

YOUR BIGGEST JOIN CAMPAIGN
IS **YOUR** BIGGEST RENEWAL PROBLEM



THEY
CLICKED

THEY
JOINED

THEY
LEFT



THE JOIN CAMPAIGN THAT WORKED TOO WELL

Every association has one. The campaign that spiked the numbers. Maybe it was a discounted rate tied to the annual conference, or a bundled offer pushed before the fiscal year closed. Membership marketing ran it, acquisition jumped, and the board saw a chart going up.

But a join campaign doesn't just bring people in. It selects for a type of member. A campaign built on urgency and price attracts people who respond to urgency and price. When the math stops working, or when they simply forget to check, they leave. The campaign that produced the biggest spike in joins also produced the most volatile cohort at renewal.



**This is
impulse
marketing.**

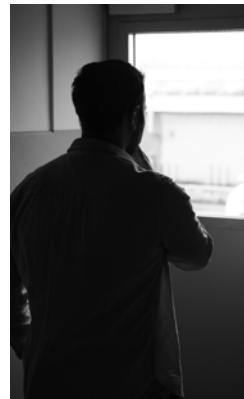
It produces growth numbers that look healthy until you follow the cohort to renewal and watch it fall apart.

By the time a member fills out the join form, the terms of the relationship are already set. The cadence of promos, deadlines, and benefit inventories that preceded the form did the work.

WHAT THEY LEARNED ON THE WAY IN



If the pattern they absorbed was register by Friday, renew to keep access, join now and save 15%, the frame is transactional. Membership becomes a thing you pay for, use or don't, renew based on math.



WHAT THE SENT FOLDER TEACHES

Open your sent folder from the last ninety days. You'll find subject lines like these:

"Save \$200 before Friday"

"Your 2026 member benefits include 47 resources"

"Renew now to maintain access"

"Final hours: rates increase at midnight"

But read them in sequence, the way a prospective member would, and a pattern emerges.

Every message is structured the same way: here is a thing, here is a deadline, act now or lose it. Taken together, they build a frame.

The person on the receiving end learns, before they ever join, that this organization communicates when it needs something and measures its value in what you get for the price.

That frame is the one they carry into membership. And it is the one they use when renewal comes up.



Together, acquisition and onboarding set the terms of the entire relationship.

Most associations fill the window with feature lists, portal logins, and benefit inventories. The new member gets a receipt for what they bought, never an introduction to what they joined. Every message after the welcome email reinforces the same posture.z

THE FIRST 90 DAYS

SET THE TERMS



A member who arrives to *here's what you get* starts counting usage. Belonging never enters the equation. By renewal, the frame is locked — and it was locked in the first 90 days, not the last 30.

But this is where the leverage is. If the first 90 days can set a transactional frame, they can also set a different one.

Picture a member who renews without reading the renewal email. Not because they forgot to cancel, but because leaving never occurred to them. The association is where their peers are, where their professional identity lives. Cancelling would feel like resigning from something, not unsubscribing from something.

That member and the one who joined on a discount had access to the same events, the same research, the same community. The difference is what they were told the membership was for. The gap between those two experiences was set in motion before either of them renewed.



WHAT IF
THEY STAYED FOR A
DIFFERENT
REASON?



WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU REBUILT ONBOARDING?

Most association onboarding was designed for a 2018 member. A portal tour. A welcome PDF. A ten-email drip introducing committees, benefits, and the executive director.

That member no longer exists.

The 2027 member arrives having been onboarded by Stripe, by Notion, by every SaaS product they use at work. Their baseline for what joining something feels like has moved considerably. The welcome PDF reads as a document from a previous decade.

Onboarding has to be built like a product. The output of that product is identity — whether someone walks away thinking of themselves as one of us or as a customer with a login.

In the first two weeks, did the member meet a peer?

Did they say something on the record?

If the answer is they logged in and downloaded the guide, **you gave them access, not onboarding!**

Did they commit to something that names them as part of the association
RATHER THAN A BUYER OF IT?

ASSESS YOUR OWN ONBOARDING

Pull the complete sequence a new member receives in their first 90 days. Every email, every login prompt, every welcome message, every resource link. Read them in order, the way a new member encounters them.



Then ask five questions.



Does the member meet another human in the first two weeks?

Not a chatbot. Not a help article. A peer, a chapter leader, a committee chair. Belonging requires someone else in the room.

Does the member do something that names them as part of the group?

Introduce themselves in a forum. Join a committee. RSVP to a regional event. If the only action they take is logging in and browsing, they haven't joined — they've activated a subscription.



How many of the messages lead with a feature, a benefit, or a deadline?

If more than half of what a new member receives in the first 90 days is structured as “here’s what you get” or “don’t miss this,” the sequence is training them to evaluate the transaction. In sequence, those messages build a frame that is very difficult to undo at renewal.

When does the sequence first tell the member who they joined, not what they bought?

If that message doesn't exist, or if it arrives after a dozen benefit-inventory emails have already set the tone, it's too late.

If you deleted every message that contains a login link, a feature list, or a deadline, what would be left?

Whatever survives that filter is the only material doing identity work. If nothing survives, the onboarding sequence is a product tour with association branding on it.



This isn't a scoring rubric. The point is to see the sequence the way the member sees it, and to notice what it teaches before anyone intended to teach anything.

THE RENEWAL IS THE RECEIPT

Renewal is the result of everything upstream. If acquisition was a coupon and onboarding was a feature tour, the renewal email arrives looking like a bill.



Bills get disputed. Volatile renewal rates rarely point to a renewal-stage failure. The damage is upstream, months earlier, when the member was forming a view of what this association actually is.

Renewal is only where that view becomes visible.

CLOSE



Every association has believers walking toward the door. People who would stay for the identity, the community, the sense that this is their industry's home. The ones who get handed a receipt instead become subscribers. Subscribers measure. Buyers compare. And both eventually leave.

The associations that fix this don't fix it by adding another campaign. They fix it by redesigning the sequence so that acquisition, onboarding, and renewal tell the same story of belonging.

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THE PLACE TO START IS THE FRONT DOOR.

What it sounds like to the people walking through it, long before renewal ever comes up.

ASSOCIATIONS CHANGE LIVES.

WE HELP THEM PROVE IT.

Rottman Creative was founded on a simple observation: the organizations doing the most meaningful work often struggle the most to talk about it. When it comes time to grow, **the story disappears behind benefits lists and renewal notices.**

WE EXIST TO FIX THAT.

We find the story that already lives inside the organization, bring it to the surface, and put it to work across every member touchpoint.

WHERE THE THINKING CONTINUES



The newsletter.

SUBSCRIBE



The webinar.

WATCH



LinkedIn.

FOLLOW



A conversation.

EMAIL