

What's next for membership organisations?

A WHITE PAPER

Introduction

What does it mean to be a membership organisation today? And what does it take for individuals to choose to belong to a community, a charity, a professional body? Is it still enough to trade on core benefits and solid reputations or do organisations need to roll out the red carpet to keep members engaged and attract new ones?

While some clubs and associations are seeing membership numbers drop in the UK – the Labour and Conservative parties have shed tens of thousands of members* – the figures for others are much rosier. Even post-pandemic and through the cost-of-living crisis, paid membership of charities has remained consistent at one in five people. And in September 2022, the National Trust revealed its membership had risen to 5.7m – 300,000 new members since the previous year – with membership income rising £12.5m year-on-year. In October 2021, the Trust reported that one member was joining the beloved heritage organisation every 23 seconds. Heartening for the future of the Trust, and a lightbulb moment for other membership bodies to examine ways in which they can keep up with changing conditions and strengthen their offerings.

From influencers and incentives to brand ambassadors and personalised content, membership organisations now have a richer toolkit to address challenges such as a gnawing generation gap, a public who are increasingly sensitive over how their data will be used, the challenges of promoting membership benefits/content on a multitude of different platforms, scaling up tech solutions to appeal to a public with increasingly sophisticated digital tastes, the indifference of boards and more.

*Labour has lost 170,000 members since 2017; the Conservative Party is believed to have lost 70,000 members since 2005.

In May 2023, The River Group gathered key C-suite members, directors and marketers from some of the UK's most eminent membership organisations for a roundtable discussion of these and other issues. Participants included:

Clive Sanders, director of income and marketing, the Ramblers (*UK walking charity*)

Adam Saville, chief editor, Vitality (*health/life insurance company*)

Sajeeda Merali, CEO, Professional Publishers Association (*membership body for publishers*)

John McKie, celebrity manager, Diabetes UK (*diabetes charity*)

Sarah Poulter, CEO, the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management (*membership body for resources, sustainability and waste management*)

James Banks, membership director, Chartered Institute of Architectural Technologists (*membership body for architectural technology*)

Tanya Curry, CEO, Motor Neurone Disease Association (*charity for people affected by motor neurone disease*)

Caan Walls, membership manager, British Library

Lysanne Currie, editor-in-chief, Chartered Institute of Public Relations (*chartered body for public relations professionals*); CEO, Meet the Leader (*boutique content agency*)

Anna-Louise Dearden, editor-in-chief, newsletters, Saga Media (*over-50s media brand*)

Clare Macer, head of membership/CRM, LYMA (*beauty product supplier*).

Cobus Heyl, co-founder, Di5rupt (*media organisation*)

James Lord, CEO/board director, RSVP (*luxury networking club*)

Jessica Day, senior membership manager, Walpole (*trade body for the UK luxury sector*)

Nicola Murphy, group CEO, The River Group (*integrated content marketing agency*)

This report collates these leaders' thoughts, insights and examples of best practice, highlighting the opportunities that membership organisations – and businesses wanting to sign up members or subscribers – can harness in order to thrive in the years ahead.

We hope you find some valuable takeaways to put into action.



JOANNA LUMLEY



ANGELINA JOLIE



CHRIS PACKHAM



MRBEAST

Chapter 1

4 WAYS TO OPTIMISE CELEBRITY POWER

Whether it's supermodels baring skin for PETA, Bob Geldof orchestrating the legendary Live Aid project for the African famine, or Angelina Jolie drawing attention to child trafficking as part of her work for the UN's Refugee Agency, celebrities have long played an important role in enhancing a charity's public image and increasing the reach of their message. More recently, influencers are working with charities: YouTuber MrBeast has raised \$23m (£18m) for #TeamTrees, helping plant over 9m trees and highlighting the importance of deforestation to his 178m subscribers.

Yet such star wattage can come laced with serious concerns. The risk for reputational

damage is great, particularly if a celebrity becomes embroiled in negative publicity.

"Many organisations tell us we need celebrities and micro-influencers to promote our brand," says John McKie, celebrity manager at Diabetes UK. "Yes, celebrities do add power and value. But they're not a silver bullet; you need to think about how they will add value to your organisation."

