2024

First-Year Member Retention Playbook

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THE HOLMAN ADVANTAGE

Hello, we're Doug & Bill, the Holman Brothers. Our company, Holman Brothers Membership Sales Solutions, delivers customized membership recruiting, member relations and membership team management solutions that help chambers of commerce drive sustainable revenue and grow.

The detailed information, processes, and action steps you will find in this playbook are the type of information that we typically reserve for our chamber clients throughout the country. But we recognize that right now many chambers need help retaining members, and we want to do our part.

Our entire practice is dedicated to serving chambers of commerce. We know what works best because we've been doing the job ourselves for nearly 25 years. Before launching Holman Brothers in 2014, we each spent 13-years managing growth and success as vice presidents with the San Diego Regional Chamber, California's largest local Chamber.

The step-by-step guidance in this playbook has universal relevance. The strategies and tactics we have provided can be applied within any chamber, regardless of size.

We hope you will find this information useful. If you have any questions about membership sales and retention, please contact us. We're easy to talk to, and we want to help.

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Holman Brothers First-Year Member Retention Playbook

Successful membership growth depends on consistent recruiting efforts that produce a steady flow of good fit members. However, new member recruiting is only half of the membership growth equation. The other half is member relations, which sets the stage for successful member engagement and retention. Member relations involves all the processes and strategies that your chamber carry-out to build relationships with your members and help them maximize their membership experience. Your aim is to develop long-term, mutually beneficial relationships that optimize value for your members and your organization.

The goal of your member relations program is to diminish membership drops or cancelations and retain as many members as possible. Members are considered retained when they renew (pay for) their membership for another year. Importantly, small increases in member retention lead to substantially more members in the future, with each membership renewal generating revenue that compounds over time.

Why Do Members Leave?

Unfortunately, most members are reluctant to share their reasons for leaving. When members are disengaged enough to let their membership lapse, they generally don't take the time to explain or even seriously think about why. They stop taking your calls and wait for you to stop trying.

Some attrition is inevitable as there will always be members who will leave for reasons beyond your control. Obvious examples include moving their organization out of the area or if their company goes out of business. Your chamber can't control these types of situations. Then again, some members let their membership lapse because they never understood the business value of your resources, services, and actions. Others leave because they felt that your chamber never connected with them or, worse, that your chamber didn't care about them. Your chamber can avoid these scenarios through regular, personalized contact with your members.

In the end, whether they tell you or not, the most common reason for leaving is that the member simply didn't find enough value. Your chamber fell short on helping them engage at an appropriate level and/or keeping them informed on your actions to enhance the business climate and quality of life in your community. Essentially, your chamber failed as an organization to help them accomplish their membership objectives.

Member Service Versus Member Experience

Member service can be thought of as customer service. In simple terms, member service is the practice of helping members and meeting their needs. Whether face-to-face, over the phone, by email, online, or in print, everyone on your team interacts with your members and provides service in some way shape or form, such as:

- Answering the phone and politely providing assistance.
- Connecting members at your events.
- Providing background materials and timely information on hot topics and critical issues and initiatives, and how they impact a member's business interests.
- Delivering updates on your latest actions, insider information and member benefits.
- Any direct or indirect interaction with a member.

Member experience encompasses the sum of all the service interactions a member has with your team, from the moment they join at all touchpoints, which forms their perception of your chamber. Mostly positive interactions and your members are far more likely to renew. Every member of your team is responsible for consistently delivering excellent service and enhancing member experience.

Member Relations

While every staff person is responsible for enhancing member experience, someone needs to be responsible for maintaining relationships with individual members to ensure they are enjoying a positive member experience. This means that an individual or team should be accountable to regularly connect with assigned members, develop positive relationships, and encourage engagement.

The First-Year of Membership Is Vital

Studies done by the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives and the American Society of Association Executives highlight that first-year members are the most vulnerable to drop. If a new member does not become meaningfully involved (engaged) in at least one resource, their chances of dropping after their first-year increase dramatically. If more than six months lapses between the date of joining and involvement, the member will likely never get engaged and merely let their membership lapse. Thus, it is vitally important to connect with new members and help them make the most of the possibilities that your chamber offers.

Personalized outreach, especially in the first-year of membership, is and will remain the most effective way to get members meaningfully involved with your organization. These connections form the foundation upon which you will help members engage and realize the benefits of membership. The key is to make consistent personal connections centered on educating members and helping them realize value.

