

Member Survey Report on Participation in Guild Offerings and Perceived Value of Membership

The Second of Three Reports from the Marketing Committee

Last month the Marketing Committee reported in this magazine on a number of demographic patterns that emerged from the 2014 member survey. That article can be found on the AGO website along with the Marketing Committee's full 102-page Survey Report at <https://www.agohq.org/ago-past-present-and-future-member-profile/> or by simply searching for *Member Survey* at **agohq.org**, or by using the QR code found at the end of this article. A 22-page digest of the survey report is also available at that site.

In this article we are sharing information on members' engagement in AGO programming including participation in chapter meetings, conventions, and certification as well as findings on the perceived value of AGO membership. In next month's issue of *The American Organist* we will present our final report on matters pertaining to employment.

Examining the Value of AGO Membership

In order to help the American Guild of Organists better serve its 16,000 members, we asked a series of questions to understand the perceived value of membership. We explicitly asked members why membership is valuable to them. But we also asked about specific behaviors such as attendance at **chapter meetings**, **conventions**, and participation in **certification** to help us understand how much value they are actually experiencing from each of these programs. In marketing jargon, we were looking at the AGO's *value proposition*. For the AGO, our *value proposition* is the set of benefits we can point to to explain why someone should pay dues each year to belong to the Guild.

Besides learning how many members utilize Guild programs, the member survey gave us a chance to try to understand how utilization of those benefits differs between members of different ages, training, and a host of other variables. The survey was administered using SurveyMonkey, an online tool that makes it possible to analyze the relationship between two or more survey questions. For example, we could investigate whether attendance at monthly meetings correlates strongly with age (it does), or with training as an organist (it doesn't). We could ask whether attendance at conventions correlates strongly with attendance at monthly meetings (it does) or hours per week employed as an organist (it does). Using this cross-tabulation methodology, we are able to vastly increase the survey's usefulness.

Expressed Value of Membership

Across all age groups, the most valuable aspect of AGO membership was identified as *the opportunity to meet and network with professional colleagues*. More than 39% of members chose that response. Another 22% said *to stay informed about news in the organ world* as the most valuable aspect, reflecting the importance of THE AMERICAN ORGANIST in the Guild's value proposition to its members.

Since members were allowed to choose only one "most valuable aspect," it does not mean that the other reasons are unimportant, only that they were not the *most* important. It is perhaps surprising that *supporting the work of organists* was the third most-frequent response with 12% of members. *Educational programming* was most important to 8%; *learning about job openings* was most important to 6%; *nurturing the next generation of organists* was most important to 4% of members; and *conventions* were the most important value to 3% of members.

Chapter Meeting Attendance

The survey revealed that 34% of all members attended **no** chapter meetings last year. This statistic includes Independent members. (See Figure 1.)

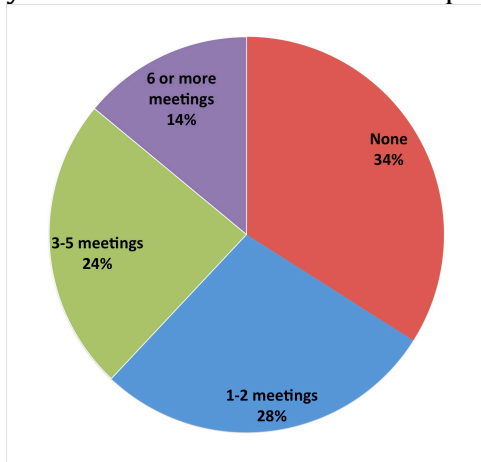


Figure 1 Number of Chapter Meetings Attended in Last Year

Approximately 28% of members report having attended 1-2 meetings last year and another 23% attended 3-5 meetings last year. Only 14% attended 6 or more meetings. If we lump together the people who attended no meetings and those who attended 1 or 2 meetings, we discover that these "no and low attenders" comprise 62% of membership. Members who attend three or more meetings, our "mid and high attenders," comprise 38% of the membership. While it may be difficult to convert "no attenders" into "high attenders," a reasonable goal could be converting "no attenders" to "low attenders" and "lows" to "mids," etc.

