). The most cited growth playbook in the field is built around removing exactly these obstacles: lower the cost of entry, offer introductory and trial pricing, bundle to raise perceived value, and make paying easy (MGI, 2026). None of this is novel. Much of it still goes undone, though one corner of it is moving fast: the share of associations with no dedicated young-member strategy fell from 20% to 2% in a single year, and mentorship programs nearly doubled, from 27% to 49% (MGI, 2026).

The sharper point is about timing. The riskiest moment in the member relationship is the first year, and the sector average is not a number to trust on its own. Median first-year renewal across the sector is 72%, but that figure blends two very different realities. Trade associations hold onto 82% of first-year members, nearly matching their overall renewal rate. Individual membership organizations, the professional societies whose members choose every year whether to pay again, keep just 61%, and 41% of them see first-year renewal fall below 60% entirely (MGI, 2026). That threshold is not academic: MGI's own data ties first-year renewal below 60% directly to five-year membership decline. In some sectors the gap runs wider still. One medical-society benchmark shows overall retention holding at 81 to 85% while first-year renewal drops to roughly 63% (McKinley Advisors, Medical Society Landscape, 2025). The members most likely to leave are the ones who just arrived, before the value had a chance to land.

Lower the barrier to the first join, particularly for younger and early-career professionals who feel the cost most and discover the association last. Treat the first year as a designed experience, not a waiting period before the first renewal. Onboard deliberately. Deliver an early, concrete win in the first 90 days. Measure first-year renewal as its own number, because it predicts the rest.

Friction removed at the front of the funnel and care invested in the first year do not produce a dramatic headline. They produce the thing every other imperative depends on: members who stay long enough to be worth all the rest.

Where to Start

Six imperatives can read like six more things on an overloaded plate. They are not meant to be tackled at once. They build in a sequence, and that sequence is itself the guidance.

Prove differentiated value first, because every other imperative depends on having something worth choosing. Win the competition for attention and fix the intelligence foundation next, because they decide whether that value reaches anyone and whether you can prove it. Engage the enterprise where your membership concentrates inside employers, since that is where the



largest and most durable growth now sits. Build revenue resilience and remove friction throughout, as the discipline that protects everything else.

> ***The honest first question for any leadership team is not which imperative to chase. It is which force in the diagnosis is hitting you hardest right now, and whether your current plan was built for the world that force describes, or the one that came before it.***

Section 3: Where Do You Stand?

Six imperatives are not six equal claims on your attention. Some will matter more to your association than others, and some are more within reach right now than others. This tool exists to help a leadership team have that conversation with evidence instead of instinct.

For each imperative below, answer the diagnostic question honestly, then score two things: impact and feasibility.

Impact: if this imperative improved significantly in the next 12 months, how much would it change your association's growth trajectory? Score 1 (marginal difference) to 5 (transformative, addresses an existential risk).

Feasibility: given your current staff, budget, data, and board appetite for change, how realistic is meaningful progress in the next 12 months? Score 1 (not realistic without major new investment or a mandate you do not have) to 5 (achievable with current resources and will).

Multiply the two scores for a priority number between 1 and 25. Do this before you read the guide at the end. The scoring is more honest before you know what it is supposed to prove.

Imperative One: Prove Differentiated Value

Can your team name, without hesitation, the two or three outcomes only your association delivers, the ones a member cannot get cheaper or faster somewhere else?

Why it matters: Only 12% of associations call their value proposition very compelling (MGI, 2026).

Your impact score (1–5): _____ *Your feasibility score (1–5): _____* *Priority (impact × feasibility): _____*

Imperative Two: Win the Competition for Attention

Do you know which specific member behaviors predict renewal in your own data, or are you still measuring engagement in opens and logins?

Why it matters: Only 35% of members took part in a chapter program last year (Mariner Management and Whorton Research, 2025), even where chapters are assumed to be the deepest engagement channel.

Your impact score (1–5): _____ *Your feasibility score (1–5): _____* *Priority (impact × feasibility): _____*

Imperative Three: Make Intelligence the Operating System

Can any staff member pull a clean, unified view of a single member's engagement history today, without a special request to IT or a consultant?

Why it matters: Only 43% of associations say they can easily access their own member data (ASI, 2026).

Your impact score (1–5): _____ *Your feasibility score (1–5): _____* *Priority (impact × feasibility): _____*

Imperative Four: Engage the Enterprise

Do you have a priced, sellable offer built for employers, not just a list of the companies whose employees happen to belong?

Why it matters: The workplace is the most common way members discover an association, and a withdrawn employer payment is behind 19% of departures (Higher Logic, 2025).