Here's some advice for any organisation thinking about sprinkling some stardust...

I. DON'T CHASE TOM CRUISE OR BEYONCÉ: USE CELEBRITIES IN YOUR SECTOR

Think about which celebrities are big in your world. If you're a charity like the Woodland ➡➔

Trust, it could be a *Springwatch* presenter like Chris Packham. For the British Dental Association, it could be a star orthodontist. These people will promote your brand more passionately and resonate more with current or potential members.

Take GB Railfreight, for example. You might think “Hmm, a rail freight operator – not interested”. But the organisation scored some valuable publicity when it hired trainspotting social media personality Francis Bourgeois as its brand ambassador last year. Bourgeois has 2.9 million followers on TikTok and 2 million on Instagram – that’s a reason to be interested.

Tapping into these highly engaged fan networks on social media can have enormous reach. Bookstores such as Waterstones have reported selling more books by hosting BookTok – an online event that engages the TikTok community of young users who make videos about their book recommendations. It’s a hungry group of enthusiasts bound by a common passion; they need very little encouragement to get involved.

Whatever your organisation’s sector or specialism, chances are there’s an influencer or ready-made community to authentically align with.

2. THIS MATTERS: FIND CELEBRITIES WHO GENUINELY CARE ABOUT YOUR BRAND OR CAUSE

The most effective celebrity hook-ups are those where the personality is a passionate advocate. An excellent recent example is England/Manchester United footballer Marcus Rashford, who confronted Boris Johnson on child poverty as part of his work with food-waste charity FareShare. Rashford’s campaigning resulted in the government agreeing to increase the number of free school meals. Likewise, Joanna Lumley’s tireless campaigning as the face of the Gurkha Justice Campaign led to a government climbdown on the rights of Gurkha veterans to live in the UK.

“Whenever a celebrity puts their money where their mouth is, it can be exponential in terms of the brand,” says Diabetes UK’s McKie.

Some brand advocates can surprise, defying preconceptions and mutually benefiting reputations. McKie notes that George W. Bush’s work with the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which he launched while in office in



MARCUS RASHFORD
2003, has so far helped save over 25m lives in sub-Saharan Africa.

3. CELEBRITIES HAVE POWERFUL FRIENDS: USE THEM

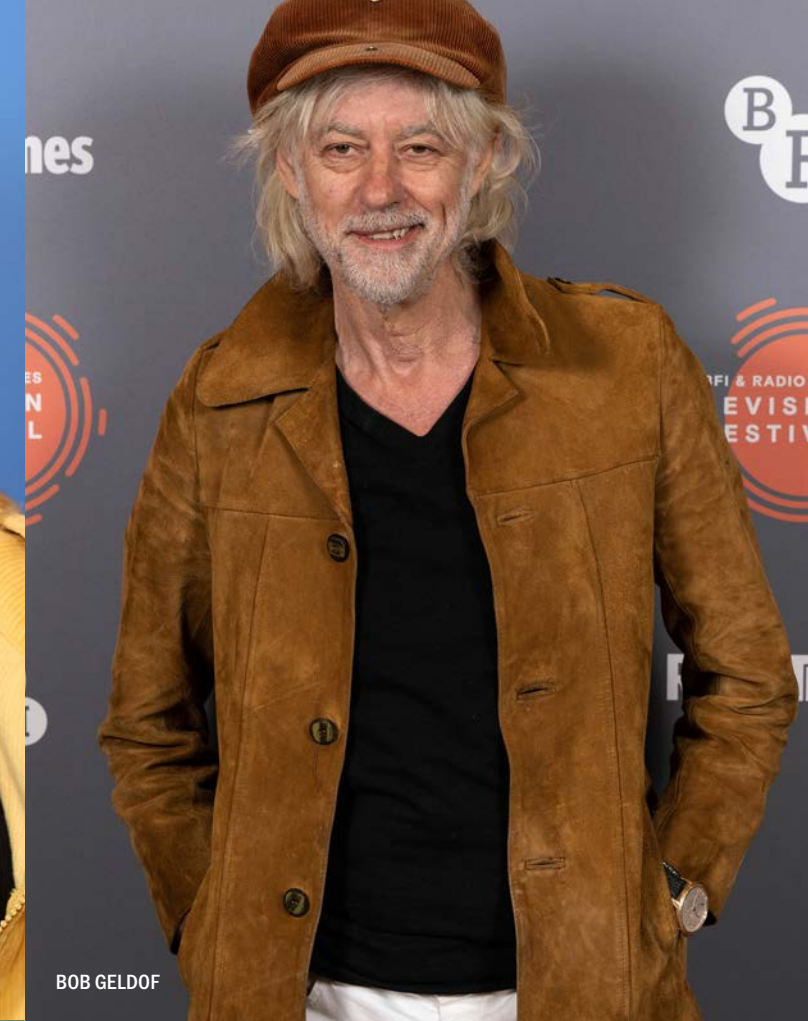
In 2021, Diabetes UK started working with model Roxy Horner, then recently diagnosed with type 1 diabetes, who posted about the charity on social media and helped them garner important media coverage. Horner’s partner, the comedian Jack Whitehall, was also inspired to get involved with the charity. In December 2022, he staged a sold-out comedy gig with the help of fellow comedians Alan Carr and Russell Howard, helping raise £40,000 for the charity.

