

Industry Paper

The Association Engagement Index – The 3Cs of Engagement

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Association, Engagement, Omnichannel, Content, Customization, Choice, Personalization, Gen Z/Millennials, Members, Digital, Trade Organization, Healthcare, Young Professionals, Young Generation, Relationship Strength, Index, Data, Insights, KPI, In-person, Digital, 3Cs of Engagement, Infographics, White Paper, Study, Report, Benchmark

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Industry Viewpoint

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ABSTRACT

The Association Engagement Index (AEI) is a global benchmark study that assesses the performance and relationship strength between associations and their members. The 2022 edition, involving 51 associations and over 12,700 responses, reveals a moderate level of engagement with an Index Engagement Score of 88. The results emphasize the need for associations to focus on younger audiences, personalize experiences, and leverage technology to enhance engagement and meet evolving needs.

KEYWORDS

Association, Engagement, Omnichannel, Content, Customization, Choice, Personalization, Gen Z/Millennials, Members, Digital, Trade Organization, Healthcare, Young Professionals, Young Generation, Relationship Strength, Index, Data, Insights, KPI, In-person, Digital, 3Cs of Engagement, Infographics, White Paper, Study, Report, Benchmark



Introduction

The Association Engagement Index (AEI) is a global benchmark study that measures the performance, relationship strength, and outcome of engagement tactics as seen through the eyes of associations' members and customers. 51 associations across multiple industries and professions participated in the 2022 edition of AEI, generating more than 12,700 responses from members and customers around the world. This robust benchmark shows a moderate level of engagement overall, with an Engagement Index Score of 88. This score, while adequate, means there is work to do to raise the engagement score to at least a strong position.

This Index reports the relationship strength (Index Engagement Score) and performance metrics as evaluated by the members and customers of the participating associations, of which 75% were Professional Societies and 25% were Trade Associations representing a broad range of industries and sectors. The associations represent a healthy variation in size and a comprehensive geographic spread with both internationally oriented and nationally focused organizations.

Method

- Data gathered from members and customers of 51 participating associations between September 19 and November 4, 2022, by anonymous online survey, resulting in 12,713 responses from 118 countries and aggregated.
- Index Engagement Score applied from -50 (very weak) to +150 (very strong).
- The AEI measures the relationship strength based on three key performance indicators as evaluated by members and customers:

- o Performance: How highly do they rate the association’s performance
- o Benefit: How do they evaluate the benefits and value provided by the association
- o Preference: how much they prefer the association vs. other sources of knowledge/ content, etc.

A Global Benchmark Study



Key Findings

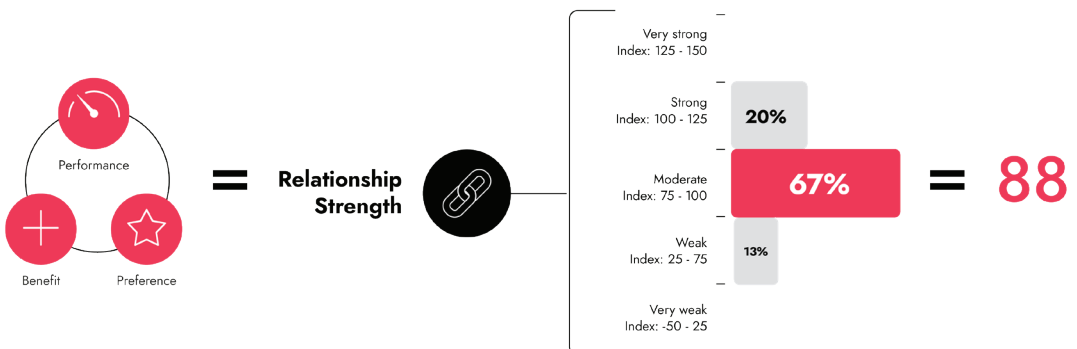
Based on the three critical indicators of performance, benefit, and preference, associations overall record a middling relationship strength with their members and customers, leading to a moderate Index Engagement Score of 88.

