

# The Ultimate Membership Renewal Guide

Practical tips and tactics for small membership organizations on how to engage and delight your members and send membership renewal rates to the stars.



# If You Are Looking for Ideas to Refresh Your Membership Renewal Process, You're Not Alone!

Running a successful non-profit, club, or association is impossible without passionate and active members. It's tough enough to find and recruit new members, but it can be even harder to keep them engaged and delighted. People are busy and forgetful, and paying annual membership dues can be inconvenient and low on the most well-intentioned member's priority list.

But having an engaged and growing membership is key to any non-profit, club, or association that wants to make a meaningful impact on people's lives – or the world.

**In this guide,** you'll learn why consistent membership renewals are critical for a healthy and impactful organization. We're going to teach you step by step how to build out or improve your organization's membership renewal process. This guidance is all informed by survey data that we will unpack to reveal the best renewal practices used by small membership organizations.



# About the Data in This Guide...

Wild Apricot receives thousands of questions about membership renewals from small to large-sized organizations every year. So, we decided to conduct an extensive survey on the renewal practices of thousands of organizations across North America. We combined the results from that survey with research conducted by the [Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report](#) and other sources to create this helpful guide.

In brief, here are some important details about the types of organizations we surveyed to create the Wild Apricot Membership Renewal Survey:

Respondents were predominantly membership organizations with 250 to 2,000 members.

The member renewal cycle of organizations was:

- 64%: static/annual renewal (all members renew on the same date)
- 36%: rolling renewal (members renew on their own anniversary date)
- 82% of organizations offered automated "self-service" renewal procedures

The renewal process was managed by:

- Staff – 50%
- Volunteers – 37.5%
- Combination of Staff & Volunteers – 12.5%

You can see [the full results from our survey here](#).

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# Why Do Healthy Membership Renewals Matter?

Starting or growing a thriving membership is hard work and takes a lot of time. How many of the following challenges do you struggle with as you try to delight new members and keep current members renewing year after year?

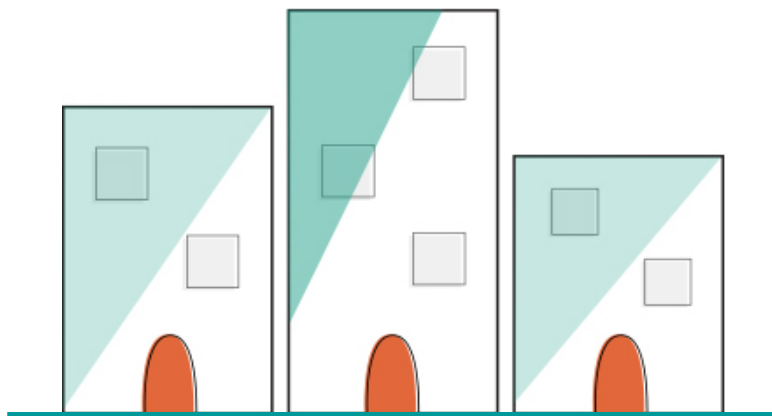
- ☹️ *Constantly adding, managing and updating member records in your database by hand*
- ☹️ *Struggling to create or improve your website to help members find information and connect*
- ☹️ *Informing and reminding members to renew their membership on time*

If you haven't found a way to overcome the things preventing your membership from renewing, it's likely your organization suffers from weak membership engagement and unsustainable revenue flow. Its very survival may be at risk.

Improving membership renewal rates ensures your organization stays healthy and grows, which for you means:

- 😊 *Spending less time doing admin work and more time welcoming and engaging members*
- 😊 *Retaining happy members year over year and capturing consistent renewal revenue*
- 😊 *Effectively meeting members' needs via mobile wherever they are and growing your ranks*

If you are looking for ideas to refresh your membership renewal process, you're not alone! And if you don't have a renewal process at all, by the end of this guide you'll be able to create one from scratch. **So let's get to it!**



## Show Your Members How They Benefit

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What are the benefits for members that renew their membership? Do your members know what these benefits are? Have you told them lately that you love them?

**Focusing on membership renewal rates isn't a once-a-year endeavor.** It's a crucial and ongoing endeavor. Delivering the value that your membership expects to receive from paying their dues shows that you honor the rule of reciprocity and motivates members to keep their memberships active and in good standing.

So how to help your members see the value they are getting from their membership?

One way we've seen this done by conducting annual or biannual member surveys requesting feedback on how your organization is doing, and what additional benefits your membership wants to see in the future.

Clearly identify the benefits that your members already receive and frame this value in your communications using two key questions:

1. *What did the organization do for members this past year?*
2. *What did members do for the organization this past year?*

In addition to making members aware of the benefits available to them, another way to maximize your renewals is by delivering impeccable member service.

