
Membership Marketing – It's More than Magazines

By Shira Linden

Membership marketing is not new. The American Medical Association was founded in 1847, while the Marine Corps Association was formed in 1913, to cite a few examples. But membership marketing seems to be gaining traction in today's marketplace.

The world's largest circulation magazine

Yes, it's AARP, The Magazine, which arrives at 24 million households each month. According to Lin MacMaster, Director of Membership Development for AARP, the magazine is a tangible benefit, but it plays a supporting role in providing information to help individuals age with grace and dignity and lead purposeful lives. MacMaster believes people are joining for the full array of benefits.

She states that the main benefits of membership include being part of a force of over 36 million Americans who are attempting to remain healthy and live life the way they want to live it, navigating the waters as life changes. Founded in 1958, AARP is a huge advocacy organization on both the federal and state levels, says MacMaster.

The organization has three divisions – a foundation, a non-profit and AARP Services, a for-profit division where AARP partners with insurance companies and other providers, delivering unique benefits to members. Membership costs \$12.50 annually; two and three year memberships are also available. According to MacMaster, the AARP card has a high perceived value and is frequently used to obtain discounts.

AARP The Magazine is not available by subscription, but does have some distribution in doctors' offices. Associate members (those under 50) can get the magazine as well. While the magazine offers feature articles, news is covered in the AARP Bulletin, a full-color newspaper. Both accept advertising. AARP also offers members free e-newsletters on an array of topics, including caregiving, health, wellness and financial well-being.

Segmenting the Market

Currently, AARP is moving away from a mass approach to acquisition to a segmented approach. They are mailing their control packages less – a standard package and a snap pack - and testing packages to specific groups. Rather than what MacMaster refers to as the pu pu platter approach (something for everyone) AARP has been testing topics that resonate with the 50-59 year-old segment including caregiving, financial security and health and wellness.

They are also tweaking language and offers, testing formats and messaging, and experimenting with information offers and premiums and freemiums tied to their value proposition (Tips for financial well-being, Tips for Turning 50, pedometers). Over the

last two years AARP has also done a lot of channel testing utilizing the web, AdvoSystems, FSIs, radio and TV that is showing promise.

Getting Promotional

As for renewals, AARP uses a 7-effort series. They are testing shorter and longer versions as well as different messages to different audiences (first time renewal versus longstanding member) and trying more promotionally based offers tied to longer terms. On their website, I noticed a "Win-Win Membership Sweepstakes" for a 16-day expedition and cruise to Antarctica. Renewals are also handled via their customer care calls for those who call in. AARP is looking to the web and all member touch points for additional renewal opportunities.

MCA - Membership with a Mission since 1913

The Marine Corps Association is the professional organization for all Marines—active duty, Reserve, retired, and Marine veterans. Annual membership costs \$21 for enlisted and \$32 for officers, and will be going up in April. MCA publishes not one but two monthly magazines – Leatherneck – Magazine of the Marines and Marine Corps Gazette. Both accept advertising. Bill Hughs, Director of Marketing, indicates Leatherneck offers more general interest/news while the Gazette is a professional journal, covering issues that face Marines every day. Members get a choice of magazines, and some take both. The magazines are available to non-members with 1775 current non-member subscribers.

MCA puts out 4,400 issues as single copies at base exchanges, MCA bookstores and kiosk stands inside some commissaries. The magazines are also available at the Quantico Amtrak station and other newsstands near bases. MCA currently does catalog marketing and finds 67% of their retail sales are from members, who enjoy a 10% discount on catalog products.

An Association in Flux

Almost 90,000 members strong, the association is currently reorganizing, evaluating whether the magazines are their main raison d'être. Hughs states that members perceive the magazines are the main benefit. E-newsletters are also sent out to members. The membership card does not have a high perceived value, he says, as the association has not adequately promoted the other benefits which include retail discounts and travel, to name a few.

Hughs stated that MCA is taking another look at lists, affinity partnerships, positioning, segmentation and messaging. They will do research, focus groups and talk to members. Currently, 62% of their membership is over 40, and they need to do a better job of reaching younger Marines (Generation X). Hughs believes this is

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because they've been using directive language in their messaging, and Gen X is not receptive to this approach. Hughs plans to change the creative, relaunch the magazine and review the renewal and expire programs to increase their membership base.

