

rottmancreative
The membership people.

The Future of Membership

Building Members in an Era That Sells Subscriptions

The ***Problem***

Association leaders know the pattern. Renewal starts to soften. Engagement falls off. New members never quite find their footing. The team has a harder time explaining why membership matters. *None of this is new*. The details vary from one association to another. The pattern does not.

What has changed is how members judge the relationship with an association. The subscription economy gives people a familiar test for recurring payments:

Did I use this enough to pay for it again?

That question now follows them into membership.

That is why an association can still hit its numbers this year while the relationship beneath them gets weaker. Members join but participate less. They receive the benefits but struggle to explain the value. Keeping them engaged requires more reminders, more campaigns, and more effort every year. A long history, an important mission, and a strong calendar of benefits may no longer settle the question.

We call it the **Subscription Trap**. It shows up at four points associations tend to manage separately: join, onboarding, engagement, and renewal. Internally, those moments may belong to different departments, budgets, and goals. To a member, they are one continuous relationship.

When that relationship weakens, the problem is not one stage of the journey. It is the journey itself. Associations can strengthen membership by connecting those moments around **one continuous member relationship**, one that gives people a reason to join, renew, and belong.



The Old Assumptions **No Longer Hold**

Association membership was built for a world in which belonging to a profession and belonging to its institutions were closely linked. The association was where practitioners found the field: *its standards, trusted knowledge, colleagues, and collective voice.* Joining wasn't simply a purchase. For many people, it was part of becoming and remaining a professional.

The world around that model has changed. A practitioner can find an answer on Google, compare notes in a LinkedIn group, and build a professional network without going through an association. Information, connection, time, attention, and money all face new competition. Membership now arrives as *one choice among many*. People can value an association's work without making membership part of their professional identity. Modern professionals are much more selective about where they participate.

The old operating model treats "we've been around for over fifty years" as a value proposition. The old thinking says that professional affiliation with an association carries weight on its own. It assumes that joining leads to continued participation and, in turn, that renewal will remain normal unless something goes wrong. Those assumptions are no longer safe.







The Pressure **Is Already Visible in the Data**

Only **11%** of respondents to Marketing General Incorporated's (MGI's) *2025 Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report* described their association's value proposition as very compelling. That figure fell from 13% in each of the prior two reports. Another 46% described their value proposition as compelling.[1]

The financial pressure is just as plain. ASAE's summary of its *2026 State of Associations* report stated that nearly 39% of CEOs reported financial decline, while 10% reported improvement.[2] In a separate 2025 pulse poll, 31.9% of the 257 responding association and association management company (AMC) leaders named membership retention and engagement as their leading challenge.[3]

These figures show pressure on value, finances, and engagement, though they don't establish a common cause. Behind the percentages are familiar conversations: a budget that no longer stretches, a renewal rate that needs defending, and a team being asked to explain membership more clearly than before.

In January 2026, we argued in our *Top 7 Membership Trends* report that membership and subscription perceptions were blurring, newer members were entering with more transactional expectations, and AI was making basic information easier to obtain.[4] The latest sector data gives association leaders more reason to take those patterns seriously.

The sector is trying to hold revenue, retention, and relevance while the people it serves approach membership differently.




Membership and subscription
perceptions are ***blurring.***

Members *Versus* ***Subscribers***

The Relationship **Shapes the Decision**

Membership and subscription are different *relationships*, even when people use the same word for both. A Netflix subscription, a gym membership, and an association membership all renew, provide access, and ask for another payment. The label no longer tells people how to judge the relationship. A relationship describes what happens between the person and the institution. A *mindset* describes how the person sees that relationship, judges its value, and decides what to do next.

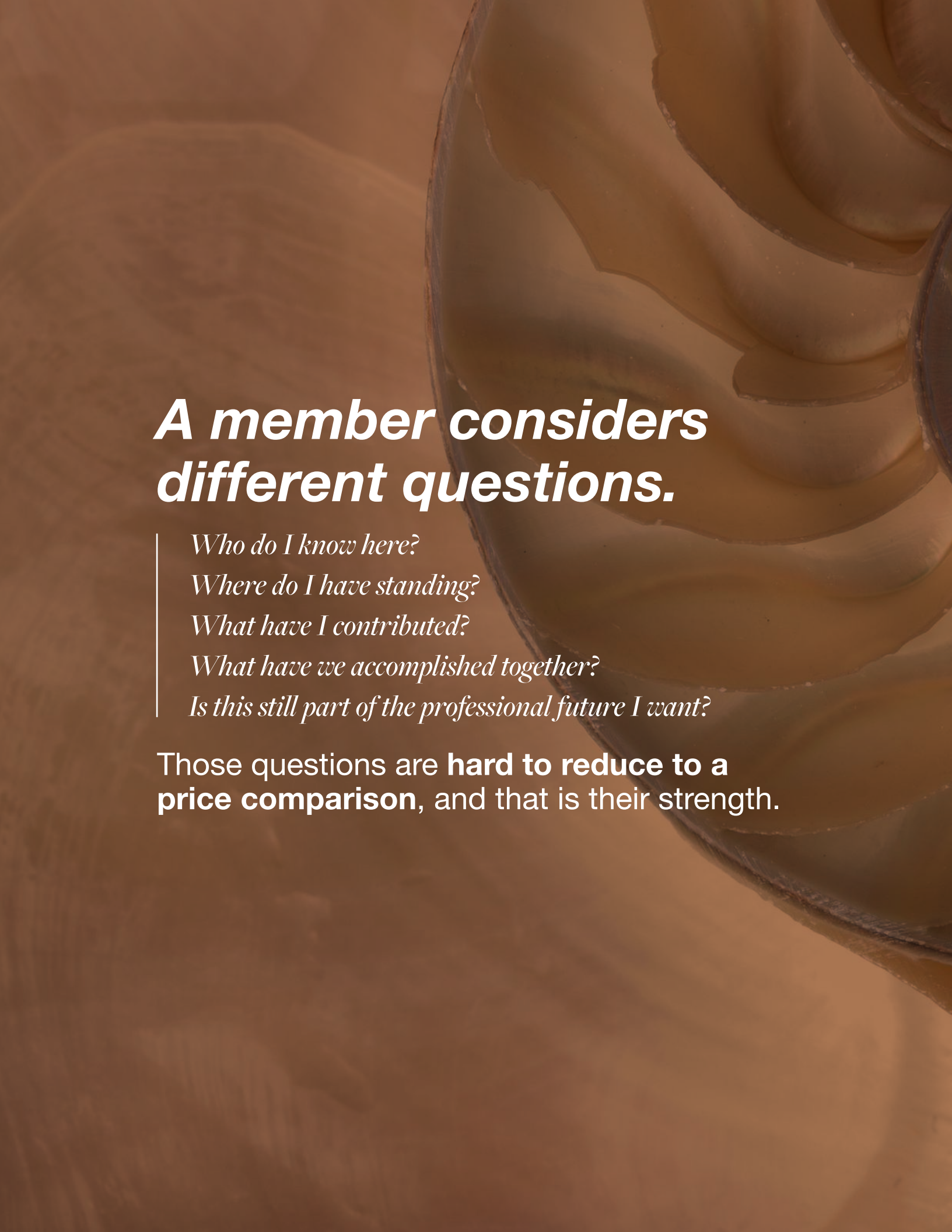
A member is someone who sees themselves in the association's story. A subscriber is a member without a story.

A subscription places the provider and customer on opposite sides of the exchange. The provider supplies value, the customer uses it, and renewal depends on whether the next payment feels worthwhile. Membership has another possibility. The people who pay for association membership can also bring judgment, trust, experience, and effort into the institution. **They receive value and create it for one another.** Their participation can increase what the association knows, represents, and accomplishes.