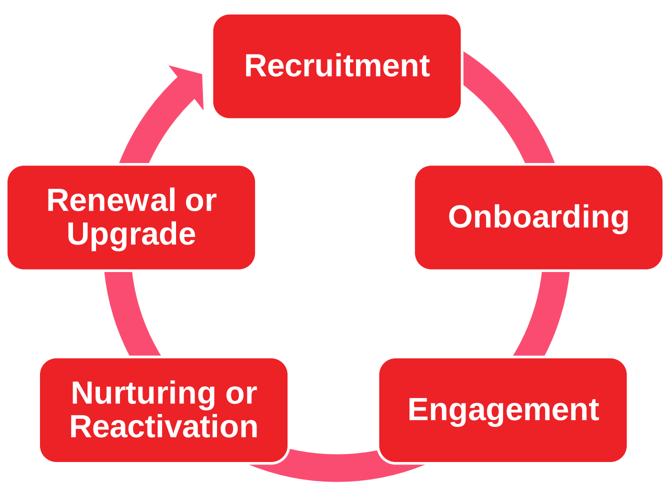
First-Year Member Continuum

The member continuum defines the progression of phases an organization goes through as a member, including joining your chamber, learning how to navigate resources, becoming engaged, maintaining their membership, and renewal. Each stage in the continuum provides insight and perspective into what member relations management efforts are needed to enhance a typical member's experience. When carried-out in a thoughtful and timely manner, your member relations management efforts will guide members toward renewal.

Phase One: New Member Recruitment

Phase one is all about attracting new members. This entails guiding prospective members through your recruiting cycle.

Notable: Member recruitment is an ongoing effort that must be maintained, or your organization will shrink.



Phase Two: Onboarding

(First month after joining)

Onboarding is arguably the most critical phase of the member relations process. Members are excited and want to experience the value they were promised. Thus, it's important to begin the onboarding process immediately after a business invests. The goal is to get every member off to the best possible start, which always increases the chances that they will stick around for the long-term.

Your chamber must remain mindful that new members can quickly become overwhelmed while attempting to navigate your wide variety of available engagement points, including events, professional development, economic development, government relations, and the like. The initial aim of onboarding is to ease new members in by focusing on the offerings and opportunities that are best suited for their needs uncovered during the recruiting process. Concentrate initial follow-up on why each member invested and focus on delivering what was promised.

Notable: Within the onboarding period, members must see clear membership value. This is crucial because when members don't immediately begin to see value, they tend to become dissatisfied with their investment – and far more likely to ultimately leave your organization.

When you know what members are trying to achieve, you know what resources to promote. Put simply, it's about focusing on why they joined and providing access to the resources and services that help them achieve their goals. Always clarify how they will benefit and help them develop a strategy to do so.

If you aren't sure how to help, seek deeper understanding. There is no harm in admitting that you don't know enough, right now. Ask for permission to learn more about the individual, their organization, and what they hope to achieve through their association with your organization. By taking the time to learn more about each member you will uncover answers that furnish the "secret sauce" behind member relations management.

Early communications and interactions should be designed to educate, persuade, or remind members which actions they should take. All the while you will develop trusting relationships where you are the conduit for the assistance and the resources they need.

Phase Three: Engagement

(Months 4 –6)

Study after study has determined that there is a strong and undeniable connection between engagement and value. When members are engaged (regularly taking advantage of your resources and services) they experience value and in-turn view their membership as worthwhile. When members take advantage of even just one of your resources or services their odds of renewing increase. The odds are even better when they use more than one of your available resources or services. Consequently, the longevity of the membership commitment depends on your ability to help each member get involved.

Notable: The engagement phase is also known as the adoption phase of the member continuum. Why? When members don't fully adopt, or buy-into one or more benefits of membership, they won't see results. Without results, there's no incentive for members to renew their membership. The goal of the engagement phase is to help members fully adopt one or more resource so that your organization becomes indispensable.

It's important to continue focusing your efforts on connecting with members based on the specific reasons they joined. Also make an effort to share the bigger picture. Connect how their investment is critical to support your actions to shape the business and economic environment and quality of life for all throughout your community:

- If you are active in economic development, highlight relevant initiatives, strategies, and positive actions your chamber is carrying-out to enhance your community and how your actions improve the economic climate.
- If you are active in government relations, highlight relevant efforts, which could include actions related to coalition building, grassroots organizing, developing media and public relations strategies, policy research, and the like?
- How can members help? In addition to their annual investment, some members may want to get engaged personally. They might want to provide input on an issue that is important to them personally, their company or their industry. Others may want to engage on a committee or taskforce.
- Most importantly, regularly thank members for supporting your targeted work to help create and sustain a favorable business and economic environment for the people, communities, organizations, and businesses in your region.