The Good Sam – a For-Profit Association for RVers

According to Sue Bray, The Good Sam Club offers a valuable package of benefits that promote the RV lifestyle. A membership survey reveals the campground discount is the top benefit, while the magazine, *Highways*, is next and their web-based trip routing service is third. Other benefits include Good Sam events and member-to-member online forums. Bray is unsure if the membership card has a high perceived value. Membership costs \$25/year for the basic dues.

Highways is a monthly magazine which accepts outside advertising. The club also markets branded Good Sam products, such as the Good Sam Continued Service Plan, which protects members against paying huge repair bills should something go awry in their rig.

Reaching Boomers through Ads, Direct Mail, Point of Sale

Good Sam is in the mail about once a month, always testing new formats. Direct mail is their main source, but they also test E-mail marketing and send an E-newsletter to members. Their DM control is a #10 envelope 4-5 page letter, response device and membership decal. Bray says that people like the decal. They have also succeeded with a member get a member campaign. Good Sam Club utilizes a 9-effort renewal series and maintains the same offer throughout the series.

The association also sells memberships at campgrounds, RV shows and camping stores, as well as through *Life and MotorHome* magazines. As a result of their outreach efforts, the association has been growing 1-2% per year and keeping pace with the market.

"Baby boomers getting into the RV lifestyle have helped fuel this growth," said Bray. While Good Sam is a mature organization that's been around for 40 years, they are always trying to improve and provide an enhanced benefit package to members.

The World's Largest Affinity Lifestyle Membership Company

Such is the claim of the North American Membership Group (NAMG) established in 1978. NAMG is a for-profit company that combines membership, publishing and merchandise marketing. The North American Hunting Club was first, followed by the North American Fishing Club, the Handyman Club, the National Home Gardening Club, the PGA Tour Partners Club, the Cooking Club of America, the National Health & Wellness Club, the Creative Home Arts Club, The History Channel Club and the National Street Machine Club. NAMG has 10 clubs in all, with 10 magazines, reaching more than 4.7 million active enthusiasts and 21.8 million readers.

The company maintains that NAMG's magazines achieve something that newsstand publications cannot – a deeper reader

relationship with unmatched interaction between writers, editors, and member readers.

Member benefits include

- Full-color magazine delivered 6 to 8 times a year
- Member-only interactive web sites with information archives, bulletin boards, event calendar, weekly polls, trivia contests
- Opportunities to test/keep products related to the club's lifestyle
- Giveaways of products, services and travel
- Member-to-member forums and informational support
- Special information resource directories
- Exclusive product purchasing opportunities
- Member-only events, competitions and contests
- Discount opportunities on selected products and services

Cooking Club of America – A Closer Look

In addition to *Cooking Pleasures* magazine, members enjoy free product testing privileges, free recipe cards, cooking school discounts, menu ideas, a recipe reprint service, and more.

While bind-ins invite members to join, renew or give the gift of membership at \$2.00 a month (\$24 annually) with a hard offer, an online offer solicits members for a "Free No-Risk Trial Membership for 30 days."

Those who sign up for the free trial receive a Thank You package in a #10 window envelope with a brochure extolling the benefits of membership, a letter indicating they have already received the first issue of *Cooking Pleasures*, and a perf-off Membership Dues Invoice for \$12.00 for 12 months.

A 4-color bucksliip invites prospective members to receive a free multipurpose grater (a \$20.00 value) by returning the bucksliip with their payment. Prospects are enticed with the possibility of winning free kitchen utensils, gourmet food, and more. The website indicates that 84% of each year's dues is for one year of *Cooking Pleasures*.

Smart Marketing

Remember when a credit card was merely a plastic card issued by a bank authorizing payment for purchases? Now, many are portals to a world of benefits ranging from airline miles to merchandise points. So, too, membership marketers provide added value by offering magazines PLUS an array of services (and sometimes an entire community) that tie members more closely to their brand and promote loyalty. Now that's smart marketing! **SM**

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