Practical value still matters. Members need useful education, sound research, responsive service, responsible pricing, and easy access. But practical value sits inside a larger judgment.

In one study of 824 health care professional association members, dues value and attitude toward the association predicted renewal intentions. Personal benefits were linked to recommendation intentions, but the study did not find a statistically significant link to renewal intentions.[5] Benefits alone do not explain the whole decision.





A member considers different questions.

Who do I know here?
Where do I have standing?
What have I contributed?
What have we accomplished together?
Is this still part of the professional future I want?

Those questions are **hard to reduce to a price comparison**, and that is their strength.

Mindsets Can Change

Member and subscriber aren't fixed types of people. A person's behavior can move between the two relationships, and their mindset can change with it.

Joining for practical reasons can become durable membership. The person meets trusted peers, finds a role, and sees their experience matter to others. What began as access becomes identity and participation.

The movement can also go the other way.

A committed member can spend a year receiving offers, benefit inventories, platform notices, and deadlines. Nothing dramatic has to happen. The repeated frame changes the questions the person asks.

The *member mindset* asks what it means to remain part of the institution.

The *subscriber mindset* asks whether the available products were used enough to warrant another year.

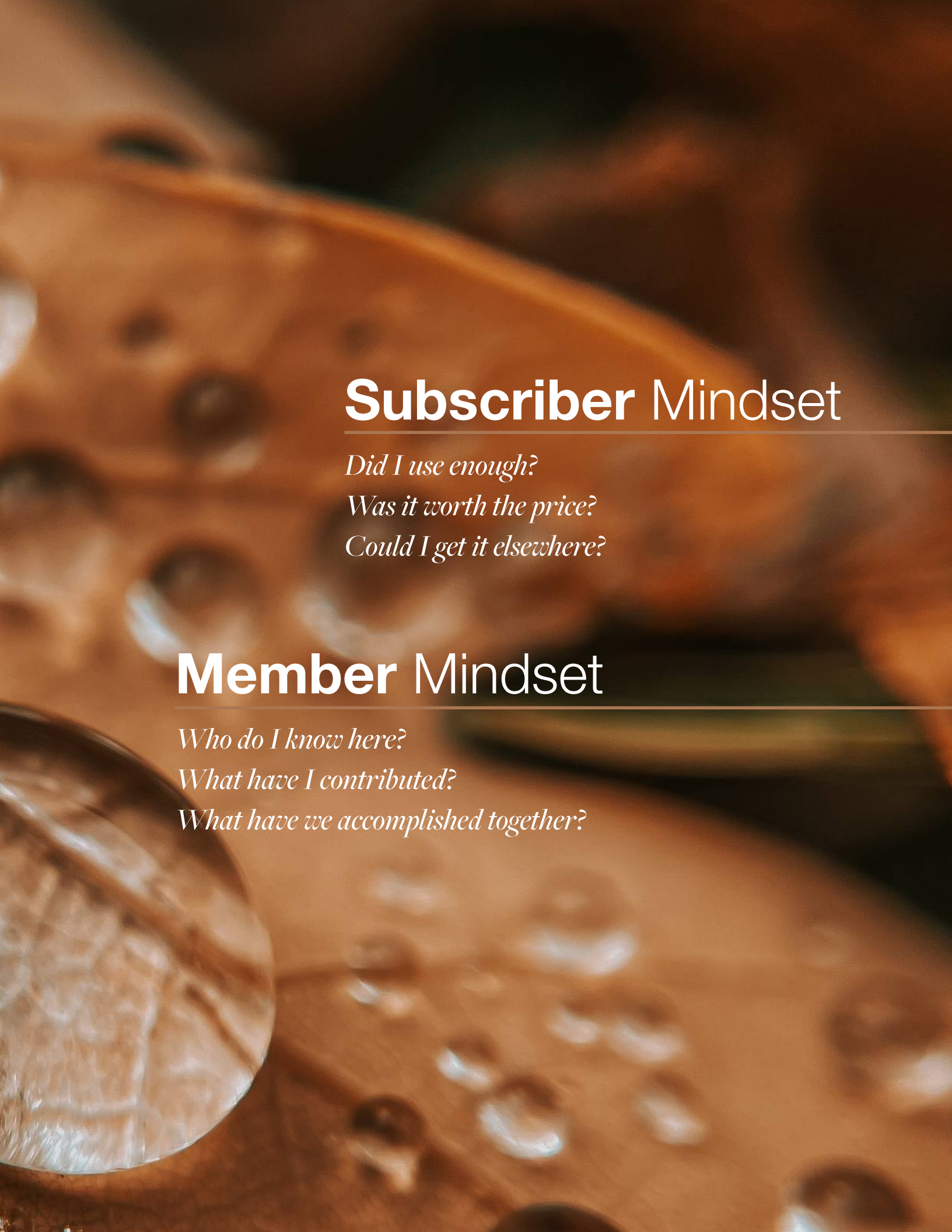
Recurring access gives the subscriber mindset a familiar method of evaluation. But access doesn't create that mindset alone. Messaging, onboarding, engagement roles, service design, measures, and renewal all reinforce it.

The relationship changes through **accumulated signals.**









Subscriber Mindset

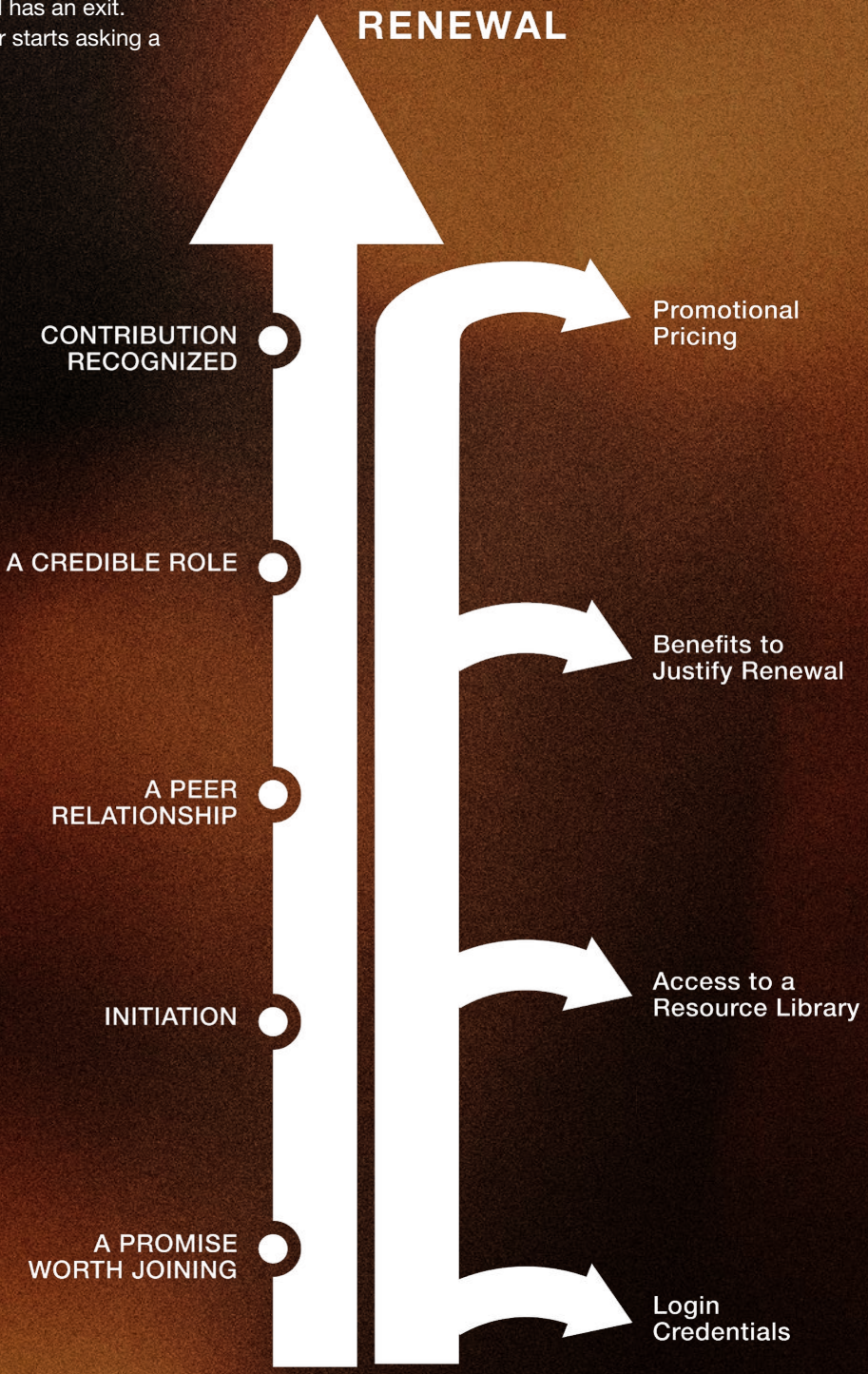
Did I use enough?
Was it worth the price?
Could I get it elsewhere?

