

# ENGAGING YOUR LONG DISTANCE MEMBERSHIP

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*How can you utilize long distance members and ensure they are active in your community? In today's world, members can come from all corners of the globe. As society leaders, we need to be prepared no matter where our members live.*

## **Inactive Participation**

The key to understanding – and addressing – the distance memberships in your organization may be in identifying who they really are. Loosely defined as any member that “inactively participates” as a distance member may be a good place to start. Inactive participation can happen in a variety of ways. Perhaps their geographic distance prevents them from participating in person, or they are a member who consistently renews, but never attends a meeting or event.

Some of these members are easier to identify than others, but having the awareness of this demographic can prove to be incredibly important.

Seeing the individual in the crowd of members can sometimes be challenging. As a general rule, society leaders make decisions for the greater good. By understand your overall group demographics, you can make those decisions in an informed way.

Breaking down the membership roster into statistics may help you to see clearly when big decisions loom. Think of your membership in terms of the following categories:

- What is a “typical” member vs. an “atypical” member?
- What does an active member look like in your organization?

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“I define member engagement as the following: Engagement is the result of a member investing time or money with the association in exchange for **value.**”

~ David Gammel

This session is intended to be an interactive discussion. Please join the conversation both during the lecture and online!

- Just because they are active, does not mean they are necessarily engaged on all levels. Are your members functioning from routine and habit, or are they truly eager to participate?
- What are the general demographics for your society? Age, sex, experience level, and so on.

When we as genealogists need to understand the overall demographics of a certain group of people, where do we usually turn first? Census records! It may be time to take a census of your society, so put on your enumerator hat, and grab a pencil!

Build your census questionnaire around the 5 key inquiries of journalism: who, what, when, where, and why.

1. Who do you want to get to know?
2. What do you need to know about them?
3. Where are they in the world, and where are they within the society?
4. Why are they members?
5. When did they join, and how long can you retain them in your community?

### **Why focus on this demographic of the “unengaged?”**

The simple truth is, without members, our organizations cease to exist. We need our members – all of our members – to have a healthy, thriving community. Finding routes to this untapped resource may prove to be vital for the future of your organization.

With the connections we now all have available to us online, it is feasible that you could have members from around the globe. It also means that the members you have close to home may no longer feel they need to attend regular meetings or society events. There is more to “engaging long distance members” than just geography; we need to be thinking about all kinds of distance: geographical, mental, and emotional factors can all play a role.

The reasons to attract these members are numerous, here are just a few:

- They provide an added value to your society; to its reach and depth.
- They each come to the organization with a unique background, unique skill set, and unique point of view.
- Long term development and growth can hinge on these members, and how they interact as you try new programming and benefits.

- The world’s population is increasingly connected. Shouldn’t your society also be connected using one of the best marketing tools? Word of mouth remains powerful.

### **What is “engagement?”**

Membership investment comes to us in a variety of forms, just like our members do. What does it mean to the individual to be “engaged?” Their idea of participating may be quite different than yours, but it is important to remember that it is *their perception of engagement* that really matters. A member that is actively engaged with your society Facebook page may think of themselves as an active member of the organization, even if they have never attended a meeting.

When considering new ideas and programs to captivate your membership, stay attuned to:

- What is the ROI for the individual member?
- What is the impact of having access to the organization, both physically and virtually?
- What are the various channels the society has provided in order to give its members the freedom of choice?

### **Identifying their needs – and the societies’**

Taking the time to evaluate who your membership is, and why they are members, allows you to develop your target audience. Keeping that group consistently in focus when planning new events or projects will ensure that your distance members are always considered. Even if, after analysis, you determine that your target audience is your core members that are highly engaged; this process allows you to develop priorities on all levels of members within the organization.

In this vein, consider a SWOT analysis as a potential next step for your organization.

### **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats**

The SWOT Analysis can be an enlightening and effective tool for understanding your organization, and to uncover opportunities that you may want to explore. By understanding both your strengths and weaknesses, you can manage and eliminate concerns before they become issues.

Strengths: consider the advantages to the organization – what do you have that no one else does? What do you do better than anyone else?

Weaknesses: What *can* you improve as well as what *should* you improve? What factors cause members to leave the organization, or to not participate in an event? What are potential members most likely to see as weaknesses?

Opportunities: What opportunities can you easily spot – the “low hanging fruit”? What trends are you aware of, and what research could you conduct to identify those trends? How can you utilize changes in technology, government policy – both local and national – lifestyle changes of your target demographics, and so on?

Threats: What obstacles do you face? What are your competitors doing? Do you have financial concerns that need to be addressed? Are you losing members faster than you are gaining them? Could any of these threats seriously threaten the life of your organization?

When using SWOT as a tool, it’s good to remember a few best practices:

- Only accept precise, verifiable statements.
- Ruthlessly prune long lists of factors and prioritize them.
- Make sure that the conversation does not end with the analysis – this should result in action plans and changes to processes.
- Apply change at the right level within the organization – be specific with tasks and follow through.

There are numerous online resources to assist in the SWOT Analysis process. MIndTools ([mindtools.com](http://mindtools.com)) has a detailed article on the steps, and additional tools to utilize, including free templates and worksheets.

The bottom line is, membership in and interacting with a genealogy society is at its very essence, *emotional*. Family history is emotional, so too is our genealogy community.

- Provide excellent customer service to all of your members.
- Generate interest and community by engaging in a discussion in your virtual space.
- Send a personal email, eCard, or just pick up the phone to say “thank you.”
- Recognize their anniversary with the society, or other special event.
- Acknowledge their contributions – no matter how small – in all of your public forums, so they are sure to see it.