Age and Chapter Meetings

Figure 2 depicts the age distribution of members at chapter meetings in terms of absolute numbers. The two long bars protruding to the right reflect the dominance of members born in the 1940s and 1950s in Guild meeting attendance. It is critical to note that 73% of members who attended a Guild meeting last year were born before 1960 (56 and older.) A college-aged new member of the AGO walking into a Guild meeting for the first time will be

surrounded by people the age of his or her parents and grandparents.

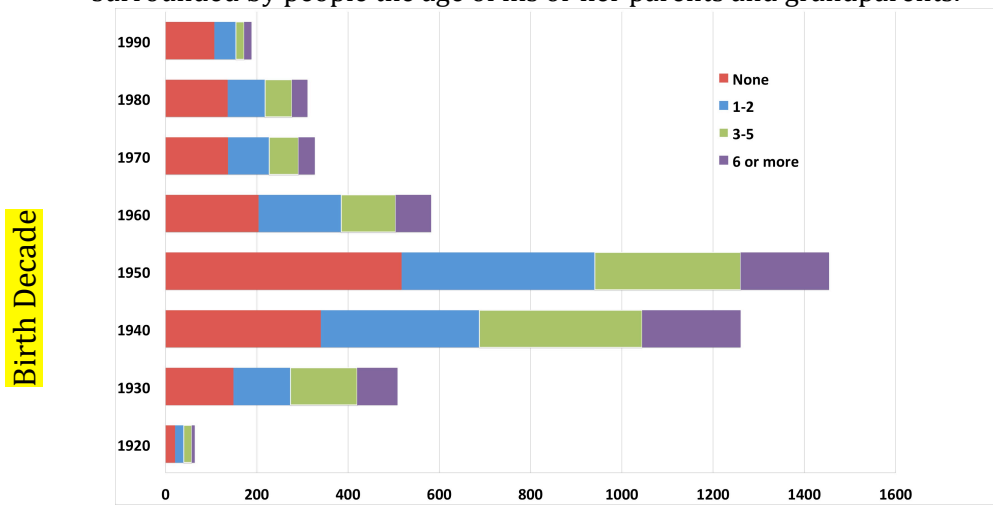


Figure 2 Number of Meetings Attended Last Year

Correlates to Chapter Meeting Attendance

To probe the question of chapter meeting attendance, we cross-tabulated *meeting attendance* with *level of training as an organist* and discovered no significant correlation. So, for example, organists whose training consists of *many private lessons* attend virtually the same proportion of meetings as members with *Master’s degrees in organ or sacred music*.

We were surprised to learn that *number of hours worked per week as an organist* is also not highly correlated to chapter meeting attendance. For example, about 15% of members who are employed *up to 10 hours a week* are “high attenders,” a close comparison to the 16% of members who are employed *40 or more hours a week* who are “high attenders.” In short, *hours a week of employment* does not appear to increase or decrease the likelihood of attending a chapter meeting.

What does correlate strongly with attendance at Guild chapter meetings? The answer is *years of service playing*. Approximately 65% of members who attended 6 or more meetings last year have been service players for 31 or more years. Apparently current chapter meetings are most satisfying and necessary to church organists with many, many years’ experience.

Analysis

The Marketing Committee urges chapter leaders to consider identifying the members of their chapters who never attend meetings and seek to understand their reasons. In these discussions “I don’t have time” will likely emerge as a stated reason for non-attendance. Market researchers and authors Harrison Coerver and Mary Byers argue that “I don’t have time” is generally code for “I’ve got better things to do with my time.”¹ Any instance when a member says they “don’t have time” should be understood as an indictment of the value of

¹ Harrison Coerver and Mary Byers, *The Race for Relevance*, (ASAE: The Association for Associations, 2011).

the proposed activity or project . Helping disengaged current members connect with their local chapters may be one of the most important ways to stabilize chapter membership.