Member Mindset

Who do I know here?
What have I contributed?
What have we accomplished together?

The Renewal Decision
Is Made Upstream

Every stage on the road to renewal has an exit. Miss the moment, and the member starts asking a subscriber's questions instead.



Every Touchpoint **Teaches the Relationship**

An association may promise community, influence, and professional growth while teaching something different through the experience. Members learn from what the association repeatedly asks them to notice and do. Offers, logins, stories, and promotions build the frame through which membership will be judged.

Acquisition Sets **the Expectation**

Acquisition does more than produce joins. **It establishes the first terms of the relationship.**

A discount can remove a barrier. An event offer can give someone a practical reason to try the association. The risk appears when price and urgency carry the entire case.

A campaign built around savings brings attention to savings. A campaign built around access brings attention to access. People who join through that frame aren't wrong to use it again when renewal arrives.

A join total tells only part of the story. Leadership also needs to know which expectation produced it and what the journey must now develop. A discounted cohort can represent **current revenue and future relationship work.**

In one association that we've worked with, a campaign featured a member learning to lead a team. Her story described a difficult first year, the peers who helped, and the decisions she learned to make. It gives a prospective member facing the same challenge a reason to join. A story like this helps prospects see themselves in the association's story.

The campaign's promise carried into the experience. The association could trace the path from initial interest to a join, a peer connection, and a return visit.




The Reason to Stay Develops Across the **Whole Experience**
RENEWAL
I want to remain part of this.
ENGAGEMENT
I have a part to play.
ONBOARDING
Someone knows my name.
JOIN
I see myself here.

Onboarding Must Begin **the Relationship**

Onboarding is the first test of whether the join promise is true.

An association may acquire people through community, influence, and growth, then greet them with a receipt, login credentials, a portal tour, and links. Those steps make the system usable. They don't make someone part of it.

The new member knows where to log in, but not who knows their name. They get a receipt for what they bought, but no introduction to what they joined. That is **the gap between orientation and initiation.**

Orientation shows a person where things are. *Initiation* helps a person begin to occupy a place among others.

Initiation begins when the new member meets a peer, recognizes a place in the association's story, and takes a first step that makes them known.

Belonging requires someone else in the room.

Research outside association membership supports the importance of helping newcomers take part. A 2024 meta-analysis of 83 field experiments in employment, higher education, and military settings found that newcomers in socialization programs had, on average, 1.46 times the odds of retention compared with control groups. Effects were stronger when programs encouraged proactivity, social integration, and effective task behaviors.[6] The settings differ, but the pattern is relevant.

An association can provide orientation by design while leaving initiation to chance. An activated account can hide the difference. Initiation begins to give the new member a place and relationships as well as access.



case study

Prospect Growth Became ***Measurable***

Starting Point
Growth relied on organic activity and word of mouth.

What RCG Connected
A prospect program combining audience segmentation, thought leadership, paid social, and email nurture.

Reported Results

4,323
Leads

$4.84
Cost per Lead

6% Lower
Cost per Lead, Year over Year

An anonymized RCG acquisition example. These measures describe prospect generation and cost efficiency.

Engagement Gives **Members a Role**

Engagement teaches the relationship through the role it gives the member.

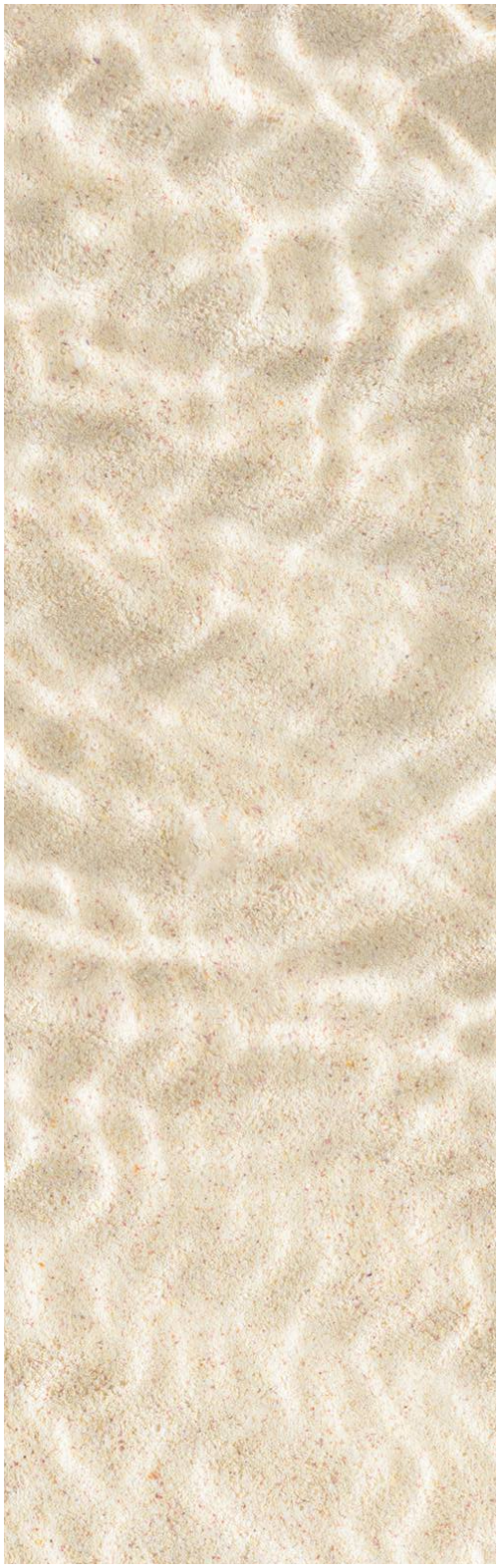
An engagement system built to count consumption can miss the relationship. Registrations, attendance, opens, downloads, and logins show that activity occurred. They don't show what the activity meant.

A person can attend many webinars and remain a careful buyer. Another can enter one serious working conversation and begin to see the association as part of their professional life.

Contribution changes the relationship because value begins to move through the membership. Members answer questions, mentor colleagues, and bring experience into shared guidance.