Phase Four: Nurturing or Reactivation

(Months 7 – 9)

The objective of phase four is dependent on each member's level of engagement. When a member is engaged, phase four is about nurturing the relationship. Things are more uncertain when a member isn't engaged. In fact, inactivity is the best indicator of future problems. In this case, phase four is about doing what you can to reactivate the disengaged member.

Previously engaged members who have not meaningfully engaged for three months are "at-risk" to drop their membership. Meaning, if you fail to get them reactivated, they may determine that they're paying for a membership they don't need and let their membership lapse. Reaching out to encourage engagement at renewal time is too late. At this point these members are generally unrecoverable.

Notable: When left to fend for themselves, most first-year members will not think to seek assistance or relief from your team when a problem or concern arises. They simply don't have enough institutional knowledge or experience to view your organization in that light. Therefore, it's particularly important to proactively uncover and manage any problems, questions, or concerns long before the renewal phase. Otherwise, many of these members will not renew their membership and chalk it up to insufficient value.

Even when members are engaged, it is still critical to connect with them on a regular and consistent basis – especially during their first-year of membership. It's the only surefire way to ensure that your members are satisfied. Remember, the relationship with first-year members is always a bit tenuous. Their connection to your chamber is new, and they may not be comfortable reaching out for assistance.

Phase Five: Renewal or Upgrade

(Months 10 – 12, or a bit beyond if required)

Member renewal is where each member has the opportunity to decide whether they will continue their relationship with your organization. The most important aspect of renewal is to remember that membership is a choice, and members typically expect positive outcomes. Personalized member outreach, active assistance, and support throughout the year always create a winning strategy.

Notable: Never lose sight of the fact that membership is optional, and your members continually assess whether their association with your organization is helping them accomplish what they wanted. They also evaluate how easy or difficult it is to interact with your organization. Members elect to renew or "drop" their membership based on these experiences. Putting care into every interaction is paramount to helping members achieve value for their investment and realize that the value associated with your organization outweighs the expense of their membership investment.

Tips For Success

Focus on New Members

When a new member does not become meaningfully involved in at least one resource, their chances of dropping after the first-year increase dramatically. If more than six months lapse between the date of joining and involvement, these members will likely never get engaged and merely let their membership lapse. You cannot afford to delay your efforts to help new members take advantage of the benefits of membership. Regular communication throughout the year is critical to share the VALUE of member resources and services and help new members get engaged in their individual areas of interest.

Emphasize Why They Joined

Every member has a reason why they joined. Of course, you know why members joined when you made the sale. You know which resources they need to help resolve their challenges and achieve their objectives. When you don't know why a member joined, find out. Ask them why they joined. When you understand why they joined, and uncover how your chamber can help them succeed, you have the "secret sauce" behind member relations. Use this information to personalize your interactions.

Facilitate Member Engagement

Don't let members sit passively on the sidelines. When they aren't engaged, they lose interest, drop their membership, and quickly move on. A sustained and consistent effort is neccasarry during the first-year of membership. Continually encourage members to get involved and take advantage of the resources that interested them in the first place as well as other resources that will enhance their membership experience.

Pick Up the Phone

Beware, avoiding phone calls, and relying on email instead, will stunt your ability to form lasting member relationships. With email, it can be hard to interpret the feelings behind the words. How one says something provides context. Personalized phone exchanges help you connect with members and build stronger relationships. When you talk, you almost always end up uncovering and supplying more information than when you send and receive emails. Words flow in a conversation, and each party uses tone and inflection to place emphasis on various details. All of which leads to greater understanding and/or opportunity to clarify facts.

Don’t Underestimate the Value of Voicemail

Simply put, if you don’t leave voicemail messages, you’ll never get any calls back. Even when you don’t receive a call back, each message you leave is a point of contact that helps you stand out for your sincere desire to connect and help. Maybe a member doesn’t have time to chat now, or they don’t have a need, but they’ll know who to call if and when they do need assistance. As such, every voicemail is a wise investment and a critical part of building helpful member relationships.