The Marketing Committee urges chapter leaders to think of this challenge in terms of product development rather than in terms of just advertising and promotion. What new services and programs can chapters offer to members that would create an incentive for more active participation in chapter events? It is worth noting that among members who said that the opportunity to meet and network with professional colleagues was the most important reason for belonging to the Guild, fully 46% were “no or low attenders” last year. This finding suggests that the current chapter meeting model is somehow missing the mark for nearly half of the members who say they highly value the opportunity to meet and network with professional colleagues.

In last month’s survey report, we discussed the predominance of Baby Boomers in virtually all Guild affairs. As these members age, many will find evening meetings less attractive, especially when driving large distances are involved. Retaining their involvement poses another creative challenge to local leaders across the country. Meeting schedules that have existed for decades may have to be altered to meet the needs of this large and graying cohort.

It may be difficult to reconcile the needs and interests of the Guild’s youngest members with the needs and interests of the huge AARP-eligible segment. Approximately 44% of members born in the 1980s and 57% of members born in the 1990s did not attend a single chapter meeting last year. Chapter leaders may wish to consider developing non-traditional alternative chapter meetings to appeal to younger members. Many young members value spontaneity and casual meetings and are not attracted by traditional meetings that require advance dinner reservations. We believe chapter leaders should be encouraged to think about **augmenting existing programming** with spontaneous, non-traditional, unpredictable chapter events publicized by social media and instant messages to appeal to many of these young members.

Marketing research² has shown that generations born after 1960 tend to be focused on three primary objectives: the opportunity to lead; the opportunity to learn; and the opportunity to make a difference in their community or association. They are anxious to get in, roll up their sleeves, and make something happen, not participate in endless meetings and discussions. Younger generations will invest in a membership organization only if the membership benefits them personally and professionally and also benefits their community or profession. These findings suggest that young organists may be attracted to short-term leadership of special projects such as community service projects.

The Marketing Committee believes that chapter leaders will need to innovate and diversify opportunities for young organists to meet and network with colleagues, adding to the currently available options. Moving beyond regularly scheduled monthly meetings, local chapters should be encouraged to try something new. AGO Chapter News reports in THE AMERICAN ORGANIST should preferentially feature outside-the-box approaches to chapter events so that chapter leaders can take inspiration from innovative activities occurring around the country. Awards could be developed for innovations that would have wide

² Sarah L. Sladek, *The End of Membership as We Know It* (ASAE: The Center for Association Leadership, 2011).

applicability. To avoid putting new wine in old wineskins, chapter leaders may want to increase the use of social media and instant messages to communicate with young organists in their preferred modes of communication.

At the same time that Guild leaders must innovate and diversify the opportunities to build community at the local level, we believe that national leadership must take up the challenge of building online communities. Today, technology gives us the opportunity to network with anyone, anywhere, anytime. For many members, networking will increasingly mean online networking. We envision a vibrant online community sharing opinions, information and resources. The American Choral Director's Association's online networking site, ChoralNet, hosts more than 100 communities, enabling members with similar interests to communicate and share resources in topics as varied as beginning teachers, composers of choral music, and collegiate choir tours. Some communities are based on geography, including numerous state online groups. Because of the demonstrated success of this initiative, we believe AGO leadership should study the ChoralNet model to assess its applicability to the AGO.

Convention Attendance

The survey question asked members to indicate the number of conventions—national and regional—that they have attended in their lifetime. (See Figure 3.) Responses revealed that 33% of all respondents have never attended an AGO convention; 47% attended 1-5 conventions; 13% attended 6-10 conventions; 7% attended 11 or more conventions.