A credible role doesn't have to be a formal volunteer position. It should be **chosen, manageable, tied to a purpose the member values, and recognized by others.**

If an association offers only opportunities to consume, it risks encouraging consumer behavior, including among people who joined because they wanted community and professional growth.









Renewal Reveals
What the Year Taught

Renewal is the result of everything upstream.

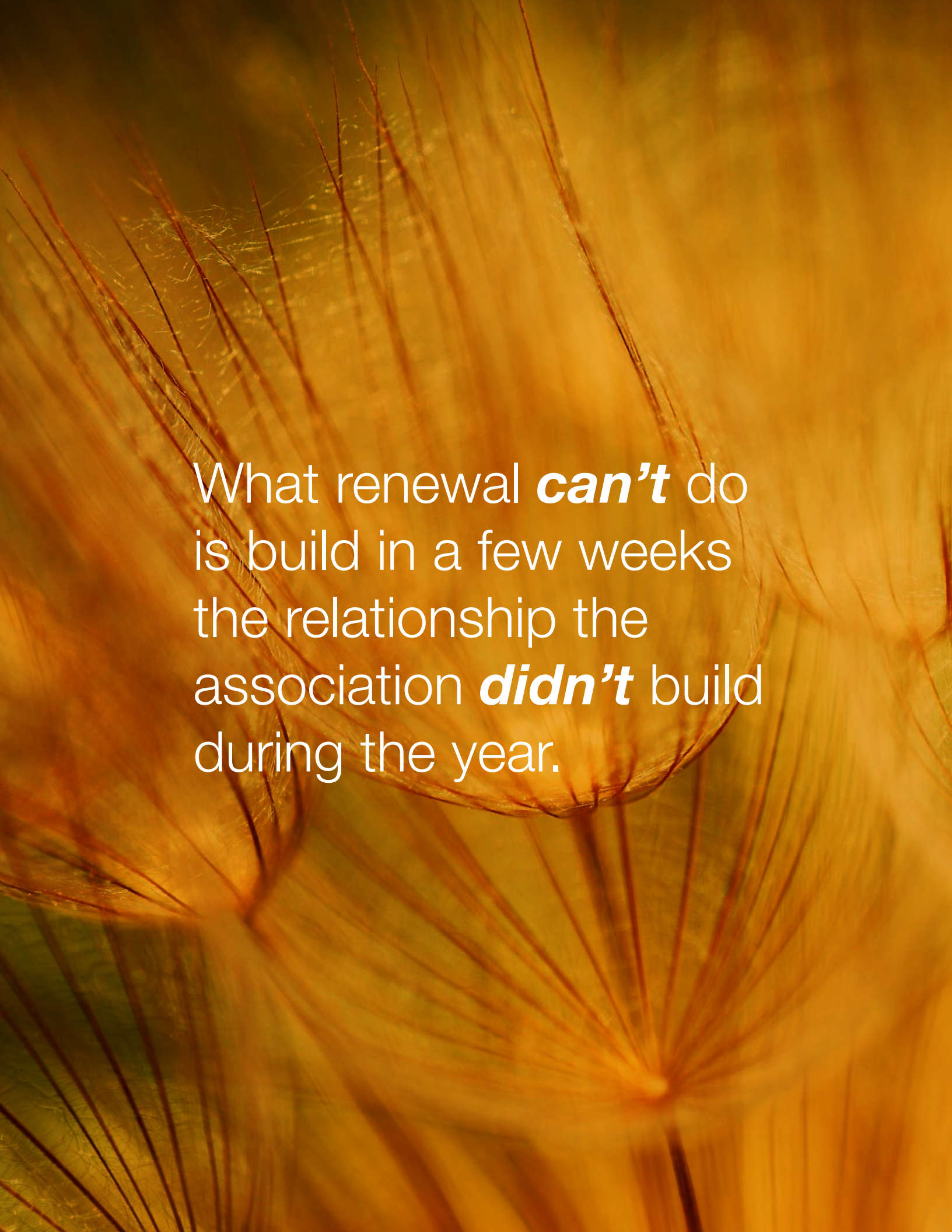
A member who entered through an offer, received an inventory tour, and spent the year responding to promotions has a clear basis for a usage review.

Another member may receive the same invoice while thinking about trusted peers, a role in shared work, and the progress the community made during the year.

The payment request is identical. The decision isn't.

The renewal campaign must make the dues, deadline, and next step clear. It should offer honest evidence of participation and practical value, along with a route back for a less-active member.

What renewal can't do is **build in a few weeks the relationship** the association didn't build during the year.


What renewal ***can't*** do
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during the year.

More Value ***Expands the Ledger***

When joins soften or renewal becomes less certain, the common response is more value. If dues purchase access, weak performance seems to mean the inventory isn't strong enough or visible enough. Both explanations lead toward the same answer.

Produce more. Promote more. Prove more usage.

MGI's 2025 report found that about two in five association innovations involved new membership benefits.[7] The figure doesn't make benefits the cause of weaker relationships. It does show that new supply remains common.

Another report, webinar, or tool may be useful. Each also enters the member's ledger.

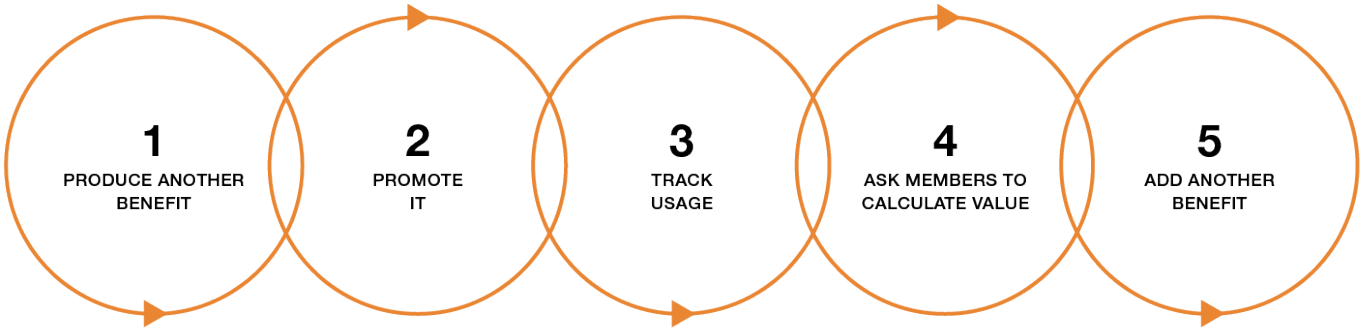
The Production Treadmill Gets Expensive

More products require staff time, technology, and promotion. Promotion directs attention toward consumption. Usage data becomes renewal proof, inviting another cost-benefit review and more pressure to add value.

The association **works harder to defend the same renewal**, while the member is conditioned to judge what was consumed.

When new deliverables are presented mainly as additions to the inventory, they can reinforce the consumption frame that subscriptions are built around. Commitment doesn't necessarily rise with each new deliverable. The standard for *what's enough* does.

This loop increases the burden of maintaining the offering while framing the association as a producer and the member as a reviewer.



Members Experience the Same Model Differently

For active members, the arithmetic may remain favorable. Programs, research, and discounts can create an easy case for renewal.