Here's some questions to help you identify the level of service you are providing your membership:

- *Are you inspiring your members to reach their personal goals?*
- *Are you not only listening to, but addressing concerns?*
- *Do you value your members input?*
- *Are you working on solutions before problems arise?*
- *Do you know at least 60% of your members by name?*
- *Are you planning a member appreciation event?*

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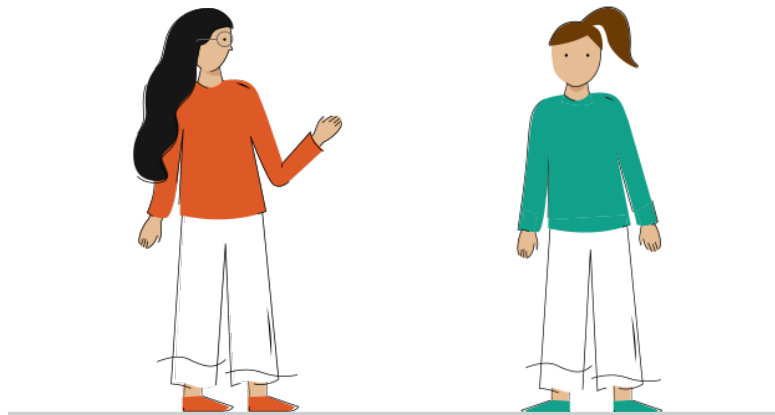
Check out our guide [12 Practical Ways to Engage and Retain Members in Today's World](#) for more tips on engaging and retaining members.

## Make Participation in Your Organization Memorable and Meaningful

Of course, once you're sure you are offering valuable member benefits, you need to keep your members informed to ensure they stay engaged and continue to participate. One way to do this is to implement 'new member' mentoring system.

Assign a seasoned member to provide 1on1 coaching or assistance to a new member to welcome them and help them feel comfortable with the organization, the community, how important things are done, and what to expect. An onboarding buddy program can go a long way to helping new members bond with existing members, participate and get a lot of value from their membership.

It is no surprise that members who are the most engaged tend to renew most often. The 2019 Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report found that 83% of associations reporting increases in member renewals over the past year have a tactical engagement plan in place.



## How to Start Improving the Renewal Process

When starting the renewal process, most organizations begin sending notices one or two months prior to expiration. If you're deciding on when to start the renewal process, here are three tips that can help you out:

1. **Look at historical renewal data:** When have you received the most renewals in the past? For example, did most members renew right away after you sent the first notice? If so, your timing may be working. If you are on a static or annual renewal schedule and find members take 1-2 months to renew, you may need to start the renewal process earlier.
2. **Consider an online survey:** If you're just getting started, have no historical data, or just think it's time to check in ask your members what their preferences are, you can use an online survey. Sending one out through your website, via email, or on your Facebook page is a terrific way to understand what your members expect from your organization.
3. **Take a longer view:** If you're sending out invoices or notices just prior to the membership expiration date, consider creating an ongoing year-round membership connection campaign.

Regardless of when you start the renewal process, one thing is clear: keep your membership database up-to-date. Sending timely and relevant renewal messages to your members showcases your organization's diligence and attention to detail.

If you are maintaining a manually updated member database, consider asking members to occasionally update their online information.



## Section 05:

# Don't Forget: Be Kind, Please Remind!

If you're only sending out one notice or an invoice, but aren't finding this too successful, it may be time to consider additional renewal notices. Think about varying your communications methods and messages as suggested below.

From the survey data, we discovered that between two to three renewal reminders are most commonly used by non-profit organizations.

As a general rule of thumb, we found organizations are okay with sending continued reminders as long as the revenue generated from dues outweighs the cost of sending the reminders (time, money, annoyed members, etc.).



## Find the Right Channel to Deliver Your Message

The three most popular channels for sending out membership renewal notices are email, direct mail, and phone.

It's interesting to note that phone is still in the mix. In fact, the Marketing Benchmarking Report found that associations with the highest renewal rates employed phone calls as part of the process.

Finding the best way to use each channel, in what combination, and how to time and target your messaging depends on two main factors:

### 1. Is your renewal cycle annual or rolling?

Do your members renew annually at the same time every year, or does each member renew on their own rolling anniversary date? With annual cycles, you need to reach every member simultaneously – which means you might want to employ a multi-channel approach to ensure you get each member's attention. For rolling renewals, you can set up (and test) a series of communications and send these automatically to each member based on their anniversary date.

### 2. How do you members prefer to receive communications?

If the majority of your membership is engaged and responsive, email can be a great communication channel to use. If you have a membership base that prefers to receive and respond primarily to direct mail, you may need to focus your efforts on a mail campaign, possibly with telephone follow-up.

Use the insights from your membership survey and any data analytics (click rates, open rates, click through rates, click to open rates) from your email platform to help you choose the best channels for your organization.

