

# Audience Assumptions Exercise

A strong membership strategy requires a mindset shift in your newsroom, from thinking about your audience as a monolithic group of people who are obliged to consume your journalism because it is “important,” to understanding that your audience is actually made up of several different audiences, each with their own motivations for reading and supporting your work.

To help bring your whole newsroom along, Membership Puzzle Project coach Javier Borelli has designed the following process. He first used it with his own newsroom, [Tiempo Argentino, as they transitioned from a traditional ad-supported newsroom to a worker-owned cooperative financially supported by its members](#). At this stage, they had donors who had supported Tiempo through recent ownership turmoil, but had not transitioned to membership yet.

First, Javier surveyed the newsroom. Then Tiempo surveyed its supporters. After they received all the survey results, the team compared their answers with those of their supporters.

Javier found this process valuable because:

- ❖ It showed the gap between journalists’ assumptions about their audiences and who their audiences actually are, in a non-accusatory way.
- ❖ It involves your journalists in the membership process without adding too much to their existing workload
- ❖ It aroused curiosity among the journalists about who their audiences are that continued after they launched their membership program

The results of this procedure are not just useful for getting to know your audiences better, but also marketing your membership program and identifying your value proposition.

Below we share the questions that Javier used, but you should feel free to swap any of them out with ones that are more relevant to your newsroom . It’s the process, not the specific questions, that are most important here.

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## Step 1: Survey your newsroom

First, Javier surveyed the rest of the newsroom via a survey which was designed with [Genosha](#), an Argentinian creative agency. You could also do this in an all-hands meeting with sticky notes.

- ❖ What’s your role in the newsroom? (Director, editor, journalist, data journalist, administrative worker, advertisement manager, etc.)

## How do you see our newsroom's present and future?

- ❖ How do you foresee the future of [newsroom name]?
- ❖ What do you imagine working at [newsroom name] will look like in 20 years?
- ❖ What will [newsroom name] have achieved by these dates?:
  - 1 year from today
  - 10 years from today
  - 20 years from today

## Audience: Who reads you?

What you can say: Think outside the box. When news organizations categorize their audiences, they often think in terms of income status, but I would like you to define our readers by other characteristics, too. Can you name three to five characteristics (income, political ideology, education, cultural interests, hobbies, etc.) of the readers you think our newsroom is reaching or wants to reach?

## Values: What do we stand for?

What you can say: When we talk about values, we mean "things that really matter to us" or "principles we consider when we make decisions." These values might be things like integrity, equity, independence, sustainability, justice, affordability, or transparency.

Identify three values that matter to our newsroom, and then identify the most important of the three.

## Drivers: What motivates your supporters?

We want to thank our future supporters by providing some benefits in exchange for their support. Which of the following benefits do you think would be most valuable to your future members? Please assign a value of 1-5 to each, with five being "very valuable."

- To receive inside information on how a news article or investigation was produced.
- The possibility to interact with newsroom journalists.
- To take part in workshops.
- To interact and share opinions with other members of the news organization.
- Discounts on items such as event tickets and to local businesses and institutions
- Online community, such as a members-only Slack or Facebook group and commenting
- To be able to contribute as a source

*If you don't yet know what benefits you want to offer, this is a good starting point, but you should replace this list with your own if you have ideas already.*

## Step 2: Survey your audience

Tiempo Argentino included the following questions in its survey, which they sent to loyal readers, donors, and people who have participated in their journalism in other ways. (Find other questions you might want to include in the Membership Puzzle Project's [membership viability and design survey template](#).) You could also collect this information through focus groups or interviews.

- ❖ How long have you been reading/supporting [newsroom]? *You would choose “reading” or “supporting” based on whether you’ is receiving the survey*
  - Less than a year
  - Between two and five years
  - More than five years
  
- ❖ What’s your connection to [newsroom]? Select all that apply. *You should adapt the answer options based on what ways people can participate or support your newsroom.*
  - Member
  - I’ve participated in a past crowdfunding campaign
  - I’ve attended one of the events
  
- ❖ What do you envision [newsroom] achieving by these dates:
  - 1 year from today
  - 10 years from today
  - 20 years from today
  
- ❖ When people read a newspaper, they might also feel like a part of a community of fellow readers. Picture some of the other readers of Tiempo Argentino and list three to five characteristics you think they share.  
*This question will give you a picture of how your respondents identify themselves, even if they are technically describing other people.*
  
- ❖ When we talk about values, we mean "things that really matter to us" or "principles we consider when we make decisions." These values might be things like integrity, equity, independence, sustainability, justice, affordability, or transparency. What do you think are the three values most important to [newsroom]?
  
- ❖ Why do you read [newsroom]? Try to summarize your main motivation in a sentence.
  