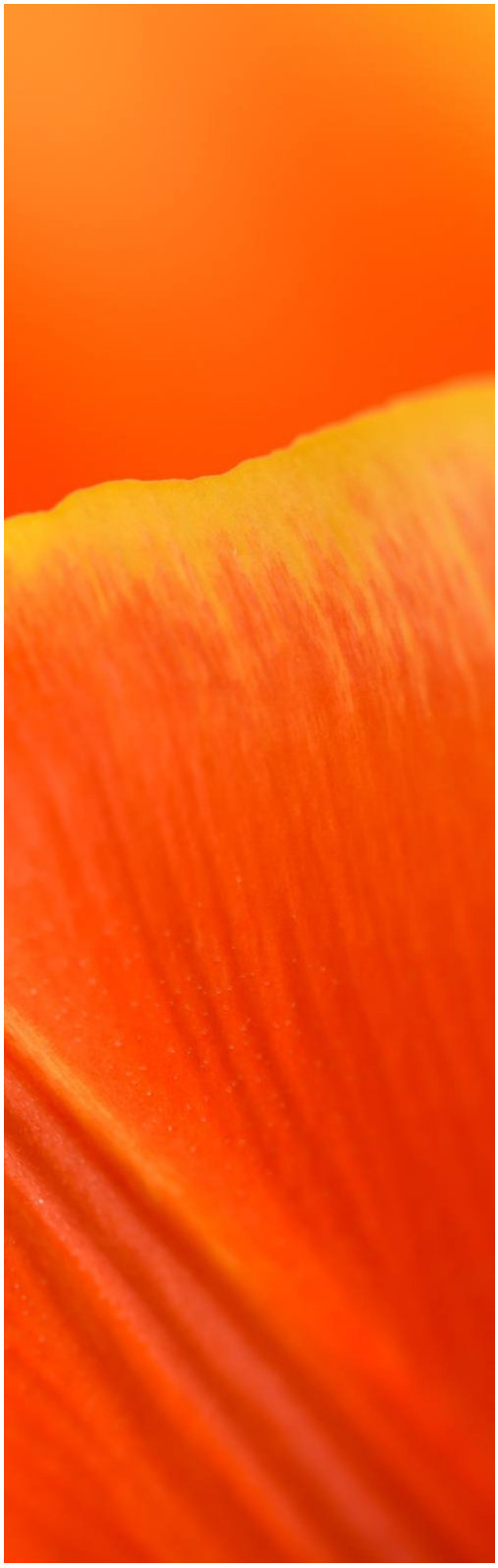
The weakness appears when usage becomes the main reason to continue. The relationship stays open to comparison with a lower price, easier platform, or new source of the same help.

For less-active members, abundance can create the opposite response. They see the webinar they missed, the report they never opened, and the portal they meant to revisit. A renewal message listing the full inventory may feel like a record of money wasted.

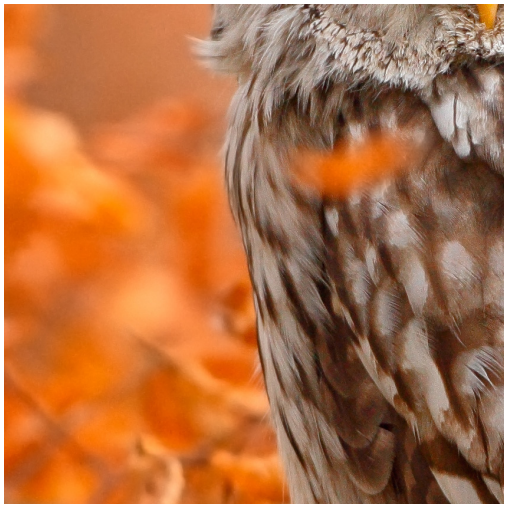
By offering more reasons to renew, the association can give a less-active member **more evidence that the prior year was a poor purchase.**

That person may stop opening messages or contributing before a lapse appears in the financial report.

Revenue can lag behind a weakening relationship.









AI Makes Immediate Answers Ordinary

AI puts more pressure on this model by changing how people get information.

Associations have trusted research and knowledge shaped by practice. But a member with ten minutes before a meeting may ask ChatGPT and act on the first useful answer. They don't always wait for the most authoritative source.

AI summaries now sit between people and original sources. Pew Research Center found that 58% of a 900-person U.S. browsing panel saw one in at least one Google search during March 2025. People were less likely to follow result links when one appeared.[8]

AI doesn't have to be more trusted than an association to change the decision. It only has to **make a usable answer easier to obtain.**

If membership is positioned mainly as access to content and answers, the association is competing with tools that make those answers easier to obtain.

More content can't restore the old scarcity. It can raise the association's cost and make membership resemble a subscription even more closely.

Practical Value
Has a Different Job

The choice isn't between practical value and belonging.

Members still expect strong content, education, access, service, and a fair price. Associations should borrow the best service habits of subscription businesses: simple enrollment, clear billing, and easy-to-find information.

The boundary is whether convenience, access, and usage are allowed to *define membership.*

Content is stronger when it helps members do something together. Research can support common decisions. Education can bring peers together to apply the same ideas.

The value lives in what members can **understand, decide, and accomplish together** because the resource exists.

AI can help people find information, apply knowledge, and coordinate work. Standing among peers and shared responsibility develop through relationships with people.

That is the opening associations still own.

Associations can give people more than reasons to buy. Story can give people a reason to see themselves as part of something.




Content is stronger when it helps members ***do something together.***
Research can ***support common decisions.***
Education can ***bring peers together*** to apply the same ideas.

Story *is the* **System**

The Story
Already Exists

Your association has a story whether you tell it or not. It lives in the answer your most loyal member gives when a colleague asks a simple question:

Why are you still a member?

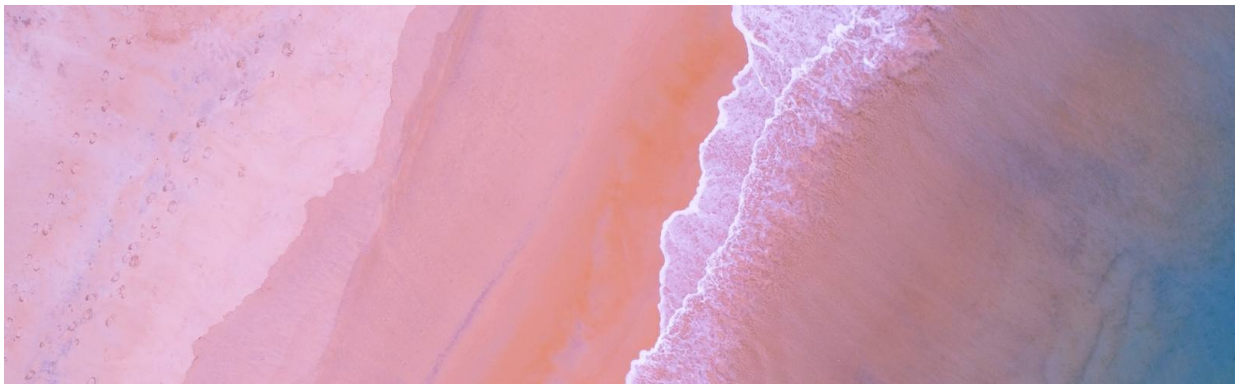
A longtime member had stopped attending most programs. She still valued the association, but her work had moved beyond much of its education. When the association invited her to help a working group revise guidance for newer practitioners, she brought an example from her own team.

Other members used that example to improve the guidance. The association credited her contribution and later showed her how colleagues were putting the guidance to use. She stayed involved and renewed with a role in the work ahead.

Her reason to stay had become specific. People she respected were using something she knew, and the association gave her a way to keep contributing.

That lived story is the foundation of the brand story. It can't be invented in a messaging workshop and handed to members as a slogan. It has to be **discovered in the relationship** between the institution and the people who believe in it most.