Schedule Your Next Call

People are busy, so connecting via telephone can be challenging. Therefore, it is critically important to make every effort to schedule your next check-in/service call before you end your current call. Vague commitments such as, “I’ll call in a few months” only lead to frustrations trying to connect when the time rolls around. When you finally do connect, it’s likely that most members won’t have enough time to really focus. Scheduled member relations calls allot time for you to connect, answer questions, and provide valuable assistance. Neglecting to schedule calls, and ultimately failing in your attempts to connect, creates a void where members can lose interest.

Always Update Your Member Database

Your member database plays a crucial role in supporting members from recruitment to renewal. Every member interaction is a valuable source of information, so you must record the details in your database. These notes are important for understanding member needs and their history with your organization.

It is essential to keep track of why each member joined, their goals, and the membership resources that interest them the most. This helps you provide personalized and effective service throughout their time as a member. When you input useful notes, future interactions become easier, and your relationships will flourish. This leads to increased member satisfaction, loyalty, and ultimately, their renewal and the growth of your organization.

Member Outreach Schedule

Overview

A sustained and consistent effort is required. The following plan provides timing and relevant topics for connecting with members. In the beginning, the aim is to encourage members to get involved and take advantage of the resources that interested them in the first place.

Over time, you will nurture member relationships and continually educate or remind them how various resources can help in other areas. Carrying-out this personalized approach will show members that you care about their organization as well as care for them as individuals – both of which lead to members who gain value and want to renew their membership.

New Member Outreach Schedule

1. First Week – New Member Welcome Call
2. First Month – Personalized Orientation
3. Second Quarter – Nurturing
4. Third Quarter – Gage Satisfaction
5. Fourth Quarter – Renewal
6. (When necessary) Membership Renewal Strategy

First Week – New Member Welcome Call

You cannot afford to delay efforts to connect with new members. It may not seem like much, but a personalized phone call to welcome new members and answer any questions could change the way they view your organization. The call not only shows members that they are wanted, but that they are appreciated. Every new member will know that they are receiving an individualized experience.

In addition to personally welcoming new members, the aim of the welcome call is to schedule a new member orientation call to personally familiarize the member with your member portal and how they can take advantage of your resources and services.

First Month – Personalized Orientation

Member retention starts with a meaningful member orientation experience. If you have ever joined an organization or association, you understand how important it is to create an noteworthy new member orientation experience. When you help new members get started and make them feel welcomed and appreciated, they'll be more likely to stick around for the long haul. A personalized orientation sets the tone for each new member's association with your organization.

The most commonly cited reason for non-renewal is lack of engagement. Yet, every member has a reason they joined. You know why members joined your organization when you made the sale. Thus, you know what resources they need to help enhance their organization or resolve their problems. If you don't know the reason, ask. Find out how they thought membership could help them, and you have the "secret sauce" behind member retention.

For the most part, new members join for one or more of the resources that your chamber provides but taking advantage of your resources with no knowledge of how things work can actually be a fairly intimidating process. The orientation process is a personalized journey that you take each member on so they can learn about how to take advantage of your resources and services.

It's not enough to simply mention a resource or service – you need to offer clear instructions for how, when, and where they can access each of your resources. Without this, new members will be left to their own devices, wondering when you'll step-in to guide them. And when members don't receive the help they need, they leave your organization feeling like it wasn't worth their money.

On the other hand, empowering new members to participate will make them more likely to get fully engaged and, in turn, receive the full benefit from their membership.

- The orientation call is critical to help you learn about the new member's interests. Ask questions to assess their needs and goals and understand their expectations.
- Once you understand their needs, help the member set-up their login information and member profile in your member portal. Ensure that all their contact information is correct. And walk them through how to access the resources that make sense for their individual needs and expectations.
- Always express your gratitude for their involvement and remind them to call you directly if they have a question or need assistance.
- Before ending the call, schedule a check-in/service call during the second quarter of their membership year.
- Lastly, you must enter the details of your conversation in the database. Be sure to notate the resources and services they respond well to. This will help you personalize your future communications and make their member experience a more positive one, increasing the chances of retaining them in the long-term.

Nurturing Calls

Nurturing calls are particularly important for first-year members. Why? If more than six months lapse between the date of joining and involvement, the member will likely never become engaged and merely let their membership lapse. Nurturing is critical to ensure that they are engaged.