4. YOU CAN DO THIS: SELECT AN AMBASSADOR WHO SHOWS MEMBERS WHAT THEY CAN ACHIEVE

Walking charity the Ramblers selected presenter and entrepreneur Amar Latif – who has retinitis pigmentosa, leaving him almost totally blind by the age of 20 – as their new president earlier this year. “Doing this showed how we’re changing the narrative,” says Clive Sanders, director of income and marketing at the Ramblers. The organisation wanted to involve someone who represented a different experience of walking and show others that ability shouldn’t be a barrier.



ROXY HORNER



BOB GELDOF



JACK WHITEHALL



ALAN CARR



Nearly half of special-interest charity members get involved because they want to "make a difference"

MEMBERSHIP & THE CHARITY SECTOR REPORT,
NFPRESEARCH, 2023

Chapter 2 BUILDING CHARITABLE AND VALUES-BASED MEMBERSHIP MODELS

England and Wales' 169,000 charities are one sector where membership is remaining consistent. Today, nearly a quarter (23%) of British adults are a paying member of a charity, according to nfpResearch's Membership & the Charity Sector report, published in January 2023.

Some types of charity appear to be attracting more members than others. Those that provide support and advice for members, such as disability charity Scope or the National Childbirth Trust, see the most members sign up (38% of respondents said they were a member of a support/advice charity). Next are charities that campaign for causes, such as Amnesty International (32% of respondents are members of 'campaigning' charities). 28% were members of heritage charities (such as the National Trust), while 23% were members of a special-interest group, society or club.

The research indicates that people are more willing to become members of organisations that are important to them emotionally, perhaps signing up for Scope because they have a relative with a disability, or joining Amnesty International because they feel strongly about human rights violations around the world. The value exchange is less tangible than, say, being a loyalty club member for the discounts, but loyalty to charities that resonate for personal reasons runs deep.

Purpose is a powerful tool for selling memberships or increasing regular donations. According to the report, nearly half (49%) of campaign charity members decided to become a member of a charity because they deemed it to be "a worthy cause", while 47% of special-interest charity members got involved to "make a difference". Some organisations might consider reframing their mission messaging to reflect their purpose as a benefit. ➤➤➤

This sentiment is echoed by the Ramblers' Clive Sanders. He says people are much more likely to sign up for membership when there's an underlying purpose, or if the organisation is addressing a problem. It's why the Ramblers today isn't solely about opening up the British countryside for the enjoyment of everybody but is also emphasising the health and wellbeing benefits of walking and its role in tackling the UK's obesity epidemic, as well as its role in the prevention of cancer, diabetes and heart disease.

