



Membership Guide

Audience Research Compass

The Membership Guide’s research team knows that taking first steps into audience research can feel overwhelming. This exercise should help you identify your audience research goals and determine how best to get the information you need.

This exercise is designed for newsrooms who are considering launching membership or who are already pursuing membership. In other words, all of the audience research described below is research in service of membership, specifically. You will find more detail on everything discussed below in the Membership Guide’s [section on audience research](#), by researcher [Emily Roseman](#).

Surveys, focus groups, and interviews

The compass assumes that you know a bit about conducting audience research surveys, focus groups, and interviews. If you don’t, that’s fine. Here is a quick refresher, along with links to the Membership Guide, where you can learn more about best practices for each.

Surveys

Multiple choice and other pre-filled questions are good for answering clear-cut questions, such as “Which of the following benefits would be valuable to you?” or collecting demographic data. Multiple-choice questions are also best when you have limited time, since the data you collect will require less time to synthesize than open-ended questions.

Asking open-ended questions will require that you spend more time understanding your responses, but will also give you a more complete picture of your potential members.

You can make it easier to recruit for focus groups and interviews by adding a question at the end of any survey asking the respondent if they would be willing to be contacted to answer additional questions. [Head to the Membership Guide for survey best practices](#), including MPP’s bank of survey questions.

Focus groups and interviews

Focus groups and one-on-one interviews are a heavier lift than surveys. It takes time to design the focus group or interview format and questions, actually conduct the focus group or interview, and synthesize the results.

But these more time-intensive research methods are great when you don’t know what you don’t know about your potential members, or when you want to understand more nuanced things like

their attitudes about your work or their underlying motivations for supporting it. It's also valuable to be able to have a back-and-forth exchange with a member or potential member, since you can dig deeper by asking follow-up "why" questions and get to the root of your member's needs. [Head to the Membership Guide for focus group and interview best practices.](#)

1. What stage of membership best describes your newsroom?

- [We are considering membership.](#)
 - [We already have a membership program.](#)
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2. Is your newsroom already publishing? Do you have an audience?

- [Yes, we are already publishing and have an existing audience.](#)
 - [No, we aren't publishing yet, or we are very young and don't yet have a sizable audience.](#)
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Ok, so your newsroom already has a membership program, but you want to know what you can do to improve growth and/or retention.

There are a few things we recommend you learn about your current members in order to grow and engage your member-base over time: including whether they are satisfied with your membership program and what motivates them to participate and stick around. Together, the answers to these questions can help you decide on things like changes to your benefits, the type of information you need to deliver above all, and what participation opportunities your members most utilize. In sum: answers to these questions will allow your news organization to know what to keep doing, and what to stop doing.

We recommend getting started with knowing how satisfied your members are with your program.

3. Do you know if your members are satisfied with your membership program?

- [No, I don't know if our members are satisfied.](#)
 - [Yes, we know that our members are satisfied.](#)
 - [Yes, and our members aren't satisfied.](#)
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Excellent. Since you have an existing audience to survey, we recommend conducting a **membership viability assessment**. This kind of assessment is an 1) inquiry into whether and how much your potential members would be willing to support you financially, and 2) what they value about your organization.

We recommend conducting this kind of assessment with a survey, which can be sent to your existing newsletter, SMS, or WhatsApp list; advertised on your website, and/or posted in your social channels (or however you best reach your current audiences).

To answer **the financial questions**, you can ask directly, by asking if they would support you and by how much. If that feels like too much, you could ask indirectly by asking what other organizations they support and how.

- Would you be willing to financially support us on a recurring basis?
- If so, how much would you be willing to give? (MPP recommends offering a range of options in your answers, such as “\$6 to \$10,” rather than leaving open-ended).
- Do you financially support any other news organizations? If so, which ones?
- Do you financially support any other causes or organizations?
- If yes, how much do you give annually to causes and organizations you elect to support?