Research on voluntary and nonprofit membership supports the importance of those ties. A study of 1,441 records from one professional organization found a relationship among involvement, identification, commitment, and continued membership.[9] Another found that organizational identification mattered more early, while peer identification became more important among members of eight years or more.[10]



Member Stories Make the Brand Story Visible

A testimonial begins with the organization and asks a member to endorse it. A member story begins with a recognizable person facing a consequential moment, finding people or shared work, and reaching an outcome that changed what became possible.

Benefits still appear. A course may have built the skill, research informed the decision, or an event created the introduction. But the resource sits inside a human outcome. The reader sees what the association provides, who they might become through participation, and why the relationship matters after the immediate need passes.

This work can't depend on stories appearing by chance. Your association needs **dedicated capacity to find them.** That takes sustained listening and interviews that move beyond member satisfaction. Someone has to recognize which experiences express the brand promise and put those stories to work when people decide whether to join, participate, and stay.

The brand story gives individual member stories a shared direction. The stories also show leadership whether that promise reaches beyond a small group. If connection appears only in the experiences of a few longtime members, the next step is to help more people enter those relationships.

In the working-group example, crediting the member and showing how colleagues used her knowledge made her contribution visible.




A brand story
becomes
stronger when
members can
act inside it.







Story Makes
Contribution Visible

The brand story names what members are part of and what becomes possible because the association exists. Its promises must then become real.

If connection is part of the story, another person must appear. If influence is part of the story, members need a credible route into decisions or shared work. If growth is part of the story, the association must show what changed and how the member took part.

A brand story becomes stronger when members can act inside it. But participation doesn't become part of that story automatically. The association has to recognize it, connect individual actions to shared purpose, and show members how their contributions move the work forward.

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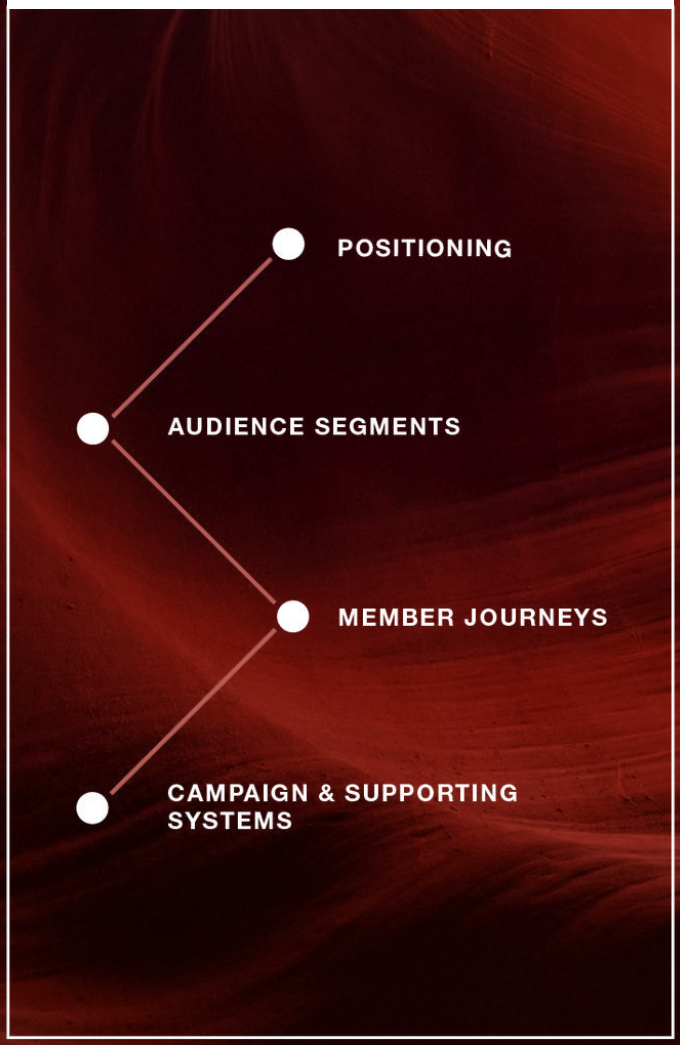
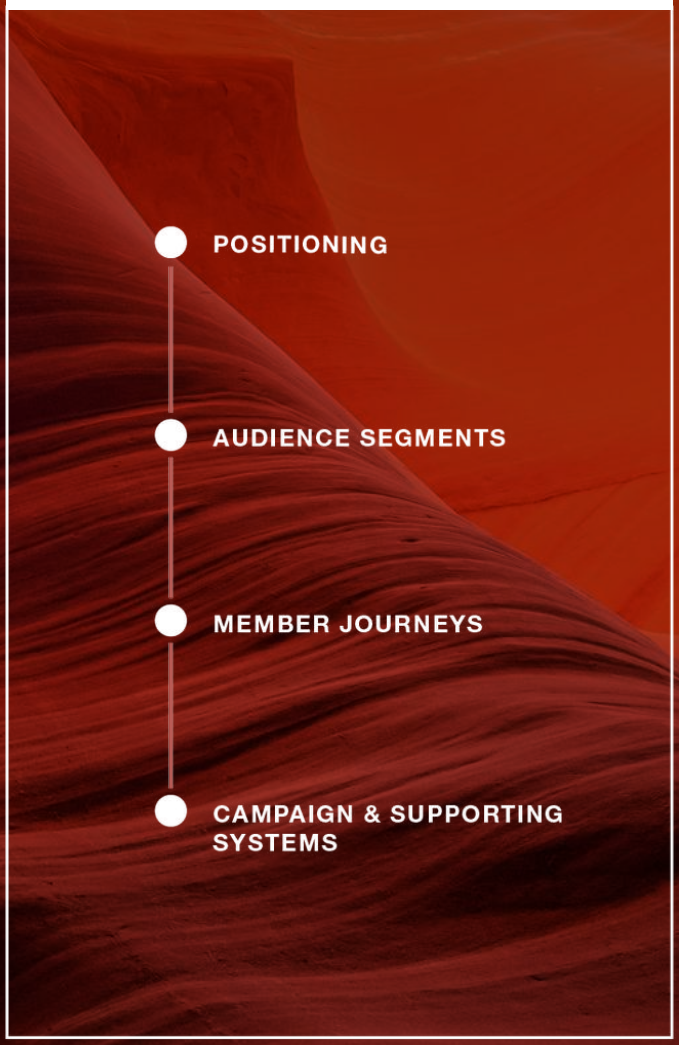
*Connect the Story to the **Experience***

Starting Point
The story, tools, and programs operated separately.



What RCG Connected



What Changed
A shared direction for what the association said and how people moved through the experience.

An anonymized RCG example of bringing separate parts of the work into alignment.

The Responsibility of ***Leadership***

Your association can't message its way out of a **Subscription Trap** that the member experience keeps reinforcing. New language may create attention, but it won't hold if the person joins and finds only a receipt, a portal, a calendar, and another stream of offers.

Story has to stay coherent from the first promise through renewal. The Subscription Trap takes shape through repeated signals across different groups of members. Reversing it requires sustained changes in what members experience, and one campaign can't carry that work on its own.



Leadership Owns the Whole Journey

Members encounter one association.

They don't know whether marketing owns the email, programs owns the event, or member service owns the welcome. They experience the combined result.

No single department can govern that result.

Marketing can make the brand promise visible, but it can't ensure another person appears after the promise of connection. Programs can create a valuable event, but it can't decide whether onboarding helped a new member enter the room. Renewal can describe the year, but it can't create relationships or roles the year never provided.

Leadership owns the space between those functions.

That doesn't require central control over every interaction. It requires a shared definition of the relationship the association intends to build and clear responsibility for each function's part in it.