## Set up a Multi-Channel Strategy From Scratch

Renewal management newcomers might want to consider the following multi-channel approach (resources permitting) – in this order:

1. **Email renewal notification:** If you offer online renewal and payment processing, your initial renewal reminder would be via email – with a link to and clear instructions on the online renewal process.
2. **Reminder letter via mail:** Next, for those who do not renew after the first email notice, you could send a direct mail letter. Depending on your processes, this letter might include an invoice and also offer instructions for optional online renewal and payment (e.g., include the URL).
3. **A phone call:** A phone call from staff and/or volunteers can be a powerful final step for those members who have not renewed after the first two notices. This offers an opportunity for your staff, board members or renewal/recruitment volunteers to address the member's questions or reservations first-hand.

If your renewal cycle is an annual one – where all members renew at the same time – you can also consider including renewal reminders in other communications vehicles, such as:

- *Online or print publications: try e-newsletters, mailed newsletters or magazines*
- *Your website: include a message on your home page and/or members-only area*
- *Direct mail: send a postcard to all members with instructions for online renewal*

## Section 08:

# Reinforce Recurring Membership Renewals with Gratitude

The renewal process isn't complete until you've acknowledged and thanked each member for their renewal payment. This is an important final step.

Your renewal communications, including the thank-you email or letter are part of an ongoing, year-round membership communications continuum – with consistent key messaging of gratitude and appreciation for their continued involvement and support.

While renewal reminders may talk about accomplishments, your grateful follow-up might include details of upcoming activities or issues that demonstrate the value of the membership and prompt ongoing participation.



Many organizations set up automated "thank you" pages and receipts for online renewals, others send personalized "thank you" letters in the mail. Experiment and find the right method for your organization and membership base.

## Section 09:

# Use Incentives and Discounts to Nudge Punctual Renewals

The Marketing Benchmarking Report found that associations that offer an early renewal discount were more likely to see an increase in renewal rates over the past year.

In addition, they found that associations with renewal rates of 80% or higher were significantly more likely to provide an installment renewal plan, with monthly or quarterly payment options.



Another idea we've seen work well to encourage on-time renewals are contests. Here's an idea for a contest that I saw on a professional association's website. The full contest promo piece appeared in the "Members Only" section of their website and when it was live (ahead of their annual membership date), it counted down to the organization's annual renewal deadline.

Whichever strategy you try, our top advice is to test its effectiveness. Don't implement an early bird discount incentive if you find it's not actually worth the return on investment, or that people aren't taking advantage of it. The point is to find something that works for your members.

## Section 10:

# Create a Clear Internal Policy on Grace Periods

A grace period is an agreed period of time, following the membership expiration date, after which if fees are not received the membership is considered lapsed or terminated. Most organizations surveyed implement a two-month grace period for their members.

If you're wondering whether you should implement a grace period, there are a number of factors involved with deciding on the optimum time frame. The real issue comes down to whether you continue to offer member benefits – such as admittance to member education, events, access to proprietary information or publications, etc. – or whether these benefits are denied until membership fees are received. It's a delicate balancing act between trying to keep existing members and bring back lapsed members while ensuring you're not short-changing paying members.



When deciding on your grace period policies, consider looking at the average lapsed time for renewals and/or the actual success rate for reinstatement of lapsed members. You might also do some discreet investigation into whether members are aware of your existing grace period and whether this encourages some to postpone payment.

# Wild Apricot Automates Membership Renewals and Reminders for You

One of the biggest complaints membership managers have is how much time it takes to process member renewals by hand. Fortunately, software exists to completely automate renewals, so you never have to lift a finger again.

It's called membership management software and it does much more than just automate renewals.

[Membership Management Software](#) is an all-in-one solution for any type of membership organization. It completely automates new member and event registrations, website updates, database updates, finances, newsletter emails, and more.

Wild Apricot has been refining our [membership management software](#) for more than ten years and is being used right now by more than 27,586 nonprofit organizations. Some of our customers save up to 20 hours a week in administrative work.

With Wild Apricot you never have to worry about outdated, inaccurate, or duplicate database entries. Plus you can automate the whole renewal process, from collecting and processing dues online, to automatically sending out email reminders.

If you are using Wild Apricot's [automated renewals](#), you can set up customized emails, varying the message in each communications piece and automatically following up with a thank you email to any members that decide to renew.

*"As our club grew from the 60's to in excess of 150 members and the need to collect dues and establish membership categories arose, it became very hard to manage everything with the paper system we had been using. Wild Apricot solved all that perfectly."*

**- Fred Finney, Vistoso Cyclists**



# Start Your Free 30-Day Trial Now

Wild Apricot is the #1 rated MMS (as rated by Capterra). You can start a free, 30-day trial of Wild Apricot today (no credit card required) by visiting [www.wildapricot.com](http://www.wildapricot.com)

If you have any questions during your trial, or if you'd like to learn more about whether Wild Apricot is the right solution for you, get in touch with our coaches at [coaches@wildapricot.com](mailto:coaches@wildapricot.com)

You can also join our free online Boot Camp to become an expert in Wild Apricot in just five days. This series of five 60-minute webinars will show you how to add members, create events, set up payments, and much more. [Click here to learn more](#) and sign up.

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