"We have a brand perception challenge," Sanders admits. "We're perceived as an old people's walking club, so our aim is to tell a different story in a different way." Aligning with an overriding health and wellness purpose – such as the Ramblers' Wellbeing Walks (described by Sanders as "getting people walking, similar to the Couch to 5k app") – can increase membership.

He adds: "We want to pivot our objective from being an organisation where you pay your membership fees once a year and get five benefits to a value-based membership model where members support us because they believe in the work that we do."

Promoting your organisation's green or sustainability agenda is increasingly important. People still buy membership on feeling, authenticity and both measurable and perceived value. But today it's not good enough to tell consumers about your core business or service; they also want to know your stance on environmental and ethical issues. Shared values are powerful currency.

This is particularly true of younger generations (millennials and Gen Z): 64% of 18- to 22-year-olds surveyed in a 2022 Bupa study said they considered it important that employers act on environmental issues. At the Ramblers, Sanders has detected a dichotomy between the over-40s and under-40s. The former "love joining things", in contrast to their younger counterparts who "prefer to support issues".

The under-40s might not think twice about paying a subscription for food boxes or streaming services, but they also pay to support things [rather than joining and participating]," Sanders observes. In other words, they'll save up for something that costs more if it meets their values. Indeed, 73% of Gen Z only buy from brands they believe in, says research from PR firm Edelman.

This generational behaviour gap has also been noted by other membership organisations. Do

younger generations really want to buy into a membership model, attending networking events in their locality?

James Banks, membership director at the Chartered Institute of Architectural Technologists, believes they may be "more interested in a loose affiliation and support what we're trying to do with things like biophilic design and healthy buildings.

"Our older-age demographic are our most engaged members; they put the work in, similar to volunteers," he adds. "But getting younger generations to buy into this model and see the benefit of membership is tricky." And it's become even more difficult since Covid as the work-from-home generation have become accustomed to staying in, rather than getting out and being active in person.

This generational divide has been borne out in research: the over-65s are twice as likely as 18- to 24-year-olds to set up a direct debit online to a charity, according to 2019 research by Populus.

To attract younger members, charities may wish to consider changing imagery or perhaps even uniting with another charity. It's what Help the Aged and Age Concern did when they merged and rebranded as Age UK in 2009. Sanders says that Help the Aged was beset by a brand marketing problem: "Their imagery was often senior citizens at the bottom of the stairs pressing a red button for help." By contrast, Age Concern's imagery was "all about living a brilliant life when you're older". After merging, the new charity could tell a different story and position themselves in new areas.

Although it's becoming increasingly important to charities to showcase their 'purpose', this will count for nothing if members aren't explicitly told how their membership fees or donations are helping others. Some organisations are investing in tech to personalise this information.

Three days after giving blood in Cambridge, Sanders received a text from the NHS informing him his platelets and plasma had helped save somebody's life in London's Charing Cross hospital. This solution is obviously dependent on some sophisticated technology including barcoding; if charities want to do similar, they need to invest in improving their digital offerings.

Technology can also be used for storytelling, and charities may need to embrace more social media channels for repositioning a narrative and driving engagement.



"We want to pivot to a value-based membership model where members support us because they believe in the work we do"

CLIVE SANDERS, DIRECTOR OF INCOME AND MARKETING, THE RAMBLERS



"You've got to have propositions that speak to different groups within your membership"

SAJEEDA MERALI, CEO, PROFESSIONAL PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION

Chapter 3

THE VALUE EXCHANGE: DRIVING AND MEASURING ENGAGEMENT

Perhaps the biggest mistake brands make with their membership base is viewing their loyalty as purely transactional: just take their membership fees, offer a few benefits and that's it. Instead, membership and loyalty schemes should be used to galvanise even more engagement, helping members discover new products or services, but also legally harnessing their data to deliver even more personalised and relevant offerings.

This is something insurance firm Vitality has an intrinsic understanding of. Life insurance is a tricky sell. After all, few of us want a reminder that one day we'll be departing this world. And in the 21st century, the insurance industry faces a big problem attracting young people; countless studies have shown millennials are the most uninsured generation since World War II.

However, Vitality regularly engages people of all generations, thanks to its shared-value model.

