

Return to Me

By Catherine Lada

Some membership executives are crooning this phrase to dropped members almost as sweetly as Dean Martin once did-and finding out how to make those members return using exit interviews.

In its simplest form, an exit interview is a structured series of questions that gets to the reasons why members consider leaving your association or let their memberships lapse altogether. Membership sales executives might use the interview questionnaire in person or over the phone. Members might also complete and return a mailed or e-mailed questionnaire.

So what types of questions do these associations ask in their exit interviews? Whether delivered verbally or in writing, here's what to ask:

- **Individual demographic data.** Member name, company, and other information that might individually identify a member is generally optional.
- **Aggregate demographic data.** Asking industry type, employee count, amount of dues paid, length of membership, length of time in business, membership type-whatever is most relevant to your organization-helps you analyze the results.
- **Reason for joining** (given as a list of options the member can select from, to more easily analyze the results).
- **Which activities and programs the member used**-and sometimes how the member rates those services.
- **The reason for dropping the membership.**
- **An open-ended request for comments/feedback.**

The types of questions asked depend to a large degree on the association's goals and its retention plan. Patty Marshall, membership development vice president for the 1,500-member Arlington Chamber of Commerce, Texas, which has a membership staff of two, says, "We started a renewal process about three years ago that we've refined, and it has helped our retention rate significantly."

The Arlington Chamber, Virginia includes an *intent to-renew* form with its invoices, which go in the mail 90 days before memberships expire. Members who intend to renew sign and return the form to the chamber. If members indicate they plan to drop, however, a staff member (sometimes accompanied by one of 22 volunteer ambassadors) calls upon them, either via phone or an in-person meeting, to explore the reasons why and try to retain the member. The member never receives a written questionnaire.

The Arlington Chamber of Commerce has improved its retention rate from 67 percent three years ago to 83 percent today. Marshall attributes much of the chamber's success to dropping the practice of sending a paper or electronic version of the exit interview and working in the series of exit interview questions earlier in the retention process, using this more personal means of delivery.

Debbie Schebe, the director of sales and organizational development at the 2,000-member Greater Richmond Chamber of Commerce, Virginia, on the other hand, has found that a written exit interview questionnaire has been helpful in analyzing the reasons members are giving for leaving her organization and is revamping it to delve into those reasons in a more in-depth way.

After using a paper and then a verbal exit interview questionnaire completed via phone for some years and getting the same three reasons (no money, no time, no value received) why members didn't renew, the Greater Richmond Chamber is now developing an online questionnaire.

"Our questionnaire will be short and simple, and our electronic delivery system ties into the association membership database," says Schebe, "allowing us to group and analyze the results easily." One of the key questions, she says, will ask whether the member participated in any of the chamber's affinity programs or events. "Engaging the member in the association is critical to retention," she asserts. "Our highest cancellation rate is within the first year of membership."

Another question will ask what the association could have offered to make the member renew. The exit interview questionnaire will be go out electronically after the dropped member—generally 90 to 120 days past due—has received a series of phone calls designed to retain them.

So far, says Schebe, the association is on track to realize a 79 percent or better retention rate versus a 70 percent pre-implementation retention rate, a significant accomplishment in an organization whose total membership has varied by approximately 200 members total over the past decade.

Still other associations use their exit interviews to gauge awareness of member benefits, evaluate their programs, and resolve complaints.

Ann Knight, member relations specialist at the 1,100-member Lynchburg Regional Chamber of Commerce, Virginia, says that even though very few have responded to their e-mailed exit interview questionnaire (of more than 60 sent out since September 2003, only nine have responded), that has given her the opportunity to reach out personally and talk about issues. These efforts helped her retain two of the nine dropped members.

"Timing is everything," says Knight. "If I hadn't followed up with those members quickly, we would have lost the opportunity to retain those memberships." In addition to the questionnaire, Knight also uses a series of personal measures, such as phone calls, before sending the survey to members who are 90 to 120 days past due.

Still other associations are considering dropping the use of exit interviews altogether. The 570-member Southlake Chamber of Commerce, Texas, which sees a very low response rate to its exit interview questionnaire (sent inside its drop letter to members at 120 days past due), is reconsidering the practice. "Along the way, we ask members why they aren't paying their invoices," says Giovanna Philips, chamber president. "We get actionable data through phone calls and visits and address those issues as we discover them." By the time the member is at 120 days past due, she says, there is nothing further that can be gained from an exit interview.

Vickie Loria, director of membership at the 700-member Bethany-Fenwick Area Chamber of Commerce, Delaware, has a similar sentiment. Loria has found that she usually knows a member's reason for dropping long before she sends a questionnaire. However, her organization still uses the exit interview to formally track year-end results, though she says the number one reason members checked for dropping is *no reason*. Budget cuts, going out of business, and finding no benefit in membership round out the top four reasons cited for not renewing membership in the organization.

The exit interview questionnaires identified in this article can be found online at <http://www.acce.org/networking/sampleinterviews.asp>.

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