Your impact score (1–5): _____ *Your feasibility score (1–5): _____* *Priority (impact × feasibility): _____*

Imperative Five: Build Resilient Revenue

If your largest funding source or sponsor disappeared tomorrow, could you name which programs survive within a week?

Why it matters: 61% of associations call non-dues revenue their leading challenge (Naylor, 2025), and the share raising dues more than doubled last year (ASAE State of Associations, 2026).

Your impact score (1–5): _____ *Your feasibility score (1–5): _____* *Priority (impact × feasibility): _____*



Imperative Six: Design Frictionless Membership

Do you track first-year renewal as its own number, separate from your overall renewal rate?

Why it matters: Trade associations retain 82% of first-year members. Individual membership organizations retain just 61%, and 41% of those fall below 60% (MGI, 2026).

Your impact score (1–5): _____ *Your feasibility score (1–5): _____* *Priority (impact × feasibility): _____*

Your Priority Grid

Transfer your six scores here. This is the table a board can read in ninety seconds.

Imperative	Impact (1–5)	Feasibility (1–5)	Priority
One: Prove Differentiated Value			
Two: Win the Competition for Attention			
Three: Make Intelligence the Operating System			
Four: Engage the Enterprise			
Five: Build Resilient Revenue			
Six: Design Frictionless Membership			

How to Read Your Scores

High impact and high feasibility is where you start. This is the work for the next 90 days, not the next planning cycle.

High impact and low feasibility is the one to build a case for. It needs budget, board buy-in, or a capability you do not yet have before it can move. Name what is missing and go get it.

Low impact and high feasibility is a quick win. Worth doing, but do not mistake motion for progress, and do not let it crowd out the harder, higher-impact work.



Low impact and low feasibility can wait. Revisit it next year, not because it does not matter, but because right now it will not move anything.

> ***The imperative with the highest priority score is not automatically the one you should chase first. It is the one you can no longer honestly claim you have not seen.***

Where the Numbers Come From

Every statistic in this report traces to a named source. The list below links to each publisher's report page rather than a specific PDF, since download URLs behind lead-capture forms tend to break. Where a source publishes annually, the link points to the current edition's landing page.

Source (as cited)	Publisher	Report	Year	Link
ASAE Challenges poll	ASAE	Insight Update: Association Challenges	Nov. 2025	asaecenter.org/resources/insight-updates
ASAE State of Associations	ASAE	State of Associations	2026	asaecenter.org, State of Associations release
ASAE Research Foundation, Innovation Impact Study	ASAE Research Foundation	Association Innovation Impact Study	2026	foundation.asaecenter.org
Association Laboratory	Association Laboratory	Looking Forward Impact	2026	associationlaboratory.com
GrowthZone	GrowthZone	12th Annual Association Survey	2026	growthzone.com/2026-annual-association-survey
Higher Logic	Higher Logic	Association Member Experience Report	2025	higherlogic.com

Source (as cited)	Publisher	Report	Year	Link
ASI, the developers of iMIS	Advanced Solutions International (ASI)	Membership Performance Benchmark Report	2026	imis.com/benchmark-report
Mariner Management and Whorton Research	Mariner Marketing & Management, with Whorton Research	Chapter Performance & Benchmarking Report	2025	marinermanagement.com
MGI	Marketing General Incorporated	Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report, 18th ed.	2026	marketinggeneral.com/knowledge-bank/reports
McKinley Advisors, Medical Society Landscape	McKinley Advisors	Medical Society Landscape	2025	mckinley-advisors.com/research-insights
Naylor	Naylor Association Solutions, with Association Adviser	Association Benchmarking Report, 14th ed	2025	naylor.com, 2025 Benchmarking Report

About Sequence Consulting

Sequence Consulting has worked with associations on growth strategy for more than two decades. We were founded in 2001 by Chris and Lisa Vaughan, both former strategy consultants, on a simple premise: association growth deserves the same analytical rigor as corporate growth, applied by people who understand why an association is not a corporation.

We do not sell benchmarks. We use them, alongside client data and direct member research, to make a specific case for what an association should do next and why. This report is built the same way we build client work: evidence first, diagnosis before prescription, recommendations specific enough to act on.

Our Expertise

Four capabilities, used together more often than alone.

Member and Market Research: what members actually value, segmented by career stage, and where that differs from what the association currently offers.

Association Growth Strategies: membership models, pricing, and program design built around a differentiated value proposition rather than a generic one.

Strategic Planning: priorities and focus for a board and staff, built to survive contact with a changing member and funding environment.

Membership Marketing: recruitment, engagement, and renewal campaigns built on the behaviors that actually predict renewal, not just activity counts.

Learn more at sequenceconsulting.com.