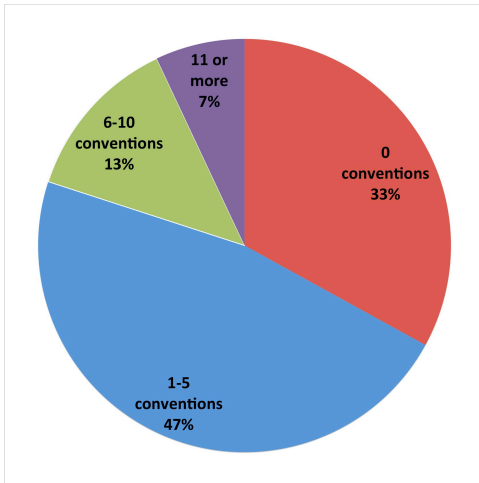


Figure 3 Number of Conventions Attended in Lifetime

The chart below shows that Baby Boomers dominate conventions from a numerical standpoint. The retirement of this oversize cohort will have profound implications for the planning of AGO conventions in the coming decades.

Birth Decade

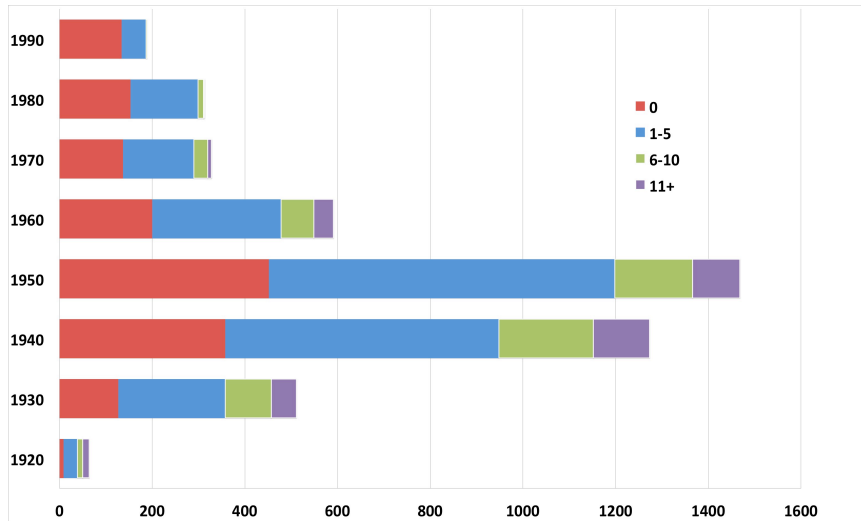


Figure 4 Lifetime Convention Attendance

Correlates to Convention Attendance

Chapter meeting attendance is strongly correlated to convention participation. Members who attended the most chapter meetings also attended the most conventions. Conversely, 78% of members who have never attended a convention attended two or fewer chapter meetings last year

By cross-tabbing convention attendance with *level of training as an organist* we see a positive correlation. We find that 92% of members with a doctorate in organ have attended a convention; 85% of members with a Master's degree in organ; 68% of members with a Bachelor's degree in organ; 57% of members with many private lessons; 46% of members with a few private lessons; 43% of members who are largely self-taught.

In considering the foregoing statistics, it is important to keep in mind that members with doctorates constitute just 9% of Guild membership. So even if 92% of these members attend conventions, they still represent a small percentage of all attendees. In terms of **absolute numbers**, the largest group attending conventions are members with Master's degrees in organ, who comprise 31% of members who have attended conventions; members with many private lessons comprise 26% of convention attendees; members with Bachelor's degrees in organ comprise 19% and members with Doctorates in organ comprise 12% of convention attendees. This diversity has strong programming implications for convention planners.

Analysis

The Marketing Committee believes it is important to attempt to involve the one-third of membership who have never attended a single convention. Because conventions represent a core component of the Guild's value proposition to members, this large segment of unengaged members should be of concern. The statistics are even more troubling when we consider the age of respondents: 41% of members born in the 1970s (aged 35-45) have never attended a convention; 49% of members born in the 1980s (aged 26-35) have never attended a convention.

