



ALL ABOUT

RETEEN

A 12.6% increase in REALTORS® nationally since the pre-pandemic days of 2019—despite a lack of home inventory—has been a boon and also a challenge to local and state REALTOR® associations. Although many association executives are anticipating a drop in members this year, they're implementing strategies and programs focused on retention.

“With Central Texas being one of the hottest real estate markets in the country, along with our cities’ growth, our membership has grown over the last few years,” confirms Kelea Youngblood, RCE, C2EX, chief marketing officer at Austin Board of REALTORS®. “Additionally, we strive to maintain a professional staff and newly revitalized AMS system that has been able to support our growth.”

In other parts of the country, membership remains steady—with a cautious look to future numbers. “Our industry has seen a lot of attention during the COVID-19 pandemic and the boom that followed,” says Ruth A. Hackney, RCE, CAE, CEO of REALTORS® Association of South Central Wisconsin, based in Madison. “While we have

not yet seen a drop in membership, we do anticipate it will be a factor in 2023.”

In this climate, how can associations best retain members and prepare for future variability?

Built for Success

Since all real estate is local, location and other such factors play a role in membership loss or gain. “Our market is primarily a resort and tourism market, so we always expect a higher amount of attrition than a traditional residential market. We typically budget for 5% to 10% member reduction,” says Laura Crowther, RCE, CEO of Coastal Carolinas Association of REALTORS®.

At the same time, CCAR continues to innovate and provide the most relevant tools to help members succeed. Member retention relies not only on the real estate market, but also on the business needs of the member. “Retention is mostly a product of the member’s ability to thrive in the industry,” says Hackney. “So, we focus on tools, professional development and networking as our primary member benefit. Our vision is for members to Connect, Learn and Thrive!”

RETENTION

What exactly do members want and need? Associations are asking this and other questions to better serve and retain members.

BY ROSIE WOLF WILLIAMS

At the Northern Virginia Association of REALTORS®, 40% of its members have been in the real estate business for less than four years. “These members are generally unfamiliar with negotiating contingencies or marketing a property that has been on the market for an extended period of time,” says CEO Ryan McLaughlin, RCE, CAE. “Our goal is to make a lasting impact by guiding them past the first four years—through education, involvement and encouragement.”

Meighan Harris, RCE, AHWD, CEO of Bonita Springs-Estero REALTORS® in Florida, recently went through a real estate pre-licensing class so she could have the same experience as her members and identify gaps in knowledge that the association could help fill. That might include skills-based training on how to track expenses, lessons on having the right mindset to survive until the first sale, or business-planning strategies that help new members understand how much time to devote to building their business.

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Kelea Youngblood, RCE, C2EX, Austin Board of REALTORS®

“Most pre-licensing courses teach to the test but provide no direction or information on how to actually conduct business or how to get started,” Harris says. “For that reason, we find it imperative to build skills-based training programs that are beneficial to new members.”

Taking the pre-licensing class enabled Harris to provide more relevant information for new members looking to enter the profession: “Before they join, everything is crystal clear, and they have realistic expectations.”

Once new members join, they need to feel seen and supported, even if they’re not the ones earning recognition for their production or years of service. “Creating recognition opportunities for new members breaks through that barrier,” says McLaughlin. “By rewarding those taking steps toward success early on, you give them the confidence and support often needed to continue in real estate.”

What Members Say They Need

Youngblood says that ABoR’s focus on retention has become more progressive and proactive over the years: “We believe if something is broken, it should be fixed. Therefore, [we] acutely listen to what our members are saying they need.”

The association focuses on four categories: Business Well-being, Personal Well-being, Client Well-being and Career Well-being. “It has helped our members understand what their association offers them and how it helps their overall business sustainability,” she says. “We have built programming, systems and member engagement in a way that meets our members where they are. Whether they engage with us once a year or come to all our events, they can plug in with us and expect to get quality service.”

“Not every member wants to go to the same type of event or mingle with the same people, so we have to be purposeful when planning events,” adds Harris. BSER’s membership retention levels range from 97% to 99%, and Harris surveys members annually to ensure they find value in the association’s services. “My association management system allows for quite a bit of customization, so when a member drops, we make sure to report why.”

Benefits and Support

Associations also need to make sure members are aware of the free services and benefits that are available. “It is important to remind members of the WIIFM—what’s in it for me. Our AMS software also comes with a free member mobile app, so I am able to build a member benefits section for local discounts and such,” says Harris. “We have a very robust leadership academy where we encourage involvement from our membership and let them know that there are advancement opportunities available. I believe our inclusive nature makes our members want to stay.”

