

## Behind the Firewall

By Jeanne L. Allert

*A recent survey by The Center for Association Leadership and Ellipsis Partners examines whether members-only Web sites are more hassle than help in adding value, building community, and protecting industry-sensitive information.*

Reprinted from *Executive Update*  
March 2005 ~ All rights reserved

Background for board of directors meetings. Special chat rooms devoted to controversial issues. Online membership directories. Internal news. Webinars. These are just a few examples of "content exclusivity" that are possible with a members-only Web section on your association site. And according to the results of a recent survey, many associations are taking advantage of this technological ability and testing whether members-only sites offer added value for members and returns for the organization.

Ellipsis Partners and The Center for Association Leadership embarked on this study in the summer of 2004 to examine the current state of operations for members-only Web efforts. The goal was to provide the association market with a general sense of how members-only content is being handled and to explore whether this concentration of technology and effort has churned out value. Secondly, we wanted this effort to encourage associations and the business partners that support them to engage in more benchmarking and research so that all associations might benefit from our collective experiences.

The hypothesis that led to this study was that members-only offerings provide two benefits: perceived and actual value that members derive from the content, services, or products; and the image and brand value that the organization receives for its efforts. In the survey, we sought first to delve into the latter: to understand the scope of the effort being expended and to get organizations' take on their own return on investment. Therefore, this first round of study gathered responses to the questions, "What are your activities, structures, and resources?" and "What return are you getting on those?"

It is important to examine the other side of the coin as well and ascertain whether or not each membership is

deriving value from its efforts. Certainly while doing this work, we heard a resounding call for greater member input in site planning and future enhancements. However, there might not be as much practical outcome in looking at aggregate numbers across a wide range of associations for member satisfaction. Each organization should take its own measures and consider its customers in this kind of Web effort.

### Members-Only Business Premise

Often in our Web strategy work, our clients are debating whether they should have exclusive sections on their site, what should be there, whether anyone will visit, and what other associations are doing. This study revealed that much of the effort that goes into maintaining a members-only section is in addition to other duties, that the practices for maintaining these Web areas are largely manual and subjective, and that resources have not been dedicated specifically to this task. So what is the business rationale that would justify making all this additional labor worthwhile?

Interestingly, very few of these respondents indicated that they went into their members-only endeavor with a clear business strategy; many noted in hindsight that they wished they had had a plan. And while most respondents have been managing their members-only effort for more than two years, they indicated that they hoped to do more planning.

The survey found that the most common organizational goals for launching a members-only area included the desire to offer content and products exclusive to members, the need to protect content that might be industry-sensitive, and the desire to provide an area where members could network online with one another.

As we learned later in the survey sections on value, associations that have established guidelines for members-only content and that market this exclusive benefit to members apparently are realizing the first goal. Across these results, however, we have yet to see evidence of members-only sites as a strong peer-networking platform.

We asked several questions about associations' practices for gathering business intelligence from their Web site and how they might be using members-only data to guide their Web efforts. Were they, for example, concentrating more efforts on some content areas rather than others, based on their members' behaviors online? While most respondents reported that they have access

to their Web statistics, the vast majority indicated that they either had not yet learned to incorporate that data into their daily practices or that the data weren't being used in business planning at all. And surprisingly, only a few of these organizations engage in any kind of regular customer feedback activities. Thus, most feedback offered about members-only value was primarily anecdotal.

### **Exclusivity or Control?**

For the purpose of this study, we defined "members-only" as "any partition of an organization's Web site that is protected from general-public access and that contains features or content unique to its membership market." This broad definition allowed us to include the perspectives of organizations with various approaches to controlling access and authenticating membership.

In terms of how organizations create this exclusive access, we learned that most organizations use a username-and-password sequence that restricts access to a subsection of the main Web site, but a few sites display a list of all content or products on the site and only control access when the user attempts to click through.

While two-thirds of respondents indicated that they thought their security procedure was adequate, we noted how pervasive and burdensome the "I forgot my password" or "reset my password" requests are. Some organizations are processing upward of 75 requests a week, which may explain why these same organizations ranked "improve the login process" among their top goals for improvement.

It's not hard to understand the source of the problem when we also learn that nearly half of the organizations assign usernames and passwords to their members. (Most of us have trouble remembering the usernames and passwords that we ourselves select!) We also were interested to learn that most of these organizations are "manually" setting controls on their content. That is, only about one-third of these groups are using any kind of content management system (CMS) to set controls and govern access to the content.

In addition, we noted with surprise the candor with which organizations admitted that they have no articulated guidelines for what constitutes "members-only" versus "public" content. Their practices were characterized as "arbitrary" or at the discretion of someone in authority.

Clearly, though, associations must continuously work, not only on technological barriers (such as login procedures) and technological enablers (such as CMS and database integration), but also on ensuring that they have clear guidelines for what constitutes member-only content and that such guidelines are consistent with their overall strategic direction and mission.

### **Show Me The Value**

"Content is king" seems to ring true everywhere on the Web. Exclusive content in the form of published articles, reports, databases, work tools, and access to other members are what organizations say they believe offer peak member value. However, the study generated an interesting chicken-or-egg question about exclusive content. While organizations infer member value because they see high activity in "downloading documents" and "accessing special databases or tools," we have to ask, "Is that enough to presume value?" Could members simply be availing themselves of content in members-only sites because that is where it is placed or because that is all the content offered? And do we know if members perceive a greater sense of value just because it's found "behind the wall?"

One of the more intriguing hypotheses to come out of this work is the extent to which members-only sites can facilitate online community — the goal ranked second among reasons to offer such a site. Community tools also ranked very high among respondents' plans for site growth. In this study, survey respondents reported that members actively used functions that help them identify themselves or connect with others, such as updating their member record and searching the member or staff directory. In contrast, the least-used activities within these members-only sites were tools such as bulletin boards and chat rooms.

Perhaps this suggests a natural evolution for technical reception within associations: Members begin identifying themselves to others and seek out others, then graduate into involvement in threads of conversation that later mature into vibrant communities of activity. We think associations should not be dissuaded by the slow adoption of these tools but rather continue to stay on top of their penetration in such sectors as online retailing, customer service, and online learning. They also should continue to assess their members' use of these tools in all aspects of their professional and even personal lives.

### **Lessons Learned**

We were interested to discover that while respondents

indicated that "member value" was the highest priority for engaging in members-only efforts, few organizations took the important step of surveying their memberships about what they wanted, and many indicated that "asking the membership" is an important lesson learned in hindsight. Across the board, these organizations admittedly realize they need to solicit more feedback before deciding. Respondents also recognized, by a wide margin, that failing to ask for member input led to faulty thinking in the site's offerings, setup, and management processes. Therefore, many organizations plan to integrate more market research into their future strategies.

Whether they have members-only or completely public Web sites, associations have more work to do in marketing and promoting their online efforts. Associations need to bolster efforts to educate their markets about what their members-only area offers, put tactics in place to continually drive traffic back, and reinforce its value.

While all survey participants intend to continue their members-only efforts, respondents indicated a clear interest in augmenting their content, improving processes, testing the reception of online community tools, and offering more options for online communications and member networking.

Members-only sites clearly are a major element of many associations' online activities. While implementation challenges do exist, we believe that members-only content offers value both to members and their organization. We should reiterate, however, that this study offers merely a snapshot in time of association activity. Just as it is important that — as an industry — we continue to support studies that give us a broad, comparative perspective, it is likewise incumbent on each organization to assess regularly their Web efforts to ensure that they are providing the kind of content, format, services, and functionality that meet members' needs.