Asking audience members **what they value** about your newsroom before launching a membership program will give you useful data about how they emotionally connect to your organization and where you’ll find your potential members with your membership appeals. This data is also the basis of a [membership value proposition](#) and can inform the design of your membership program, particularly what types of benefits will resonate with your future members. The following are five questions you could ask. You could also riff on MPP’s [member values worksheet](#).

- What do you turn to [newsroom] for?
- What work by [newsroom] do you value most?
- What work by [newsroom] work do you consume most often? (Answers might be i.e. daily news stories, newsletters, or podcasts, for example. You could also make this about particular beats or types of coverage. MPP recommends allowing them to rank the answers)
- What motivates you to support other causes and organizations?
- What other causes and organizations do you support?

For an example of a full membership viability assessment, check out [this case study of the Daily Maverick in South Africa](#).

If this inquiry reveals that membership is viable – defined by strong enthusiasm for financially supporting your organization – head to “[Designing our membership program](#)” in the Membership Guide for a step-by-step membership program design process.

[Head here for one last thing before you get started.](#)

Ok, so you're not publishing yet. You can still start to gather some insights in your community to see if a membership program could work for you. MPP recommends **assessing your target audiences' general willingness to pay for news**. Above all, you'll want to assess whether your target audiences would be willing to financially support a news organization that reports on the topics you'll cover, and if so, how much they'd be willing to support it (or, how else they'd be willing to contribute if not financially).

We recommend asking these questions to your target audiences either in a survey or in a focus group format, depending on the time and bandwidth you have at this point.

- **Light lift:** A survey with multiple choice questions is the lightest lift option here. The challenge will be finding enough people to take your survey. Consider partnering with other organizations in the community you seek to serve in order to send your survey over their email lists or at one of their events, [as the Compass Experiment did](#). You could also use social media or paid-advertising tools, like Facebook's Lookalike Audiences, to get your survey in front of a target audience. Promoting a survey over an email list tends to gather the most responses.
- **Medium lift:** Stick to surveys still, but add some open-ended questions. The research team suggests adding questions such as:
 - What type of news is your community lacking?
 - What do you want in a news organization?
 - Do you subscribe to or financially support any news organizations?
 - What other organizations are you a member of, and why did you join?
 - What do you find valuable about being a member?
- **Heavy lift:** A heavy lift version of this assessment would involve hosting focus groups among your target audience members. Stick with the same kind of open-ended questions as the "medium lift" version above. In a focus group, you'll want to help keep the conversation flowing so that participants build on each other's answers, ideally creating a kind of moderated banter that reveals your audiences' deeper motivations and information needs. Keep in mind: you might have to partner with another organization (perhaps a local library, or a civic or nonprofit organization in the community you are serving) to attract a large enough group to participate in focus groups or interviews on these subjects. That's what the [Compass Experiment](#) did.

[Head here for one last thing before you get started.](#)

We recommend conducting a **satisfaction assessment**.

- **Light lift:** If you only have a few hours, we recommend a simple Net Promoter Score (NPS) survey, which is used to gauge the enthusiasm of your current users. Essentially, it is the question: “How likely is it that you would recommend our company/product/service to a friend or colleague?” In this case, the question would be, “How likely is it that you would recommend membership to [newsroom] to a friend or colleague?”

The scoring for this answer is based on a 0 to 10 scale. Many organizations also offer a place where respondents can offer open-ended feedback after giving a score. These optional answers can become fodder for member testimonials and give you a casual sense of what members value most about their membership and your organization. If you are above a 7, you have a strong promoter contingency. That means members are satisfied. [Read more about NPS surveys.](#)

- **Medium lift:** We recommend running an NPS survey and including an option to allow respondents to opt into interviews with a member of your team. During your add-on interviews, ask participants to tell you more about why they gave your newsroom a particular score on the NPS spectrum. You might ask them which benefits they’ve most enjoyed and whether they’ve encouraged others to join. MPP also recommends reaching out directly to everyone who gives you a score below 7 to ask what would make them more likely to recommend your organization.
- **Heavy lift:** We recommend [automating your NPS survey process](#) so that you are getting a steady flow of feedback on members’ satisfaction, rather than a one-time flood of feedback. We also recommend sending a more detailed survey to your members to find out what parts of the membership experience they find most valuable. Membership platform [Steady](#) recommends, for example, asking members to tell you which benefit they find most valuable and which benefit they find least valuable. (Be sure to include the full list of benefits in the survey.) This will help you decide which parts of the membership experience to invest in improving and which ones to stop doing.