The Best Way to Engage Members

To create effective communications, you need to understand your audience. A new *Engagement Segments Guide*, created by a work group of NAR’s Association Executives Committee, will help you communicate with the different groups you interact with regularly, including:

- Association leaders
- Broker-owners and managers
- New members
- Top producers and team leaders
- Commercial and property managers
- Affiliate and appraiser members

 nar.realtor/member-engagement-guide

CCAR has likewise placed a strong emphasis on association benefits and new member training. It has also enhanced broker engagement and added more training, roundtable discussions and legal consults that address risk management. “We have implemented a drip campaign that introduces new members to all of the programs, products and services we offer,” says Crowther. “Often they are overwhelmed when first joining, and they miss these great opportunities! We are in the process of implementing a new-member concierge service to guide these individuals as they progress through the first 12 to 24 months.”

Meanwhile, ABoR launched a “Be A Member” campaign that stresses the importance of being a part of a network of 18,000 professionals. Personalized support is emphasized, with brand recognition and advanced tools to help business growth. “But that means they have to engage with us and use the services they are subscribing to, which has built trust within our membership—that their association has their back,” says Youngblood.

Youngblood also says that ABoR created an omni-channel approach to programming and education, providing live broadcast, in-person and virtual ways to attend. “We know our members are on the go,” she says. “Being able to plug in however best suits them has increased our attendance and engagement tremendously.”

While RASCW made no major changes in its plans for member retention in 2022, it updated its vision for the association, refreshing branding and communication. It added a monthly member spotlight to its website to promote the types of businesses its members are involved in. “We’ve also implemented a personal health series to ensure that even in a difficult market, they are taking care of themselves,” says Hackney.

Meanwhile, BSER just received its license to become a real estate school with long-term plans of offering pre- and post-licensing courses. “We provide important information and expectations to people who are looking to get started in real estate,” says Harris.

The association also hosts an event the first Friday of each month called Fishbowl Fridays, where members meet at a restaurant or brewery and can throw questions into a literal fishbowl. “For instance, they might ask, ‘What is the best way to follow up with a guest that visited an open house?’” says Harris. “Those in attendance are a mix of new and seasoned agents. This is a judgment-free, recruitment-free zone for members to ask questions to other agents as a way to learn.”

Staying Member Aware

Just as important as knowing what members value is understanding why they leave. “I would say that members who don’t renew typically give it a year or two and realize that they haven’t seen a profit from the money that they have spent in brokers’ fees, board dues, MLS fee and marketing, and go back to something more stable like a salary,” says Harris. “Other than

New Toolkits

One way associations can support member retention is by offering tools to help members communicate both their own value and the pro-consumer, pro-competitive benefits of local MLS broker marketplaces.

The National Association of REALTORS® has created three new communications toolkits to help you do just that. The toolkits are centered around three core areas, also as represented at our [competition.realtor](https://www.competition.realtor) website:

- Fostering Competition
- Consumer Access & Opportunity
- REALTORS® as Champions

Each toolkit includes facts, infographics, Q&A’s and other content that you can use as is or customize.

Questions? Contact Mantill Williams at mwilliams@nar.realtor in NAR communications or Lesley Muchow at lmuchow@nar.realtor in NAR legal.

 thehub.realtor (Toolkits are available through the state AE and local AE Hub communities.)

that, they go into referral mode so they can still keep the license active but seek other employment opportunities.

“When I see they have left because they have changed brokers, I make it a point to let them know that they can still remain primary with us if their broker had a secondary relationship,” Harris adds. “Sometimes it is really just an education issue.”

Some members might struggle with changes in strategies or the implementation of new ideas. But Youngblood says that associations should stop trying to make everyone happy and instead make bold and innovative choices. “Associations get the reputation of being stodgy because they try to be so vanilla that they lose sight of their purpose and, thus, lose value to their members,” she says. “Associations are a community of like-minded people. I think peer-to-peer marketing is so powerful, and associations should generate ambassadors to help them communicate the value they provide.”

Despite an expectation of a decline in membership, Crowther says, CCAR continues to keep a finger on the pulse of the association’s members, asking for feedback on their needs and addressing the current market conditions. “Everything we do is member-forward-focused,” she says. “If the past two-and-a-half years taught us anything, we can pivot on a dime, and we will continue to grow from the lessons of the past.” ■

Rosie Wolf Williams is a writer whose work has appeared in USA Weekend, Woman’s Day, AARP the Magazine and elsewhere.