



# **Leading Through Cost Pressure & Higher Member Expectations**

Starkweather Association Services | 14 Oct 2025



# Executive Summary

Event and operational costs are rising while member expectations for experience, personalization, digital access, and career outcomes continue to climb. Many associations remain optimistic, expecting growth in new member acquisitions and total membership. However, renewal risk persists when perceived value lags price. This white paper draws on recent industry findings to highlight membership dynamics, cost pressures, and evolving member expectations, translating them into practical guidance tailored for associations using YourMembership (YM).

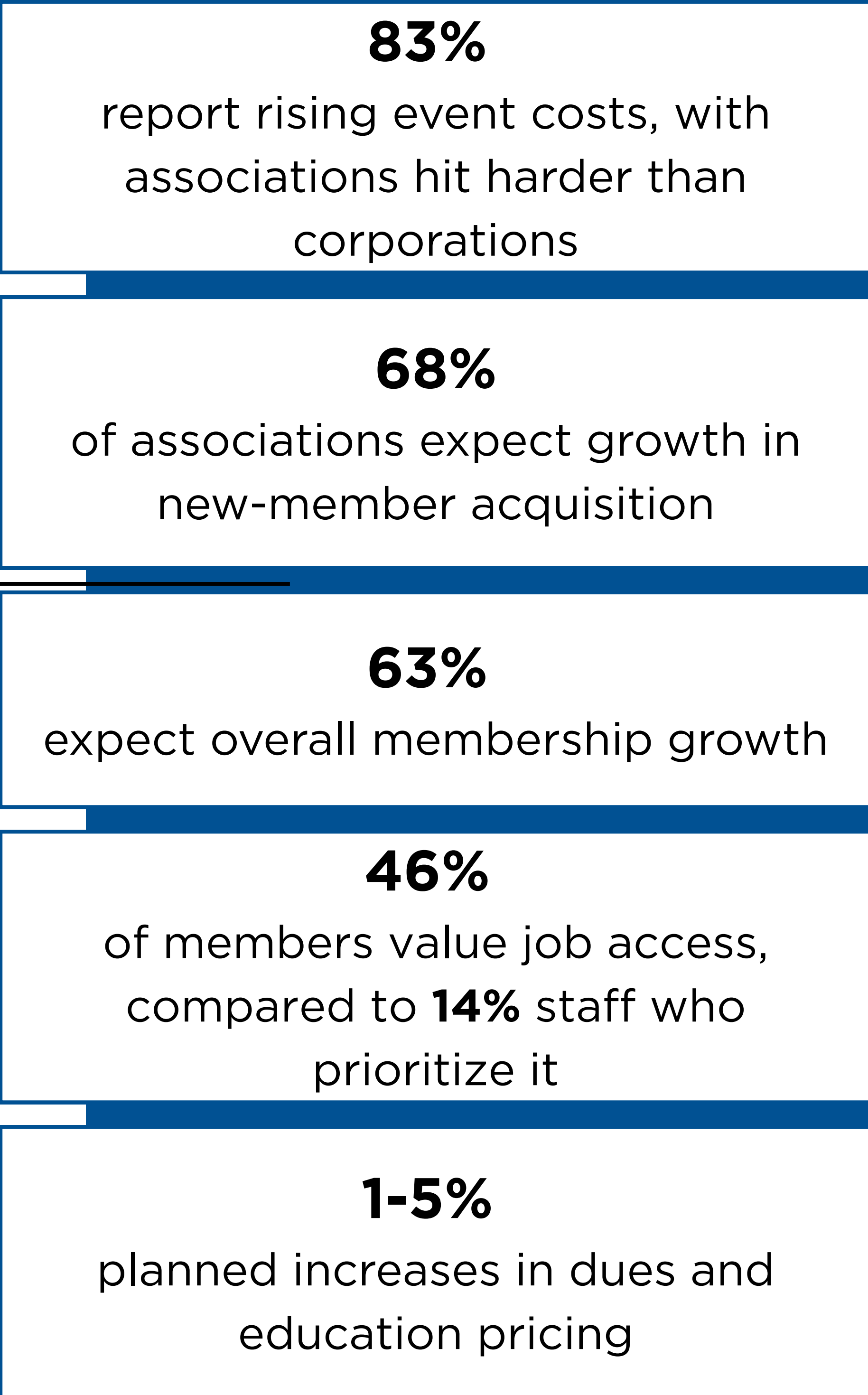
## What’s Driving Membership Decisions

Associations face a dual reality: cautious optimism for growth, alongside persistent pressures. Costs are rising faster than budgets, and members are demanding more personalized, career-relevant value. The challenge is not simply surviving these shifts but translating them into strategies that strengthen retention and resilience.

Cost escalation is eroding margins, especially for associations and non-profits that lack corporate-scale resources. Growth projections are encouraging, yet renewal remains fragile when members don’t clearly see return on investment. Persistent churn signals a need to rethink how value is communicated and delivered.

At the same time, The gap between what staff assume and what members actually want is widening—particularly around technology, personalization, and career services. Modest pricing adjustments are common, but without transparent communication and clear ROI, they risk amplifying price sensitivity. Associations that bridge this expectation gap will be better positioned to convert optimism into durable growth.

## Key Signals Shaping 2025



These pressures highlight the need for YM associations to adopt a consistent framework that transform costs into investments, expectations into value, and programs into sustainable growth.



# What Members Value

Beyond cost pressures and growth projections, associations must align with what members say they value most. Research shows that retention depends on more than networking or a single event experience. Members increasingly look for relevance to their roles, seamless experiences, and ongoing access to knowledge and career pathways. When these drivers are missing, churn accelerates — but when they are present, renewal rates and perceived value rise.

To illustrate, member priorities cluster around three drivers:

## Relevance

Content and programming tied directly to members’ roles and timely problems. Associations that describe their value proposition as “compelling” are far more likely to report membership growth (Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report, 2025). Organizing sessions by persona and focusing on outcomes helps members see immediate career value and strengthens renewals.

## Experience

A seamless, polished journey from registration to delivery. Associations recognized as early adopters of technology report higher member satisfaction, loyalty, and engagement (PR Newswire, 2024). From streamlined registration and transparent pricing to professional onsite or virtual delivery, strong experiences communicate credibility and reduce churn.

## Access

Value that extends beyond the event itself. Members increasingly rank professional development, job opportunities, and access to data and knowledge as top priorities (PR Newswire, 2024). Providing recordings, resource libraries, and career pathways turns one-time participation into sustained engagement and stronger ROI.



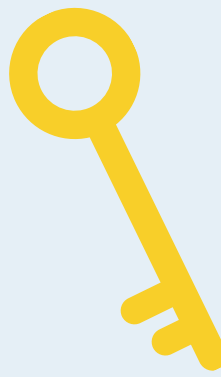
### RELEVANCE

While **68%** of associations expect new-member growth, members value content tied to roles and real-world challenges. Associations with a compelling value proposition report the strongest growth.



### EXPERIENCE

Satisfaction is higher with smooth, modern delivery – fast registration, clear labels, reliable access – and early tech adopters report greater loyalty and engagement.



### ACCESS

Benefits must extend beyond events. Career services and professional development now sit among members’ core expectations.

RETENTION

GROWTH

Relevance, Experience, and Access are the pillars of perceived value. Associations that consistently deliver these three elements – in events, education, and year-round engagement – are more likely to see sustained membership growth.



# The Solution for YM Associations

To help YM associations navigate rising costs, shifting member expectations, and renewal pressures, we recommend a structured, repeatable model that builds value into every stage of the member experience. This approach leverages YM's capabilities to streamline operations, deliver clear ROI, and strengthen retention.

Successful events don't happen by accident – they result from a clear rhythm that balances preparation, delivery, and follow-through. Associations that establish this rhythm can reduce complexity for staff, protect margins, and provide members with consistent value.