20% of associations outperformed the benchmark with a strong relationship and engagement score. With the vast majority (67%) in the moderate range, it is clear that associations can improve their engagement strategies and understanding of the key drivers so as to enhance their relationship with members.

3 Key Performance Indicators

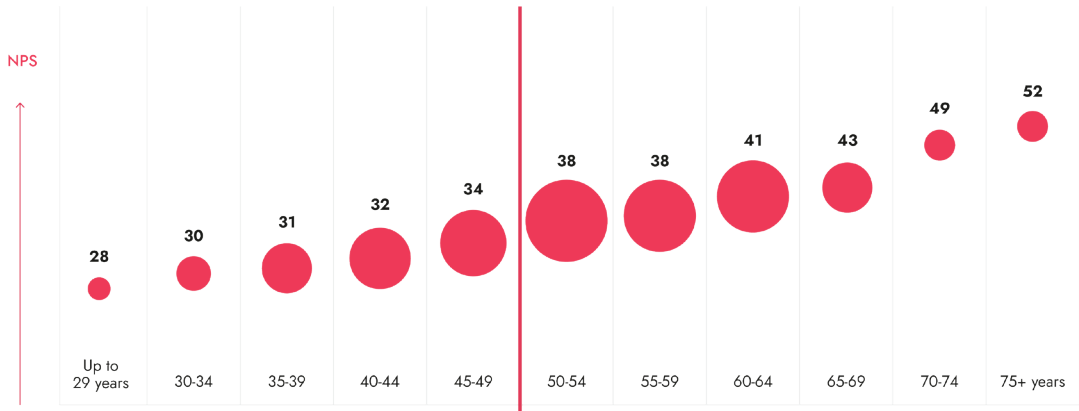
Index Score

Index Engagement Score



Interestingly, there is very little deviation within the overall 88 Engagement score according to the age of members. However, those who are retired (aged 70+) and most likely honorary members are the ones tipping the balance and showing a higher relationship strength. To be future-proof, associations must consider the interests, preferred style of engagement and ease of access desired by the younger members of their community.

The importance of focusing on the younger target audience becomes very clear when asking members if they would recommend their association to others – the older a member is, the more likely he/she is to recommend; the younger the member, the least likely. Whilst age did not remarkably affect the members' relationship strength with their association, there is a clear variance when reviewing the Net Promoter Score (NPS).



Size of bubbles represents share of age among respondents

“We were pleasantly surprised by the strong engagement index and NPS. The engagement was a new metric for us.”

Robert A. Gilbert, CHME, CHBA, President & CEO, Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMAI)

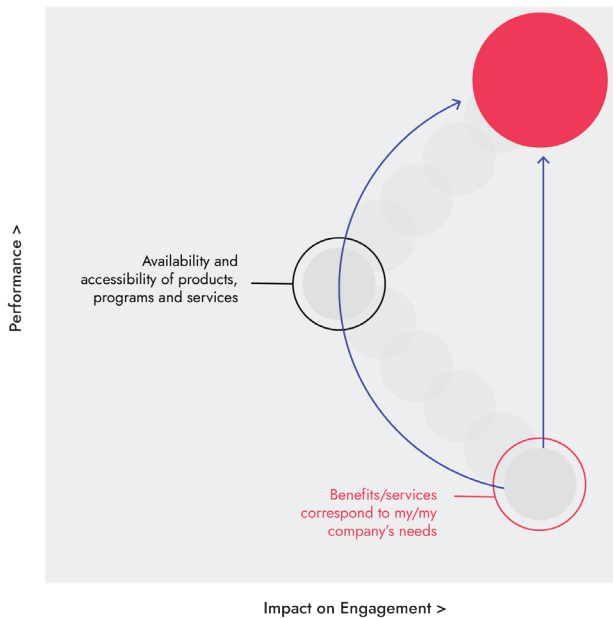
More and more associations are starting to consider actively involving younger professionals in the governance structure, ensuring that their voices are heard in the boardroom. At the least, strategy and vision need the input of this target audience. Associations must consciously seek to better understand what drives and motivates Millennials and Gen Z to secure their involvement, active engagement, and brand loyalty. Relevance of content is vital to Millennials and Gen Z, but also equally important to Gen X. Fostering innovation and ease of access to products/programs and content were amongst other key drivers for Gen Z and Millennials.