We believe that if the Regional and National Conventions of the AGO are to remain a meaningful part of the Guild's value proposition to its members, AGO leadership will need to

fast-track multiple strategies for dissemination of the convention resources to a higher percentage of Guild members. Strategies for distribution of the convention across a number of platforms (streaming audio and video, webinars) should become an essential part of convention planning, so that *the feasibility and appropriateness for electronic distribution becomes one of the objectives of convention design*. This may require a reallocation of resources and responsibilities between existing Guild committees.

We encourage an aggressive goal of at least 50% of members participating in some part of the 2016 national convention either in person or online.

Participation in Certification Examinations

Only 19% of respondents indicated that they had ever taken a certification examination in the course of their lifetime. 81% of respondents indicated that they have never taken a certification examination. (See Figure 5.)

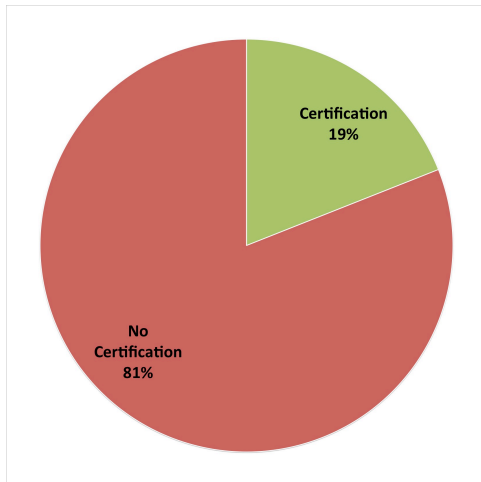


Figure 5 Members Participating in Certification Program

While the percentage of members taking Guild examinations in each birth-decade group remains fairly constant, it is important to note that due to the over-representation of Baby Boomers in overall Guild membership, these members--born roughly between 1946 and 1964--dominate certified members from a numerical standpoint. (Please note that Figure 6 represents certified survey respondents and not total certified Guild membership.)

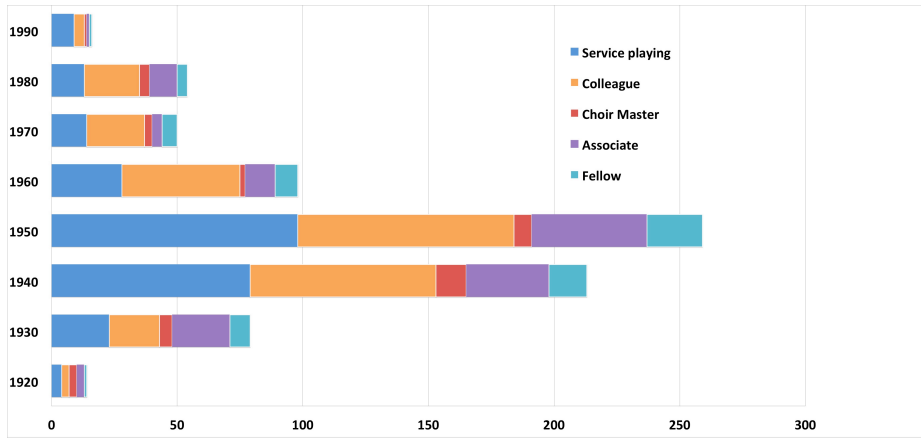


Figure 6 Highest Certification Attained

Analysis

With a lifetime participation rate of 19%, the AGO’s certification program is currently reaching far fewer members than would be necessary if it were to be a significant part of the Guild’s value proposition to prospective members. As currently structured, the certification program offers **no** value to 81% of the organization’s members. This statistic points to the urgent need of a thorough re-examination of the certification process. In particular, Guild leaders may wish to consider how certification options can serve the needs of the 46% of members who do not have a college degree in organ, developing certification programs that are accessible to every member of the organization. Consideration may be given to making college coursework count toward some certifications. Beyond that, a modular certification structure might enable members to amass component skill certificates and, over time, aggregate the components into professional certification. Members could potentially find online assistance, skill-building tools, and self-guided study tools for SPC and CAGO certification examinations.