## Foundational Setup (One-Time)

Certain elements only need to be built once, then reused across events:

### **Price & Tiers**

Define pricing for members, non-members, early-career professionals, groups, and all-access bundles. Publish a simple “who gets what” grid.

**YM Cue:** YM allows you to set member vs non-member price types, apply segment promo codes, and display fees transparently so pricing is always clear.

### **Content Hub**

Build a central library for recordings, slides, and summaries so resources are easy to locate and use.

**YM Cue:** You can create a dedicated page or area within YM and organize files by event or topic for easy access and future reference.

### **Community Spaces**

Choose groups and permissions for event discussions; pre-load 3-4 seed prompts to spark engagement.

**YM Cue:** YM enables you to create communities and load discussion starters in advance, so conversations begin immediately.

### **Automation Index**

Decide on critical communications – confirmations, abandoned registrations reminders, renewal nudges – and establish processes for automation and regular follow up.

**YM Cue:** Workflows allow you to automate these communications, keeping the copy concise and outcome focused.

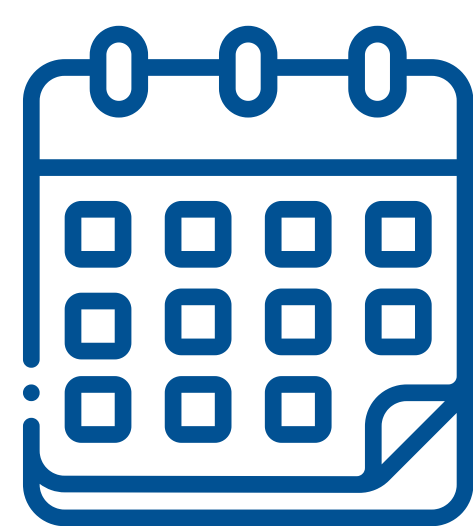
### **Reporting Basics**

Select 5 KPIs to monitor: registration, revenue mix, email click-through rate, community activity, cost per attendee. Decide in advance where each will be tracked.

*“A strong, compelling value proposition is strongly correlated with membership growth.”*  
– Membership Marketing Benchmark Report



# EVENT LIFECYCLE REPEATABLE CHECKLIST



## Pre-Event

3 weeks out to day before



## During Event

event week



## Post-Event

Weeks 1-3 After



## Measure & Tune

Week 4 After

✓ Publish tier grid and activate 2 time-boxed segment promos

✓ Keep registration forms short and pre-filled; verify member pricing applies automatically

✓ Add “What You’ll Get” benefits to the registration page (recordings, community access, career touchpoints)

✓ Capture all sessions to provide recordings for post-event access

✓ Collect final presentation slides from speakers for member use

✓ Post 1-2 community prompts to encourage live participation and discussion

✓ Upload at least 3 event assets to the content library and label them clearly by event name or topic

✓ Run a 3-post community cadence:

- key takeaways
- Q&A follow-up
- “what’s next”

✓ Send a concise follow-up email with resource links and career opportunities

✓ Review conversations, attach/bundle rates, email CTR, library usage, and community engagement

✓ Review non-renewal themes and member feedback from recent cycles to identify gaps in perceived value that future events can address

✓ Trim low-yield extras (like catering or AV) before cutting high impact experiences

This structure enables associations to deliver consistent, high impact programs – but program design alone is not enough. Sustained growth also requires diversified revenue streams that reduce reliance on dues and single event registration



# Non-Dues Revenue Quick Picks: Fast Track Revenue Ideas that Add Member Value

Associations can't rely solely on dues and event fees. Non-dues revenue (NDR) strengthens financial resilience while creating new ways to deliver value. To keep the process manageable, we recommend starting with one of the following quick picks. Each can be piloted quickly, tested, and scaled if it proves successful.