The governing question is larger than whether an activity met its immediate goal:

What kind of relationship did it build?



Measure the Relationship Before Renewal

Association dashboards can show activity more clearly than relationships.

Joins, activations, registrations, opens, downloads, and payments arrive quickly. The relationship forming beneath those activities crosses teams and develops over time.

Leadership needs both kinds of evidence.

Transactional measures show whether the immediate system is working. *Relationship measures* show what kind of member the system is forming.

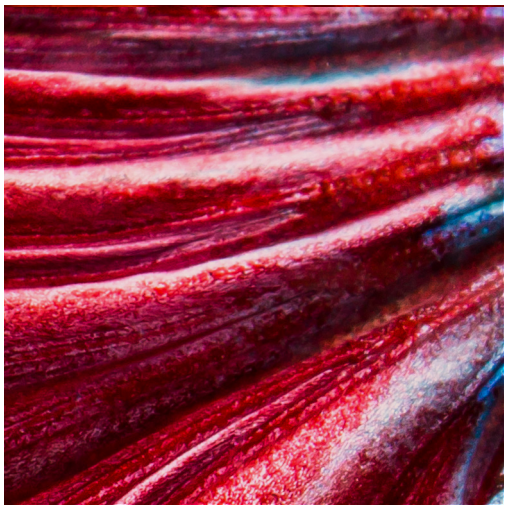
Early signals include the expectation that brought someone in, time to first peer contact, first participation, return after that participation, a contribution recognized by others, and the reasons members give for staying.

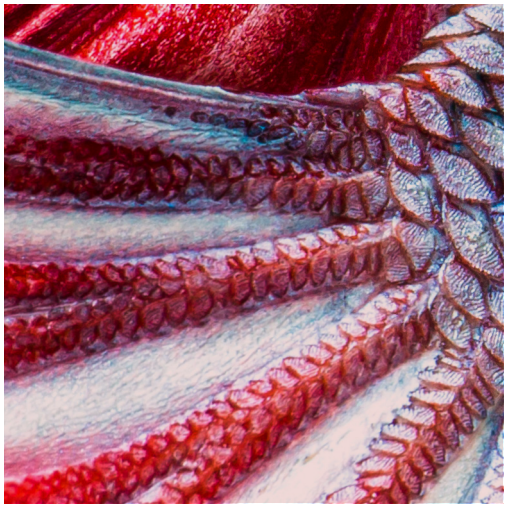
These signals don't need to become one artificial engagement score. Their job is to **reveal differences the blended numbers conceal.**

Two groups can produce the same renewal rate while relying on different reasons to stay. Cohort analysis can show whether members who entered through different offers developed broader ties, found a peer, returned after participating, or changed how they explained the value of membership.

Renewal remains important. *It is also late.*

Leadership needs evidence of the relationship **while there is still time to strengthen it.**



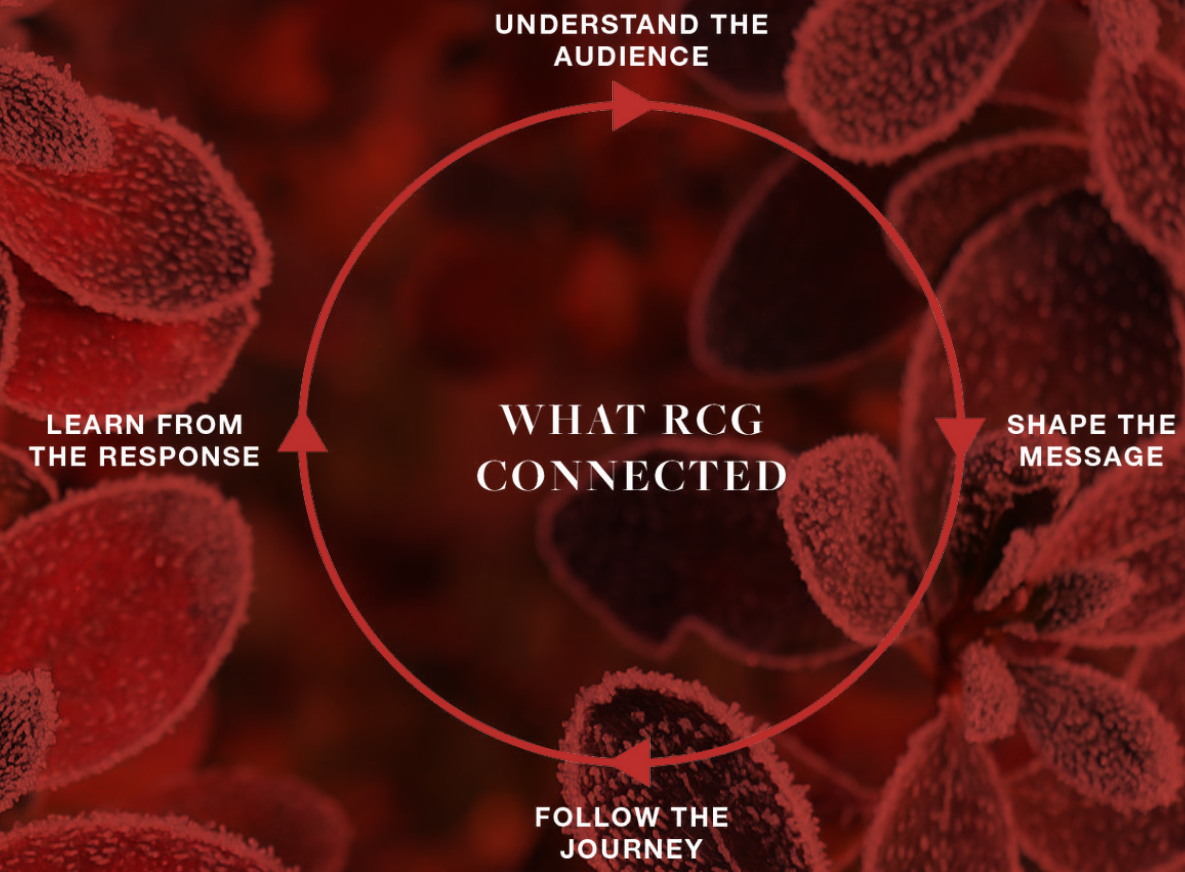




case study

Let Learning ***Carry Forward***

Starting Point
Each campaign stood on its own.



What Changed
Learning from one campaign informed the next decision.

An anonymized RCG example of connecting audience insight, messaging, the journey, and ongoing learning.

Capacity Reveals the Model

An association's real operating model becomes visible in what receives staff time, budget, technology, and attention.

If another benefit is easier to approve than a member role, the inventory will keep expanding. If an automated sequence is easier to launch than a peer welcome experience, onboarding will keep producing activated accounts. If program volume receives more attention than participation quality, engagement will keep favoring consumption.

Those outcomes don't come from careless teams. They follow the capacity leadership made available and the results those teams were asked to produce. Building members requires capacity for work that often sits between departments. Teams need time to connect the brand promise to the member journey, find member stories, create peer entry points, compare cohorts, and learn why people stay. Technology has to support those choices rather than define them.

Tradeoffs need to be visible.

Another product may create immediate use. A member-hosted welcome group may create an earlier relationship. Another campaign may increase registrations. A serious working conversation may give fewer members a stronger reason to see the association as part of their future.

The choice is where the institution places its available capacity. It can spend nearly all of it producing and promoting things for members. Or it can **reserve meaningful capacity** for helping members form relationships, take on roles, and participate in the story the association tells.