- ❖ Tiempo aims to provide accurate information about socially relevant issues (*You would exchange this with a short summary of your own newsroom mission*). Do you want to help us to achieve that goal?
  
- ❖ Please assign a value between 1 and 5 according to how important the following factors are in your decision to support our news organization.

- Interest to help an independent media outlet to provide confident and not biased information.
  - Ability to interact with reporters and inside information on their coverage.
  - Being connected with other members or other like-minded people
  - Events/opportunities to connect in person and online
  - Interactions with like-minded organizations (i.e., member discounts at local businesses or partnerships with other organizations that share values)
  - Merchandise / physical branded goods
- ❖ How would you be interested in supporting us?
- By a financial contribution
  - Providing other kind of support (*Below are the three options Tiempo offered, but you should replace with the ways you would like to see readers support you*)
    - As a source for news articles
    - By sharing content and helping to get to a broader audience
    - Participating in activities carried out by the newsroom.
    - Other
- ❖ We want to thank you for your support. Which of the following benefits interest you the most. Please assign a 1-5 value to them, with 5 being the most valuable.
- To receive inside information on how a news article or investigation was produced.
  - The possibility to interact with newsroom journalists.
  - To take part in workshops.
  - To interact and share opinions with other members of the news organization.
  - Discounts on items such as event tickets and to local businesses and institutions
  - Online community, such as a members-only Slack or Facebook group and commenting
  - To be able to contribute as a source

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## Step 3: Presentation

After analyzing the audience responses, present the results to your team.

You may split the screen or blackboard with a line down the middle. The left of the screen or board will be for answers from the newsroom, and the right will be for answers from the readers.

Here are some examples of what this process looked like for Tiempo.

### Characteristics of Tiempo's audience members

<b>NEWSROOM</b>	<b>READERS</b>
<i>progressive</i>	<i>progressive</i>
<i>People who vote for X party</i>	<i>middle-class</i>
<i>students</i>	<i>working class and graduated</i>
<i>left-oriented</i>	<i>critics</i>
<i>political activists</i>	<i>People who vote for Y party</i>
<i>Readers who wants to confirm a certain political ideology</i>	<i>Readers who want to be exposed to other ideas</i>

### What benefits Tiempo supporters would value most

These are listed in the order of which each set of respondents ranked them. The responses with the greatest divergence are highlighted.

<b>NEWSROOM</b>	<b>READERS</b>
To interact and share opinions with other members of the news organization	To receive inside information on how a news article or investigation was produced
Discounts on items such as event tickets and to local businesses and institutions	The possibility to interact with newsroom journalists
The possibility to interact with newsroom journalists.	To take part in workshops.
To receive inside information on how a news article or investigation was produced.	Discounts on items such as event tickets and to local businesses and institutions
To be able to contribute as a source	To be able to contribute as a source
To take part in workshops	To interact and share opinions with other members of the news organization.

### Tiempo in 2030

<b>NEWSROOM</b>	<b>READERS</b>
Be a regional reference for independent media	To be a pioneer in cutting-edge investigative journalism
To be sustainable and to increase profit	To become one of the most read newspapers in Argentina

To increase the number of journalists	To increase the digital presence of the news outlet
To reach younger audiences	To produce more audiovisual content.

After this, it's helpful to ask members of your team to identify the assumptions your team had about your audiences and your future that were confirmed or disproven by the audience research results.

Although this was not a step Javier took, MPP recommends starting with another blank slate and dividing it down the middle. The left can list "Confirmations" and the right can list "Surprises." Below, Javier offers examples of what it might have looked like if Tiempo had done this.

<b><i>CONFIRMATIONS</i></b>	<b><i>SURPRISES</i></b>
Our readers identify as progressive.	Our readers are more often people who vote for Y party.
Readers would appreciate the opportunity to interact more with our journalists.	Our readers are people who want to be exposed to new ideas, rather than just those they identify with.
Both the newsroom and the readers aspire for Tiempo to become a leading paper in Argentina and the region.	Of all the benefits we could offer, readers were most interested in getting the inside story on how a story is produced.
	Readers didn't value the opportunity to meet fellow readers of Tiempo.

These surprises are a useful starting point for discussion. Ask your newsroom why they think there is a gap. Maybe you need to conduct additional interviews with your audience members to learn more and identify what you can do to close the gap between your newsroom's assumptions and what your audience members actually want.

This isn't necessarily a signal you need to change something about your editorial strategy. It might simply be a sign you need to do a better job of telling your story.

Tiempo Argentino discovered that the majority of their supporters cited the importance of Tiempo being a self-managed, journalist-owned media organization, and understood that their support helped ensure that continued. This helped shape Tiempo's next marketing campaign:

**"Tiempo Argentino: Periodismo autogestionado, necesario y financiado por sus lectores"**

**(Translation: Tiempo Argentino. Self-managed and necessary journalism financed by its readers).**

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