OPTIONS	EXAMPLES	ESTIMATED TIME TO LAUNCH
Sponsorships (year-round)	Newsletter or podcast placements, sponsored briefs, sponsored sessions	Low 2-4 weeks
Digital Education	On-demand mini-courses from session recordings; member vs non-member pricing	Medium 4-8 weeks
Content Licensing	Package research or white papers for institutional buyers	Medium 6-10 weeks
Career Services	Paid job postings, resume banks, sponsored career webinars or virtual fairs	Low-Medium 4-6 weeks
Post-Event Monetization	VIP/premium tracks, paid access to recordings or CE credits, micro-learning bundles	Low 2-4 weeks
<div><h3>How to Apply</h3><p>Audit your assets &gt; select one pilot &gt; define revenue, engagement, and retention metrics &gt; review after 60 days &gt; expand only what works</p></div>		

By pairing a repeatable event rhythm with fast track non-dues revenue pilots, YM associations can address today's pressures, deliver clearer value to members, and build more sustainable growth. Together, these solutions create a practical roadmap for retention, resilience, and long-term impact.



# Real-life Association Examples

Associations across industries are already demonstrating how non-dues revenue can strengthen sustainability and member value. The following models illustrate practical approaches that YM associations can adapt to fit their mission, accreditation needs, and configuration.

## American Marketing Association (AMA)

The AMA has built a strong digital education stream by offering certifications and online learning opportunities to both members and non-members ([AMA Certifications](#)).

**Takeaway:** YM associations can repurpose recordings and CEU pathways into digital education products using YM's pricing and access controls.

## IEEE

IEEE generates significant non-dues revenue through content licensing, with institutional buyers accessing its publications via platforms like IEEE Xplore, alongside strong sponsorship programs ([IEEE Xplore](#)).

**Takeaway:** YM associations can package research, standards, or white papers for institutional access using content hubs, leveraging YM's content management tools.

## American Nurses Association (ANA)

The ANA supplements membership dues with CEU-accredited online education and micro-certifications, that directly support career advancement ([ANA Continuing Education](#)).

**Takeaway:** YM associations can create credentialing by converting event content into on-demand micro-learning.

## Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM)

SHRM diversifies revenue through job boards, training, certification, and affinity programs, providing members with clear career value ([SHRM Certification](#), [SHRM Job Board](#)).

**Takeaway:** YM associations can launch career services and affinity offerings, providing members with clear career value generating new revenue channels through YM integrations.

## Why it Matters

These examples prove that associations of all sizes can expand beyond dues and events. With YM's built-in capabilities from pricing tiers to content hubs and communities, associations already have the tools to adapt these models for growth and retention.

Together, these examples reinforce a simple truth: associations that align structure with value and diversify revenue are best positioned to turn today's pressures into long-term growth.



*Associations that balance costs, clarity, and career value will not just endure change, they will set the standard for growth.*

## Conclusion

Associations are navigating a period of rising costs, shifting member expectations, and greater pressure to demonstrate value. The evidence shows that growth is possible – but it depends on a clear value proposition, meaningful event experiences, and diversified revenue strategies.

Real-life examples from AMA, IEEE, ANA, and SHRM illustrate how associations are rethinking education, licensing, career services, and affinity offerings to strengthen both sustainability and engagement. These models demonstrate that success is not about doing more but about doing what matters most for members: relevance, experience, access.

For YM associations, the tools are already in place to put these strategies into practice. By aligning pricing, content hubs, communities, and automations with what members truly value, associations can deliver clarity, efficiency, and outcomes that resonate.

## Partner with Starkweather, The experts in YM Support

The challenges associations face today are complex, but you don't have to navigate them alone. Starkweather provides the expertise and continuity YM associations need to align tools, strategy, and member value for sustainable growth.

Learn more at [www.starkweather.us](http://www.starkweather.us), or to start a conversation directly, contact us at [ymhelp@starkweather.us](mailto:ymhelp@starkweather.us)





## References

Sources are provided for reference; all external statistics and examples were adapted for this white paper.

### Industry Reports & Research

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### Association Examples

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- IEEE. IEEE Xplore Digital Library
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- Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). Certification | Job Board