Fund and Protect the Relationship

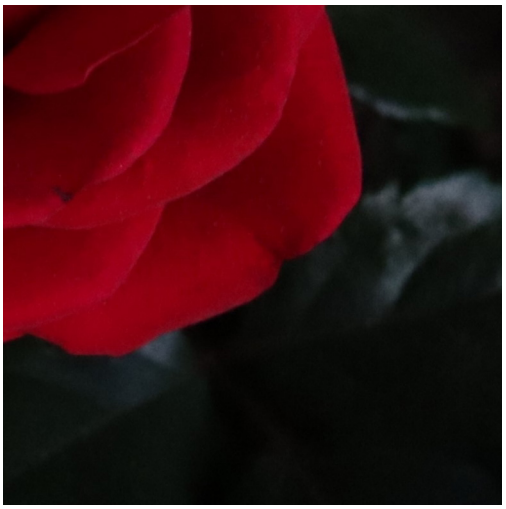
These are choices about the relationship your association is funding. The people making introductions and supporting member roles **need time for that work**, just as the people producing programs do.

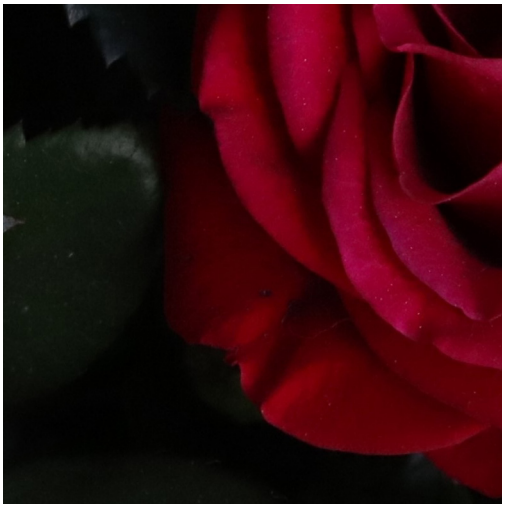
That capacity also needs to support useful roles and uncover the story that loyal members tell themselves about why they stay.

Protect that time when campaign pressure rises. Keep the brand promise and member pathways steady long enough for people to recognize them, take part, and bring others in. The work needs permission to mature. Early evidence may appear in peer contact, return, contribution, and the different paths member groups take through the association. Those signals let leadership judge progress before the renewal rate moves.

Continuity matters too. The brand story can't be reinvented by every campaign or interpreted differently by every department.

The work also has to survive changes in budgets and internal ownership. If it disappears when one internal champion leaves, it was never **embedded in plans, roles, or resources.** Leadership has to keep the promise, experience, measures, and resources aligned long enough for a different pattern of membership to take hold.







Reserve meaningful capacity for helping members form relationships, take on roles, and participate in ***the story the association tells.***



The Future of ***Associations***

The final stake is larger than a decline in membership figures.

An association can maintain membership in numbers while losing the member participation that gives it authority, relevance, and a reason to exist. That is **membership in name only.** When that happens, professions and industries lose more than a provider of education or information. They lose places where peers shape standards, carry trusted knowledge forward, mentor the next generation, and act together on work no commercial provider can own.

A member-driven institution can speak with credibility because people have participated in its work, tested its judgment, and accepted responsibility for what it represents. An organization made up mainly of customers has a thinner claim, even when it has a large database and reliable revenue.

Associations that adapt will still deliver excellent content, education, tools, and service. But those offerings will support a larger relationship rather than stand in for it. The future of membership belongs to associations whose members can say,

"We built this together."




The future of membership belongs to associations whose members can say,
“We built this together.”

Sources

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2 ASAE, “ASAE Releases First-Ever ‘State of Associations’ Report Offering Data-Driven View of Industry’s Present and Future,” March 23, 2026. Publisher summary of the report.

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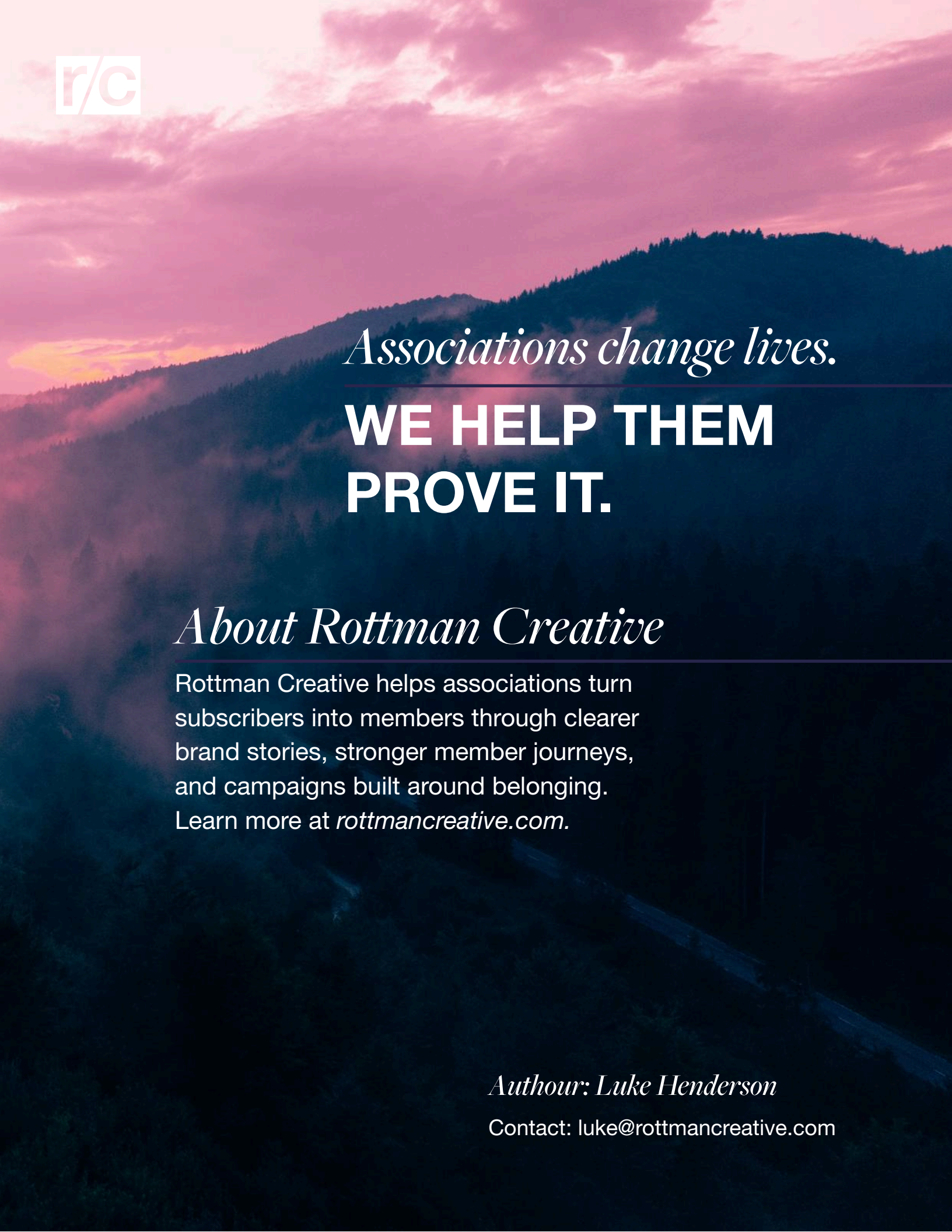

Associations change lives.

WE HELP THEM PROVE IT.

About Rottman Creative

Rottman Creative helps associations turn subscribers into members through clearer brand stories, stronger member journeys, and campaigns built around belonging. Learn more at *rottmancreative.com.*

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