It addresses a societal problem by acting as a business, not as charitable donors.

"Our core purpose is to make customers healthy," says Adam Saville, chief editor at Vitality. "If these values are expressed and understood from the beginning of a member relationship, it's much easier to gain engagement and increase the retention rate. Keeping our members healthy keeps retention high."

The mission to improve the fitness of customers isn't down to benevolence alone; if their customers are healthier, it lowers the cost of their healthcare and therefore the price of insurance.

Vitality incentivises potential members by offering discounts on Apple Watches and Fitbits; a partnership with Apple sees members' premiums defined by the level of activity recorded on their Apple Watch. Meanwhile, its sponsorship of weekly parkruns since 2012 has seen nearly 3m ➡➡➡

AS PART OF ITS TARGET TO INCREASE NEW MEMBERS BY A MILLION, CO-OP RECENTLY ANNOUNCED THAT IT WOULD BE INVESTING £240M IN A NEW MEMBERSHIP REWARD PROGRAMME. THE FIRST PHASE, LAUNCHED IN APRIL 2023, FOCUSED ON NEW AND LOWER PRICES EXCLUSIVELY AVAILABLE TO CO-OP MEMBERS, WHO COULD SAVE UP TO £300 PER YEAR

wardrobe consultation or personal stylist – can also drive loyalty.

Identifying which members to incentivise isn't just about who spends the most cash either: it may also involve activating and nurturing your communities. Those members who write reviews, interact with the brand on social media and post user-generated content can act as ambassadors for the brand, perhaps generating leads for other potential customers or members.

During the cost-of-living crisis, perhaps one of the most effective engagement tools is based around price. As part of its target to increase new members by a million, Co-op recently announced it would be investing £240m in a new membership reward programme. The first phase, launched in April 2023, focused on new and lower prices exclusively available to Co-op members, who could save up to £300 per year.

Making customer journeys as simple and friction-free as possible is also key for engagement. One of the biggest barriers to people signing up for membership is annoyances encountered on the company website or in online marketing: clunky PDFs, slow load times, bad UX, outdated design and irksome chatbots. "People prefer instant gratification," says Saville. "They'd rather have something short, sharp and easy, there and then."

Potential members may also be deterred by marketing they consider offensive or distressing, says Tanya Curry, CEO of the Motor Neurone Disease Association.

"Because, sadly, 50% of people with motor neurone disease die within two years of diagnosis, we have a huge challenge marketing our brand," she says. "There's a sensitivity around these issues that needs to be added to our marketing."

Personalisation can be used here to give customers a choice to opt out of marketing material. "If someone is suffering from depression, the last thing they need is receiving content telling them to go out for a run," says Saville. In recent years, retailers such as Marks & Spencer, Bloom & Wild, Waitrose and very.co.uk have given customers the option to not receive marketing in the run-up to Mother's Day or Father's Day.

As with the charities mentioned in Chapter 2, membership organisations may wish to accentuate any purpose-driven or altruistic ventures. Caan Walls, membership manager at the British Library, notes that "many of the organisations I've worked with have changed their messaging and moved from a transactional membership model to a philanthropic one, whether it's [promoting the news that] scientists at Royal Botanic Gardens Kew are working on dementia, or people doing research on the cure for Covid at the British Library. In both cases, it helped with our philanthropic ask."

Engagement is more of a hurdle for some organisations than others. Getting younger people interested in waste management is easier when the sustainability benefits are front and centre, says Sarah Poulter, CEO at the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management.

"Our sector is really pushing forward the circular economy and recycling, such as the different business models of designing out waste: something you can imagine students and the younger generations getting interested in," she says.

Ultimately, driving engagement may come down to a basic truism: any membership organisation worth their salt needs to have an implicit grasp of the needs and desires of their members.

"The crux of it is understanding your audience and giving them choice," says Clare Macer, head of membership/CRM, LYMA. "The public need to trust you, but you've also got to give them choice to spend on and select what's relevant to them, presenting it through different media."

people run a 5k around their local green space: the kind of publicity many financial services firms can only dream of.