“Older members need to learn from younger members just as much as younger members can learn from older members.”

Roundtable rapporteur at ESAE Engagement workshop (Jan 2023)

However, for all age groups, the Index reveals that associations must improve the personalization and customization of their members’ and customers’ experience and access. The AEI Impact Performance Roadmap shows that members want easy access to benefits and services that correspond to “my or my company’s needs”. However, they do not highly rate associations’ performance in this regard.

Impact Performance Roadmap



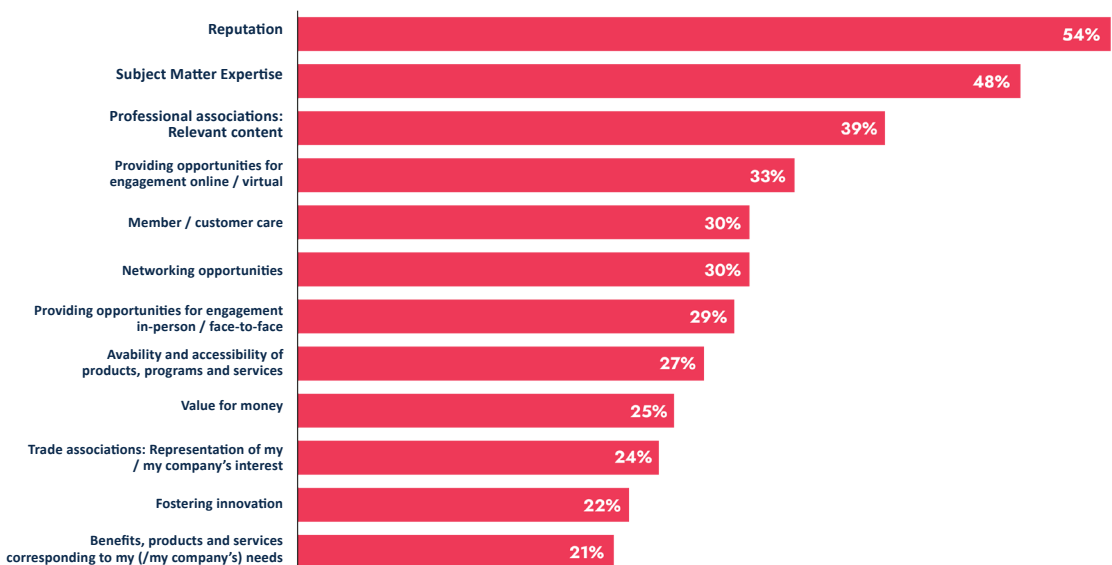
If associations focus on leveraging technology, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), machine learning algorithms, predictive analytics, and data to understand customer preferences and personalize their journey, they will increase their members' access to relevant content and programs quickly and seamlessly. This, in turn, enhances the member experience, creates a greater intimacy and relationship strength with the association and impacts engagement. Additionally, this focus puts members' and customers' needs and interests at the heart of the association's actions, enhancing member/customer centricity.

The Impact Performance Roadmap above provides associations with a clear route for improving the customer journey and member experience, thereby enhancing engagement.

A deeper dive into the Performance Evaluation shows that only 21% of the AEI respondents consider associations "excellent" at providing benefits and services that meet "my needs". In the case of trade associations, less than one quarter (24%) consider their association "excellent" in representing "my company's interests."

Conversely, reputation and subject matter expertise rank highly – with more than half of the respondents awarding excellence to their association's reputation.

