

# Membership Growth in a Shifting Landscape

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## Introduction

A continual theme heard around the world in genealogical society board meetings is, “our society membership is declining, what can we do to increase our membership?” Many cite the seemingly easy target of all of the online genealogy resources now available. While it’s true, entrepreneurs did their homework and realized an untapped market as Ancestry.com co-founder Paul Allen recently shared. He and co-founder Dan Taggart “launched Ancestry.com in 1996, offering genealogy hobbyists free access to the Social Security death index for their research needs. Allen started surveying online visitors to the site, asking them questions about what they’d spent on various genealogical endeavors over the course of a year. How much on reference books, family tree software, genealogical magazines, travel? What about on postage and photocopies? When he crunched the numbers, he realized his average visitor was spending more than \$500 a year on this hobby. ‘This is a multibillion-dollar industry and nobody’s noticed it yet,’ Allen realized. ‘Why don’t we digitize everything they’re spending money on and make it possible to do it all through one subscription.’”<sup>1</sup>

Since established genealogical societies are still able to provide real value in an online world, perhaps it’s time to take a page out of the Ancestry.com playbook and survey your members to see what they are spending their money on and what they would be willing to spend money for if your society were to provide the information or service.



**40%**  
Growth

## Growth in the Industry

During an unprecedented year surrounding a pandemic, one of the things that we have learned is that people are home looking for things to do and researching their family is among the top new endeavors. The major online companies, Ancestry.com, MyHeritage, FindMyPast all reported increases in revenue in 2020 in the +/- 40% range. Traffic on those sites, including FamilySearch in the mix, is up by even higher percentages. When retirees are forced to stay home, apparently they do genealogy.

Nothing is more evident of this fact than the recent RootsTech Connect virtual conference held in February 2021, that to date has drawn 1,117,000 participants. Yes! Over one million participants! With all of this documented interest in family history, let’s answer the questions surrounding why your society may be declining in membership?

1. Libby Copeland, “The forever family,” *Deseret News*, 7 March 2021, online archives ([https://www.deseret.com/indepth/2021/3/7/22315282/the-forever-family-ancestry-genealogy-dna-test-spit-privacy-family-history-mormon-secrets?\\_hsmi=114670020&\\_hsenc=p2ANqtz-8rG3iu28hKbcMJxqO-2DW9lh6wfKJgZZMBJ7RWPKFtyRIMNCHwicKVvehsAH4pgMo\\_29XwKKvquns9gYghh2oY\\_Vou-WxbAtUUqOXDkcGWoh9X19o](https://www.deseret.com/indepth/2021/3/7/22315282/the-forever-family-ancestry-genealogy-dna-test-spit-privacy-family-history-mormon-secrets?_hsmi=114670020&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-8rG3iu28hKbcMJxqO-2DW9lh6wfKJgZZMBJ7RWPKFtyRIMNCHwicKVvehsAH4pgMo_29XwKKvquns9gYghh2oY_Vou-WxbAtUUqOXDkcGWoh9X19o) : accessed 8 March 2021), para. 15.

## Surveying Membership

In the same way that Paul Allen, Ancestry.com co-founder reached out to his online members, you can survey your members and former members to determine what they value and how your society may be able to provide that value.

If you've lost membership over the last year, recruit the members of the board to make personal phone calls to each of them and simply say, "we noticed that you didn't renew your membership this year, would you be willing to share with us why?" Then listen! Let them express to you what they were looking for in value from your organization. Listen for ways that your society may have driven off members who were previously very satisfied, but now find themselves not enjoying the value they once thought your society provided.



For example, one society's newsletter won national recognition for the quality of their journal, in fact they won the award twice. However, the publication went from fifty-six pages per quarterly issue, to twenty-four pages. Guess what—their membership also declined as a result. Why? Because members no longer saw the value they once did for their membership fees.

Develop a list of value propositions that you believe your society could offer and survey your current membership, asking them to rank them highest to lowest. Also ask them what they would like from your organization and make sure you capture every idea offered and how frequently it was mentioned.

Here's where the discussion among your board members may have to change. Frequently, the "old guard" says... "We tried that, it didn't work," and "We don't have anyone to do that," and "Where will we get the money, we can't do that," and...you get the idea. These individuals are holding your organization back from adapting to today's opportunity and yes, your organization will go out of existence.

Instead of asking the questions above, ask:

1. "I've heard this was tried before, why do you think it didn't succeed?"
2. "What could we do differently if we tried this again?"
3. "Do you think we put enough resources into it to help it succeed?"
4. "Do you think we stopped too soon, did the idea need more time?"
5. "Who's the right person to make this work?"

Obviously, we're not recommending that you pour good money after bad, but often times, it was not *the idea that was bad*, it was *the execution of the idea* that led to the failure.