Personalisation is also key for Vitality, as with its Next Best Action scheme, which gives customers bespoke advice by using their data to recommend a 'health improvement journey' to quit smoking, lose weight or become more active, for example.

"Personalisation allows us to go granular," says Saville. "If we have a customer in an urban location, we can set up an article about getting active in the city; if they're in the countryside, it could be about running in the local area."

As businesses apply machine learning and AI to customer data to offer even more targeted offerings, members of organisations can expect such personalisation to increase.

But beware. Some consumers may perceive personalisation as too intrusive. According to a 2019 survey by KPMG, only one in five consumers saw personalisation as a leading benefit of loyalty programmes. A fifth (20%) of UK respondents to the survey said having their online or purchase behaviour tracked was a key deterrent to joining loyalty programmes.

Offering personalisation to members often may mean segmenting the audiences – by age, gender, household income, social grade, educational background or location. As Sajeeda Merali, CEO of the Professional Publishers Association (PPA), says, "You've got to have propositions that speak to different groups within your membership."

This could be a financial strain for many organisations. Targeting varied groups invariably means increasing staffing to create more omnichannel content to reach these disparate audiences and optimise engagement across them. Growth strategies for these kind of broad-church organisations need to consider this.

The role of incentivisation

Incentivising membership also works. This goes beyond discounts, perks and freebies such as sending out logoed-up merchandise. Incentives need to carry tangible, useful benefit – like priority boarding and early check-in with airlines' executive clubs, or hotel loyalty schemes that allow members to pre-order drinks from the bar. Tapping into the experience economy – exclusive events and experiences such as offering a





Over 40% of Gen Z say they've granted access to personal info in exchange for a discount code or free use of service

RESEARCH BY MCKINSEY, 2022

Chapter 4

MEMBERSHIP: FIVE MACRO- TRENDS

From the roundtable discussions, some common trends and themes were identified that could help determine the success of membership organisations in the coming years.

I. DEMOGRAPHICS: THE GEN Z LOYALTY CONUNDRUM

If one common theme has emerged from the preceding chapters, it's that attracting younger members is a key battleground for many membership organisations. The challenge is partly economic: young adults don't have the disposable income enjoyed by previous generations, thanks to the combination of debt, inflation and expensive mortgages. As River Group CEO

Nicola Murphy says: "The younger generation want the best price, right now."

It's also behavioural: having grown up in the sharing economy, ownership is often anathema to Gen Z. They're Ubering or sharing cars rather than owning a set of wheels, or streaming their favourite films and music rather than buying physical albums or DVDs. These habits could all be feeding into their apparent reluctance to pay membership fees.

The impersonal and fast-paced nature of technology is another factor – Gen Z have been raised on user-friendly apps and intuitive devices – this means that they don't necessarily spend the time needed to get to grips with the nuances of a brand, or build relationships with ➤➔

businesses, creating even more disloyalty.

“When I got my first bank account at the age of 17, I needed to go into the branch, fill out multiple forms and develop relationships with a manager,” says Murphy. “Today, all that youngsters need to do is take a photo of themselves on the Monzo app, and the next day they get a card sent to them in the post. This is how loyalty works today: there’s no customer journey or affiliation, or none of the loyalty that usually develops in business relationships over years. It makes them more fickle about dropping or switching brands.”

Perhaps counterintuitively, the solution could be patience and playing the long game. The PPA has cultivated a strong alumni network through events such as their annual 30 Under 30 awards, which is a surefire way of finding – and hopefully retaining – future stars and ambassadors, who could become members.

“Over the last 10 years, this programme has grown our alumni base, which has developed into a community in its own right,” says Merali, who adds that this community recently held a ‘hackathon’ to hack the problem of attracting new talent into the sector.

On the other hand, perhaps organisations need to dispense with defining their members by generation altogether. As the work of Bobby Duffy, professor of public policy at King’s College London, has shown, labelling all over-60s as baby boomers or all under-25s as Gen Z could create even more division and confusion. As Anna-Louise Dearden, editor-in-chief of newsletters at Saga Media, describes her audience: “We’ve got 50-year-olds who go clubbing at Pacha in Ibiza. At the other end we’ve got 90-year-olds shopping in Asda.”