[Head here for one last thing before you get started.](#)

That's great that you have satisfied members. At this stage, MPP recommends a **motivations assessment**, which goes beyond understanding financial support and digs into what motivates your most enthusiastic members to participate. This assessment gives you the insights you need to develop audience segments – a critical step for developing opportunities for your audience members to participate that will tap into their individual motivations.

- **Medium lift:** At this stage of audience understanding, there isn't really a "light lift" option. Truly understanding what motivates your members will require asking open-ended questions in a survey format and/or and conducting interviews and or focus groups with members. For a medium lift, the research team recommends focusing on collecting qualitative data and key demographic data through surveys. Send out a survey to your members with a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended questions, such as:
 - How are you involved with [newsroom] as a member? Please select all that apply. MPP recommends listing all the participation opportunities you offer. Here are some examples:
 - I comment
 - I share stories
 - I attend events
 - I've been a source
 - I've contributed sources
 - I've contributed research help (please describe in the next question)
 - I've contributed tips or story ideas
 - Other (please describe in the next question)
 - Please elaborate on how you've contributed and any other ways you are involved with our organization or other media organizations.
 - For the ways you've participated or most often participate, what prompts you to participate?
 - In 200 words or less, why are you a member of [newsroom]?
 - What would you change about being a member, if anything?

MPP's [member values worksheet](#) could also be helpful here.

- **Heavy lift:** A heavier lift version of this process will involve sending the survey detailed above, then following up with a series of 1:1 interviews or a focus group. If possible, MPP recommends a focus group because seeing your members interact will give you a strong window into the community that is developing around your journalism. MPP [detailed how it conducted a member motivations focus group with De Correspondent](#), and we encourage you to riff on that process to suit your newsroom needs.

For an overview of how De Correspondent conducted a motivations assessment to decide how to improve its existing membership program, check out [this case study](#), particularly the [member research brief](#).

The type of data you collect in a motivation assessment is ripe for synthesis and segmentation, or the process of making connections and finding patterns in your data and, grouping your data based on distinct behaviors, attitudes and/or demographics. Head to the Membership Guide for tips on [generating insights from data](#) (synthesis) and [segmenting your findings](#).

[Head here for one last thing before you get started.](#)

Ok, so your members aren't satisfied with your membership program. That's okay. A bit of audience research can help you figure out why.

It could be a problem with a simple fix, like not being onboarded smoothly (see [here for onboarding best practices](#)) or never receiving their member tote bag (see [here for how to provide strong customer service](#)). It could also be that the membership program you designed is out of sync with their motivations for supporting you. Here are a few ways to gather those insights.

- **Light lift:** Add a multiple-choice question to your membership cancellation page that asks them *why* they are cancelling their membership. [Here's how VTDigger does this](#). Be sure to give them an option to elaborate on their answer.
- **Medium lift:** MPP recommends sending a short survey to your recently canceled members. It's important to send this soon after they cancel. If you can automate this, that's even better. Stick with multiple-choice questions such as, "What was your reason for canceling?" that offers choices such as "It costs too much" or "I don't use my benefits enough," etc. Some organizations offer to extend a person's membership for free if cost is the reason (particularly during the coronavirus pandemic). Since these are people who are not happy with your product, don't be surprised if you get a low response rate.

If surveying is unsuccessful, or if you want another datapoint, MPP recommends examining membership data you already have, such as how long people are members before canceling and the open rates on your member-only newsletter. See the [warning signs section](#) of the Membership Guide's retention section for more on this.

[Head here for one last thing before you get started.](#)

Thanks for using the Audience Research Compass!

If you have a spare moment, please take [our two-question survey](#) to let us know whether this was helpful.

For more on audience research in service of membership in news, check out the [Membership Guide's audience research section](#).