Always review each member's account in the database before calling. Refamiliarize yourself with previous conversations and the member's preferences. Review participation metrics like their email open rates, event attendance, and level of engagement taking advantage of your resources and services. If their engagement metrics aren't quite where you'd like them to be, address it during your call.

Remember, the most common reason why members don't renew is lack of engagement. That's why consistent contact and nurturing relationships is so important. Educate members about the diverse ways they can gain value, which may include specific resources, professional development, and/or participating in various events. Empowering members to participate fully will make them more likely to stay engaged and get the most benefit from their membership investment.

Promoting the benefits of membership and stressing the fact that your chamber is the only place that produces this breadth of opportunities reminds members exactly why they joined in the first place. Which benefits make the most sense for why they joined? Is it networking events, economic development, government relations, or other resources?

When a member appreciates opportunities to make new connections and/or learn, share your event calendar, and encourage them to attend as many events and workshops as possible. If a member appreciates your economic development and/or government relations, mention recent success stories or share updates about your ongoing initiatives. You can also mention the possibility of engaging deeper by participating in a committee or getting involved in a taskforce or grassroots campaign.

Reactivation Calls

Frustrating as it is, member relations will stall from time to time, no matter how much effort you've put into focusing on the relationship. It can be a strange feeling when communications and follow-ups are going according to plan, then suddenly – "radio silence." This seemingly unexpected type of pullback can be somewhat ambiguous, because the member could be dealing with any number of unknown circumstances.

Unless things have really gone wrong, members don't generally make instant decisions to drop their membership. For the most part, members tend to gradually disengage; they stop taking advantage of available resources and/or attending events. They may stop attending events or committee meetings or stop accessing information. No matter the reason, inactivity is the best indicator of future problems, and these members are at-risk of letting their membership lapse.

Review Activity

Review member activity and engagement metrics to understand their history and identify whether a member may be losing interest. Is their level of participation waning? When was the last time they logged in? Are they actively utilizing any available resources? Have they attended an event in the last three months? When you identify previously active members who are slipping, intervene right away to recapture their interest and involvement.

At-Risk Members

Disengagement can happen even when you have faithfully followed all the steps of your relations plan. No matter the reason, previously active members who have not meaningfully engaged for three or more months are "at-risk" to drop their membership.

Meaning, if you fail to get them reactivated, they will struggle to answer this basic question: “What’s in it for me?” At this point, they may determine that they’re paying for a membership they don’t need and drop. Reaching out at renewal time will be too late.

Importantly, recently disengaged members are almost always easier to win-back than recruiting brand-new members. Your current members deserve your best effort to actively re-engage them in what matters most to them; typically centered on their specific historical activity recorded within the database.

- These members have demonstrated a need or gained value from your resources, making them far better prospects than random names on a prospecting list.
- They are at least somewhat familiar with your resources and services, which eliminates the need to completely educate them about what your chamber do.
- Most importantly, you can draw on the information you have recorded about them in the database. You know why they joined and how they previously engaged, which makes winning them back much easier than attracting a new member.

The purpose of contacting a previously engaged member is to learn what, if anything, went wrong and to remedy the situation. Below are several strategies and tactics to help you get these important relationships back on track:

Prioritize Outreach

Personal connections are often a difference-maker to encourage reengagement. Prioritize reaching out to members who had been active in the past but haven’t engaged in three or more months. These members must be handled delicately as their impressions may be outdated. When reconnecting, it’s important to maintain a sense of openness and honesty, which must be accomplished one-to-one via a phone call.

Offer Assistance

One of the easiest yet most effective ways to win-back members is to simply reach out and ask them how you can help. This is particularly effective with smaller organizations who tend to seek a tangible return on their investment. Uncover how you can help – and devise a strategy to help them achieve their objectives.

Uncover What Is Causing Their Detachment

Members can be moving targets. If you don’t keep up with their ever-changing needs, expectations, and interests, their attention can wane. Try asking them this question: “In what three ways could we make your membership experience better for you?” Their answers will help you devise a working plan to help them reengage. They will appreciate and value your efforts to find a solution.

Seek Feedback

Sometimes members appreciate knowing their viewpoint matters. The aim is to make members feel comfortable enough to share their opinions. Find out why they slowed their engagement and what, if anything, you can do to make their membership experience more fulfilling. Simply ask for their feedback. You can ask them why they stopped taking advantage of certain resources or why they stopped attending events or committee meetings. If appropriate to the conversation, ask for suggestions they might have. In addition to getting valuable feedback that you can utilize to re-engage them, you'll also remind them that you genuinely care about their success.