River Group Deputy MD Rupert Foy agrees that many member organisations may need to reframe their notions of age: “Just because somebody’s over 60, it doesn’t mean they’re not interested in the latest tech... today, nobody wants to feel marketed to as if they’re in a certain bracket.”

2.

INCLUSION: IS YOUR ORGANISATION TRULY FOR EVERYONE?

Letting the public know that anybody can join your organisation – regardless of gender, race, ethnic background, social class, sexual orientation or ability – may seem like membership marketing 101. Yet few organisations incorporate this sense of inclusivity into their

THE WOMEN’S INSTITUTE (WI) HAS ENJOYED A RESURGENCE AMONG YOUNG UK URBANITES IN RECENT YEARS (MEMBERSHIP IS CURRENTLY 220,000, UP FROM 201,000 IN 2008), THANKS IN NO SMALL PART TO PROMOTING ITSELF AS A PROGRESSIVE ORGANISATION. IN 2015 IT INTRODUCED AN OFFICIAL POLICY TO ALLOW TRANSGENDER WOMEN TO BECOME MEMBERS

imagery or storytelling. However, there have been some interesting recent developments in this area.

Earlier this year the Ramblers appointed Amar Latif as its new president, sending an immediate signal that walking in the UK’s green spaces should be a right enjoyed by everybody, irrespective of their ability. Over the past few years, the Ramblers has also run regular Refugee Walks – where members give asylum seekers the chance to enjoy walking in the UK countryside. The Ramblers’ Refugee Walks were recently featured on BBC One’s *Countryfile*, helping give a very different perspective on what the Ramblers does as an organisation and who it’s for.

The Women’s Institute (WI) has enjoyed a resurgence among young UK urbanites in recent years (membership is currently 220,000, up from 201,000 in 2008), thanks in no small part to promoting itself as a progressive organisation. In 2015 the WI introduced an official policy to allow transgender women to become members (the policy had unofficially been in place since the 1970s). In 2021, the WI featured trans woman Petra Wenham on the cover of its membership magazine; CEO Melissa Green recently said the inclusion of transgender women “enriches” the organisation.

Conversely, public criticism and negative publicity tends to dog membership organisations that refuse to update archaic attitudes towards inclusion. In June 2023, London gentlemen’s club Pratt’s announced it would allow women to become members – after a wait of 166 years. The Travellers Club (which has diplomats among its members), White’s (which has never allowed

“We’ve got 50-year-olds who go clubbing at Pacha in Ibiza. At the other end, we’ve got 90-year-olds shopping in Asda”

ANNA-LOUISE DEARDEN, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF NEWSLETTERS AT SAGA MEDIA

women inside the building, aside from the late Queen Elizabeth II), Brooks's and Boodle's still refuse to admit women.

3. GDPR AND DATA: WILL YOU FACE A PRIVACY BACKLASH?

GDPR presents problems for long-term retention of members. You can't keep people's data and information indefinitely, so you must keep them engaged, otherwise risk losing them. How to do this? Make them feel they're getting something in return.

Data capture is an incredibly useful tool for loyalty and membership schemes, helping to develop offerings. However, many marketers seem reticent to use this data, fearing members may object to their privacy being invaded. But it appears that younger adults have no such worries. According to 2022 research by McKinsey, over 40% of Gen Z respondents said they'd granted access to personal info in exchange for a discount code or free use of service. The same study also found a paltry 1% of people of all ages read through what they're agreeing to when signing up for a service or website.

With Google predicted to start phasing out its support for cookies from 2024 in Chrome, many membership organisations are fearing a 'cookiepocalypse' over their data. Many organisations may need to find new ways to collaborate with their members, rather than just harvesting data from them.

4. MULTIFACETED MEMBERS: THE CHALLENGES OF BRINGING MULTIFACETED MEMBERS TOGETHER

Most membership organisations are not homogenous. The PPA, for example, has more than 300 members spanning publications ranging from *New Scientist* and *The Economist* to *Vogue*, *Practical Caravan* and *The Beano*, among many others, as well as independent publishers of blogs and websites.