Performance Evaluation



Impact During the Pandemic

The strength of the associations’ brand, reputation and subject matter expertise also had a positive impact on members as we look back on the pandemic years. Associations leveraged their position of authority and focused on knowledge enhancement, and in these areas, members felt supported. As part of their future-proofing and engagement strategies, associations should build on these strengths and continue to leverage them, as well as formalize these initiatives into contingency planning for future scenarios.

“The AEI report has been highly valuable to understand how members wish to engage. Data doesn’t lie and the statistics are a really useful conversation piece.

A strong theme throughout is the need for new products and innovation. The report comes at a critical time as the Executive gather to discuss strategy for the years ahead.”

Vanessa McCourt, Senior Association Manager, European Society of Coloproctology (ESCP)

Future Engagement

Finally, what are members and customers expecting from associations in the post-pandemic world? The overwhelming response is choice! It is no longer a question of virtual vs. in-person – members and customers want to choose the right channel and means of engagement. Associations must leverage an omnichannel approach and build on the agility and ways of working that were introduced during the pandemic.

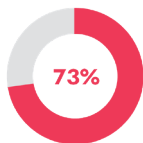
The Right Channel for the Right Activity



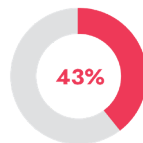
When asked about their preferences relative to specific association activities or programs, the message is loud and clear - the right channel for the right activity



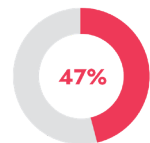
Prefer to engage with peers/ the association community both online (virtual) & offline (in-person)



Confirm that virtual events are a good alternative and could/should complement physical events



Prefer to engage in-person for the Annual Meeting, Conference or Trade Show



Want both online or offline for committee meetings, task forces, special interest groups etc.



Many associations are struggling to understand the “right” way forward. Should they revert to pre-pandemic behavior, formats and design or maintain the positive transformation, agility and new ways of working that have emerged from the pandemic period? Members and customers have shown that the “right” way is omni-channel. It fits with customization and choice. The more an association can facilitate that choice, the more it ensures the member/customer journey matches the needs of the individual or company, and the higher the relationship strength and engagement impact.

“Sharing the AEI 2022 results with ECPC’s Board Members is an amazing opportunity to drive conversations and facilitate decision-making that is based on industry evidence and trends. This is a great tool for many professionals managing membership to advance services into the future.”

Adriana Martins, Membership Community & Capacity Building Manager, European Cancer Patient Coalition (ECPC)

Call to Action: Choice, Omni channel and Customization

Members and customers from around the world, working in multiple professions and industries, have shared their insights. The outcome is clear: associations will increase their relationship strength and enhance engagement if they focus on the 3Cs of Engagement: Choice, omnichannel and customization.

In summary, we recommend associations to:

- Review engagement strategies against this benchmark
- Build on the agility, ways of working, and connectivity implemented during the pandemic
- Develop specific engagement strategies for Millennials and Gen Z

- Be sure to offer a choice and multiple channels – both offline and online
- Involve young professionals in designing future strategies and relevance
- Leverage technology (data, preferences, algorithms, AI, etc.) to help customize (personalize) members’ access to content, programs, etc.
- Adapt in line with members’ evolving needs and preferences.

Members and customers want a choice – the right program, service, or product at the right time through the right channel. Associations must enhance the members’ journey with as much customization as possible based on their needs and preferences. Customization is a key driver of emotional connectivity and increased relationship strength, which in turn leads to higher engagement. They must adopt the three Cs of engagement: give members a choice, leverage multiple channels and customize their journey.



To access the full report and infographics visit <https://www.wearemci.com/association-engagement-index>.

For more information and to receive the next edition of the AEI (2024 edition to be released in June next year), contact Nikki Walker, Global Vice President Engagement – Associations & Communities, MCI at associations@wearemci.com.

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