In addition, as part of the re-evaluation of the AGO’s certification program, we urge Guild leaders to consider developing opportunities for certified members to engage in structured mentoring—either online or in person—providing a channel through which the Guild’s most highly skilled members can share their wisdom and experience with other members.

Reasons for Lapsed Membership

In addition to surveying current members, we sought responses from former members of the organization as to their principal reason for allowing their membership to lapse. (See Figure 7.) By far the leading choice (46%) among the 480 respondents was *that the cost of membership outweighed its benefits*. The other reasons offered all garnered relatively low levels of response: 14% responded *I retired*; 11% said *the organ became less important in my life*. Although inhospitable Guild meetings have frequently been identified as a significant problem for retaining members, only 6% of members said that *I never felt welcome at Guild meetings* was their primary reason for leaving the organization. A

slightly larger percentage, 7%, said *Guild meetings were unsatisfying*.

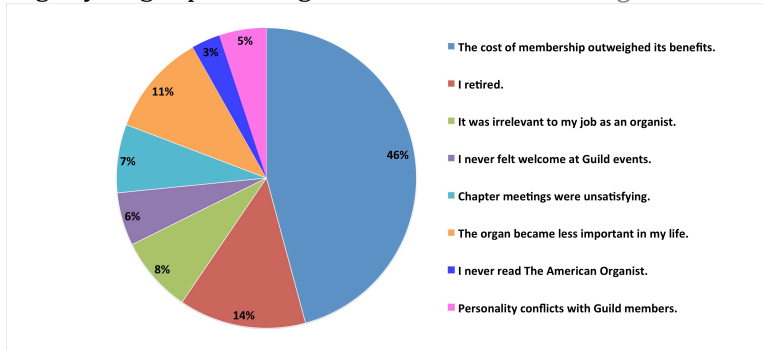


Figure 7 Former Members' Reasons for Lapsing

Analysis

The preponderance of respondents who cited *the cost of membership outweighed its benefits* suggests that this topic will be a productive topic in the series of focus group discussions currently being planned by the Marketing Committee.

When members tell us that *the cost of membership outweighs its benefits* they are talking about their perceived value of membership. It is a foundational marketing principle that the perceived value of a good or service affects the price that someone is willing to pay for it. Is the price reasonable in relationship to its value?³ The higher the perceived value, the more someone is willing to pay. So as we analyze comments about the dollar cost of Guild membership, it is important to understand that cost is always expressed in terms of the perceived value. When members tell us that AGO dues are too high, we must learn to hear them saying “AGO dues are too high for the experiences and products I receive in exchange for my membership fee.” The Marketing Committee is committed to helping the AGO innovate across all areas of Guild activity to find new experiences, products, and services that will add to the perceived value of membership.

Based on these findings, we believe that every leader in the AGO must be engaged in developing new value drivers for membership. Studies⁴ confirm that increasingly members will expect to have many of those products delivered to them conveniently by electronic means. If these members aren't using the AGO's core offerings and products, increased promotion or re-branding of the status quo is unlikely to engage those members.

The Marketing Committee believes that technology will play a key role in offering game-changing benefits to unengaged members. The scope of the challenge facing AGO leadership suggests that modest, incremental changes that amount to little more than tweaking existing offerings are likely to deliver little or no gain to the organization and the membership.

We believe that recognition of the limitations of current programming for a sizable number of members is the first step in re-inventing the Guild for the 21st century.

³ Philip Kotler and Kevin Keller, *Marketing Management* (Pearson Education Inc., 2009).

⁴ Sarah Sladek, *The End of Membership*

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