

Top 5 Survey-Based Benchmarks Every Association Executive Should Be Watching Now

A strategic guide for leaders shaping a future focused on relevance, impact, and value.

For association leaders looking ahead to 2026 and beyond, this is the moment to challenge assumptions and ground your strategy in data that drives outcomes. Smart benchmarking isn't just about tracking performance - it's about unlocking perspective that sharpens decision-making, validates investments, and strengthens your position with members, your board, and other key audiences.

The following five benchmarks represent high-return opportunities to better understand member priorities, quantify organizational impact, and build a stronger foundation for what's next.

1. Member Engagement & Perceived Value

Why it matters:

Retention doesn't begin at renewal - it starts with relevance. How members perceive your value today is the clearest indicator of how committed they'll be tomorrow. Yet many associations rely on anecdotal feedback or lagging indicators instead of a structured understanding of engagement. Measuring perception helps you spot early signals, address emerging concerns, alleviate pain points, and stay centered on your members' actual experience, not just what you intend to deliver. It can also help uncover what members believe your organization is uniquely positioned to do.

What to measure: Understanding engagement incorporates several touch points from level of satisfaction, likelihood to renew, level of participation, and the Net Promoter Score (NPS).

Watch for: Survey fatigue and surface-level insights. Keep surveys concise but consistent and use trends, not single data points, to shape decisions.



2. Member Needs Assessment

Why it matters:

Annual planning grounded in outdated assumptions or overly general feedback can lead to incremental improvements when what's needed is strategic clarity. Needs assessments are more than just a temperature check - they're a chance to uncover what's changing on the ground. When designed thoughtfully, these assessments go beyond preferences and satisfaction to reveal where members are struggling, what opportunities they're watching, and where they see the future heading.

Whether it's talent shortages, evolving trade dynamics, or the regulatory landscape, benchmarking member needs helps identify the issues gaining urgency in your industry before they hit the headlines. Questions that explore how workforce challenges are evolving, how tariffs or supply chain shifts are impacting operations, or what innovations members are trying to navigate can bring valuable foresight into your strategic planning.

When done well, a needs assessment becomes a decision-making asset, not just a survey. It sharpens your member value proposition, directs your programming, and positions your association to lead on what matters most next.

What to measure:

Current and emerging priorities, unmet needs, shifting challenges, operational barriers, and the outcomes members are looking to achieve with your help. Based on the focus, it can provide grounded guidance in areas of high-impact relevance like workforce, technology adoption, trade and tariffs, or environmental pressures.

Watch for:

Generic survey templates that only confirm what you already know. Instead, ask questions that connect the dots between daily member pain points and the broader shifts in your sector. The most useful insights often come from identifying what members *aren't* prepared for yet - but will benefit from the association's support in navigating.



3. Program Performance & Willingness to Pay

Why it matters:

Not every well-received program delivers long-term value. And not every legacy service deserves its spot in the budget. Understanding how members use, value, and prioritize your programs - including what they're willing to invest in - creates clarity in resourcing, strategy, and pricing. Especially in times of economic scrutiny, you need data that not only defends but validates your decisions.

What to measure: Usage rates, level of demand, satisfaction levels, and pricing sensitivity. Techniques like Van Westendorp can help uncover optimal pricing boundaries.

Watch for: Misalignment between internal assumptions and what members really value. If the enthusiasm isn't mutual, it's time to refine the offer or reposition it.

4. Advocacy Awareness & Impact

Why it matters:

Effective advocacy is built not only on passion and purpose, but on proof. Benchmarking industry performance, impact, and key indicators enables associations to elevate their voice in conversations that shape policy and regulation at the local, national, and even international levels. Whether you're making the case for smarter regulation, greater investment, or increased visibility, being able to ground your message in data makes your advocacy efforts more credible, more compelling, and harder to ignore.

Benchmarking doesn't just validate your existing advocacy - it helps you anticipate what's next. By tracking changes in the market, shifts in member sentiment, or fluctuations in policy impact, benchmarking becomes a tool to spot emerging issues early and respond with confidence. It can spotlight the scope of an industry's economic footprint, track the implications of workforce challenges or trade dynamics, and quantify the burden or benefit of new regulations. It provides associations with the evidence needed to advance their agenda, align with public priorities, and speak authoritatively in settings where decisions are being made. It also opens the door to greater engagement with media, thinktanks, and external partners looking for reliable, timely intelligence.

What to measure:

Indicators that support your advocacy narrative and help surface emerging issues,



such as industry growth, employment trends, regulatory burden, trade volume, or supply chain disruptions.

Watch for:

Tracking only retrospective outcomes or policy wins. Benchmarking impact across multiple fronts helps you stay proactive and frame a broader story about how your association drives relevance and results.

5. Technology Maturity & Adoption

Why it matters:

Technology decisions shape how your association communicates, captures insight, and scales member experiences. Leaders who treat digital tools as operational overhead, not as strategic infrastructure, risk falling behind peers and member expectations. Benchmarking where you stand helps prioritize smart investments, ensure organizational agility, and spot new opportunities.

What to measure: Adoption of member data systems, digital engagement platforms, and readiness for automation or AI-enabled features.

Watch for: Disconnects between what your systems enable and what your members expect. Benchmark against both peers and your own strategic goals.

Final Thought:

Benchmarking is more than a measurement exercise – it's a leadership discipline. Rather than trying to capture as much data as possible at once, focus on what aligns most closely with your priorities, and layer in new benchmarks as you progress. Done right, it equips your team, and your members, with clarity, credibility, and conviction to move faster, serve better, and lead with greater confidence.





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Hargrove Association Insights (HAI) is a pioneer in transforming member data into collective intelligence that drives engagement, industry growth, and advocacy support. For 40 years, HAI has partnered with leading associations worldwide to provide secure, proprietary information that enables cutting-edge analytics. Our solutions help your members make informed decisions, identify emerging trends, and navigate complex market landscapes. As a trusted third-party data exchange partner, we prioritize security, privacy, and compliance. Our innovative technology platform and dedicated team of experts ensure that associations and their members receive the highest quality data and insights.