"The biggest challenge is finding a boutique offering that brings all of these different members under one umbrella," says Merali. "And we thought that one of the ways we should deliver is to [emphasise] the idea of progress. That relates to driving forward the reputation of our industry and providing leadership on issues such as sustainability and DEI."

Members also need to be reminded how their affiliation with the organisation can help the industry on a wider, more campaigning level –

implementing real changes. "For us, it's important to create our membership model as a business environment that will support and benefit our members, in areas such as policy and regulation," explains Merali.

5. MEMBERSHIP: USING MEMBERSHIP AS A BUSINESS STRATEGY

Although more subscriptions may have been cancelled since the easing of Covid lockdowns, it's worth remembering that the pandemic also saw an unprecedented number of organisations – particularly small and medium enterprises – embrace the world of memberships or subscriptions for the first time.

Many of these immediately saw how profitable membership could be and have subsequently made it a central plank of their business strategy. Back in the summer of 2020, Barclaycard estimated the subscription economy to be worth £323m, a significant increase of 39.4% on the previous year, with households spending an average of £552 a year on sign-up services. It also found that 10% of companies launched their first subscription service during the first national lockdown.

Membership-like organisations are also popping up in other places, such as the world of cryptocurrencies. Decentralised autonomous organisations (DAOs) are essentially groups of investors and artists who meet in chatroom servers, sometimes minting their own currencies. At DAO Friends With Benefits, members can have access to a private chatroom on the Discord app (to talk about NFTs and other topics) or attend secret parties in Miami and New York. If large companies get the opportunity to mint their own digital currencies (a Gucci coin, maybe?), members could get exclusive access to products and experiences.

Above all, membership can be lucrative for many organisations and offer a reliable, more predictable income than other sources. For small organisations such as equestrian charity the British Horse Society, membership can account for as much as 81% of its annual income. For the National Trust, it's 53% of its annual revenue. In other words, membership revenue has a serious impact on organisations' bottom lines.

All these trends should be on membership organisations' agendas over the next few years, in what looks set to be a fascinating and transformative time for the sector.

Few organisations incorporate a true sense of inclusivity into their imagery and storytelling



Photography: Alamy, Getty Images, Pexels / Kinohi Media / Mart Production / Jack Sparrow / Vanessa Garcia / Van Krakau, Rachell Smith, Helen McHale

RIVER GROUP: THE AWARD- WINNING MEMBERSHIP EXPERTS

River helps membership organisations to tell their stories and reach new audiences. With targeted strategies, impactful content and effective amplification, our approach to membership engagement, conversion and advocacy drives awareness and deepens loyalty. As a full-service integrated marketing agency, we take your brand's narrative from strategy and creative to data, measurement and insight. With roots in content marketing, we deliver authentic, engaging creative that works across channels, reaching members where they are, delivering a best-in-class experience and measurable ROI. Our teams create tailored, effective strategies and social media campaigns that saw us named a Top 20 Agency for Value for Money in 2022 and 2023 by The Drum Recommends. We call on top journalists and thought leaders who bring rigour and perspective to brand stories. And we measure everything we do.

Our client membership portfolio includes these respected brands:

- Boots
- Superdrug
- ICAS (*Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland*)
- Co-op
- Diabetes UK
- Ramblers
- Vitality
- Hidden Disabilities

River's smart-commissioning process delivers content efficiently across channels, employing the most effective formats for every client and campaign: print and digital editorial, talent and influencer content, podcasts, newsletters and social media, traditional PR and ad sales.

Our clients describe us as agile, collaborative, creative, innovative, commercial and fun. Get in touch now at nmurphy@therivergroup.co.uk.

The logo for River Group Content Limited is centered on the page. It features the word "RIVER" in a bold, white, sans-serif font. A small, stylized white bird icon is positioned above the letter "V". Below "RIVER" is the word "GROUP" in a larger, white, sans-serif font. Underneath "GROUP" is the text "CONTENT LIMITED" in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. The background of the entire page is a complex, abstract pattern of overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of blue and teal, including circles, squares, and triangles.

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