## Value Proposition

With your value proposition framed, now resurvey a selected random group of your members and ask them if they would be excited about the new direction for your society and do they believe that they could recruit others to join the society with that focus? If your current members can't get excited about telling others what you're doing, then you haven't found the sweet spot just yet. The response you're looking for is them pulling their wallet out saying, "where do I sign up?" That's when you know that you have a value proposition that separates you from the online genealogy companies and perhaps, even other genealogical societies that may be competing for the same subscribers.

## Recruiting Younger People

I'm frequently involved in discussions with society board members who lament that their society is unable to recruit younger people to join their society. Perhaps the goal shouldn't be to recruit younger members to join, but to mentor them and provide value to their goals in life and build their resume for landing the job in a career that interests them.

Instead of dangling a membership in front of them, identify potential candidates in the 16-30 age range, and approach them to serve on your board of directors. Yes, you read correctly, your *board of directors*! Help them understand the value of having this volunteer effort on their resume and being able to share the lessons they have learned about leadership in a job interview. Let them know that they will be paired with a society board member who will specifically be helping to mentor them to develop skills in the AVO (All Volunteer Organization) industry. Include a free one-year membership, or have another member sponsor their membership fee. For even younger members, this will also be seen as a positive in their college applications.

With them serving on the board, now listen to what they think needs to happen to attract other young people. Does your society have a reserve of funds that they can use to create internships for young people. Again, these internships on their resume's are very powerful to potential employers to separate out candidates with similar backgrounds.



Engaging in an intern program with a high school, college, or university in your area will spread the word about your organization and gives your marketing committee something very tangible to go to the local media with for a human interest story.

## Diversity on the Board of Directors

Just as we have discussed recruiting younger members to the board of directors, does your board reflect the diversity of the population in the area you hope to serve? While your society can't be all things to all people, it can represent the various ethnic groups among the citizens in your area. Study the history of the various peoples who populated your area and spotlight the diverse history in your publications and advertisements. Include these presentations in your local meetings and reach out to local libraries to provide free community programs. These opportunities bring us together and shine a light on something that everyone is yearning to learn, the quest to see where they fit in the woven fabric of humanity.

We don't add diversity to the board for diversities sake, rather, we add members from diverse backgrounds to help us all learn how to meet the needs of the entire community where we are trying to make a difference in preserving the stories and histories of the area.

## Spotlight on Members

Spotlighting members in your publication is another way to create brand loyalty to your organization. It helps you connect with your members and as they tell their story of why they joined the society, you learn more about the value you add to their lives and the lives of those they care about the most.

Do you have multi-generational members in your society? Can they relate family stories and anecdotes that may be part of the history of other members of your society? Have you used the "Relatives Around Us" app created by FamilySearch with the Family Tree to see how the members at your meetings are related to each other? It's a fun exercise. Let them know in advance that you will be doing this so they can sign up and create their tree.

## **Welcoming Prospective Members—Before they Join!**

Invite your members to bring a friend to your next meeting. When they do, provide a welcome packet that lets them know what your organization is about and why they may want to become a member. There isn't any pressure here, it's simply a fun way to engage others in discovering their family history. It's likely why your society was created to begin with—the founders firmly believed that they had information that they wanted to share with others.

Your welcome packet for guests might include:

- a. Free consultation with a society specialist-help them get started
- b. Suggestions on how to organize and preserve their family photos or heirlooms
- c. Free look-up service (be careful not to breach paid subscription site policies)
- d. Mission and vision of the organization
- e. Testimonials of why the organization is important and the value you see

## **National Genealogical Society Resources for Societies**

Following the merger of the National Genealogical Society and the Federation of Genealogical Societies, the society resources were all evaluated for their current value to member societies and relevancy in the twenty-first century society management arena. Numerous publications are currently being reviewed, edited, and updated for release on the NGS website (<https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/society-management-information/>) in the “NGS Info & Answer Series” of publications.

Currently, there are four updated publications available for pdf download to members:

- Growing Your Society
- Fundraising Ideas
- Marketing
- The Society Newsletter

The virtual conference of the National Genealogical Society this year will spotlight Societies, Libraries, Archives, and Museums in their SLAM event on 18 May 2021. They will also host the former Federation of Genealogical Societies “Focus on Societies” event on Friday, 21 May 2021. A popular event during this function is the “Society Shout Out” where the delegate from your society has the opportunity to share what your society is doing and to learn from the delegates of other societies how they are meeting the challenges of membership growth and relevant society management topics in their organization.

## **Conclusion**

If your society membership is declining, there is one simple truth. You've stopped delivering value to your members. They've voted with their money and taken it somewhere else. To regain their confidence and to recruit new members, you must identify a value proposition that speaks to them and their interests. In the twenty-first century, they want some things immediately—does your society provide that? How agile are you to meet your member's needs?

One of the biggest learnings coming out of the pandemic is that people miss each other and the social relationships we all were enjoying before 2020. Your society now, more than ever, can be the source of that social need and bring people together with a common interest in their family and create a joy and satisfaction that they can pass on to their posterity and that will add real value by preserving their heritage, their stories, their love of family, and their willingness to share it with others.