What Motivated Members To Invest?

Help members refocus on what they wanted to accomplish in the first place. What challenge(s) or objective(s) did they hope to overcome or achieve through joining? Why do they feel that membership isn't working for them? Is there anything you or your team can do differently? Anything the member can do differently? These questions are important because they demonstrate that you are trying to find a solution and that you are willing to share responsibility.

Reinforce Opportunities

You think about your resources and services every day, but members are busy working within their organizations. It's unlikely that your available benefits are always top-of-mind. Remind them! Share the impact of your resources and events so they can visualize how reengaging will help their business. Note: Be careful to remain realistic about what is doable and what isn't.

Make Exceptions

Your chamber has policies in place for good reasons. However, most policies are helpful guidelines and not an unbendable set of rules. It is often neither practical nor sensible to state a policy and fail to assist a member. Be willing to make reasonable exceptions that make good sense. When the request is unreasonable, use positive language to focus on what you can offer as opposed to directly saying no. If you are unsure about a request, seek counsel from your manager.

Use Email to Schedule a Call

Can't reach a disengaged member via the phone? Send a personalized email to try and set up a call. Simply invite the member to jump on a call and walk through what they like and don't like, ultimately aiming to help them maximize their membership investment. Many members appreciate the opportunity to provide their feedback and opinions.

Win-back Promo

Win-back promotions can work as a last resort effort to reactivate a formerly active member. The concept basically involves providing an attractive discount or gratis opportunity. This could entail an upcoming event or available resource that you feel could be a difference maker in reactivating a previously engaged member. This method should only be utilized when other strategies have failed. NOTE: You must obtain permission from your manager prior to making such an offer.

Fix the Problem

Of course, there will be instances when a member has a problem or issue that comes as a result of an isolated incident. When this occurs, the next crucial step is to determine whether it is worth the effort to win the member back. Needless to say, if the problem is something that can be easily remedied, you should fix it. However, if winning a member back means overhauling your processes, that's a different story. When in doubt, seek counsel from your manager and follow-up accordingly.

Gaging Satisfaction Calls

The third quarter touch-point is where you gage each member's satisfaction and probability of renewing. As such, you need to make sure the member is enjoying a positive membership experience. You are on a discovery mission to figure out their level of satisfaction:

Talking points and steps to ensure member satisfaction:

- Do you recall why you initially joined?
- On a scale of 1-10, how are we doing?
- If you get less than or equal to a 6, the member isn't likely to renew their membership. Ask what you or your chamber need to do to get to a 9 or 10.
- If you get a 7-8, the member is neutral. Ask what you or your chamber need to do to get to a 9 or 10.
- If you get a 9-10, you are well on your way to a renewal. Ask what steps the member and you or your chamber need to take to help maintain their satisfaction.

Nurturing and Renewal Confirmation

Never merely send a membership invoice and leave renewal up to chance. The fourth quarter call is designed to continue nurturing the relationship and uncover whether your previous connections and follow-up efforts have smoothed the way for a seamless membership renewal.

Talking points and steps to nurture relations and confirm renewal:

- If the member's participation has slowed, try to get them reengaged or introduce another way for them to gain value.
- Let them know when they can expect their renewal notice and confirm whether they intend to renew.
- If they intend to renew, offer to take a credit card, and manage the renewal process for them.
- If they are on the fence about renewing, ask what you or your chamber can do to improve their experience so that they will renew.
- If the answer is still no, meet with your manager to discuss possible solutions.

Membership Renewal Strategy

There will always be members who don't renew right away, but the good news is that many will eventually renew with a little extra effort. In fact, getting these members to renew is much easier and less time consuming than prospecting for new members. This is because they are already familiar with your organization and have proven interest in and willingness to pay for a membership. You'll find that many members intend to renew and merely put it off. In other cases, the member just needs a little reminder of why they invested in the first place and what they'll be missing if they don't renew.

Added follow-up steps when your chamber do not receive a member's renewal payment:

- Continue trying to reach the member via the phone.
- Leave two voicemails reminding the member why they joined in the first place and what they'll be missing if they don't renew.
- Call, letter, or email from your CEO reminding them of the helpful solutions that your chamber provides with reminder invoice or renewal link.