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Evidence-based Marketing Strategies to Increase Student Membership in a Professional Association

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Purpose and Statement of Need

Membership acquisition and attrition is vital to the survival and growth of a voluntary professional association. The percentage of social work students who are members of social work voluntary professional associations is low (Attinson & Glassberg, 1983). The purpose of this project is to understand the acquisition and attrition of students in order to develop marketing strategies to increase student membership. Voluntary professional associations value student members because they are the future of the profession and the association (NASW, 2013). Student membership in a voluntary professional association is important for students as this participation provides students with opportunities for socialization to the profession, networking, and professional development (Brown, 2004). Despite previous efforts to increase membership, student enrollment in School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) has remained between four and six percent of the total membership population over the previous four years (Streeck, 2012). Effective marketing strategies geared toward students raises awareness of the professional association and affects membership acquisition.

Methodology

A systematic literature review regarding the history of voluntary professional associations, current membership trends, and theories describing membership acquisition and retention was conducted. The research was synthesized to facilitate the generation of evidence-based marketing strategies targeting students. An executive summary was developed to present the marketing strategies to the association's Board of Directors.

Literature Review

Many theories have been proposed to describe the motivation to join a professional association and the reasons members leave (Knoke, 1988). These theories include incentive theory, social identity theory, social exchange theory, and motivation theory.

Incentive theory

Incentive theory suggests the membership rate increases when members know the value of services and the association aligns incentives with member wants and needs (Knoke, 1988). There are four kinds of incentives that an association can offer to increase the perceived value of the association: material, purposive, solidarity, and informative (Knoke, 1988). The congruence between member motivations and incentives offered by an association can elicit a greater contribution of resources such as money, in-kind services, time, or psychological commitment which can be used fulfill the mission of the association.

Social identity theory

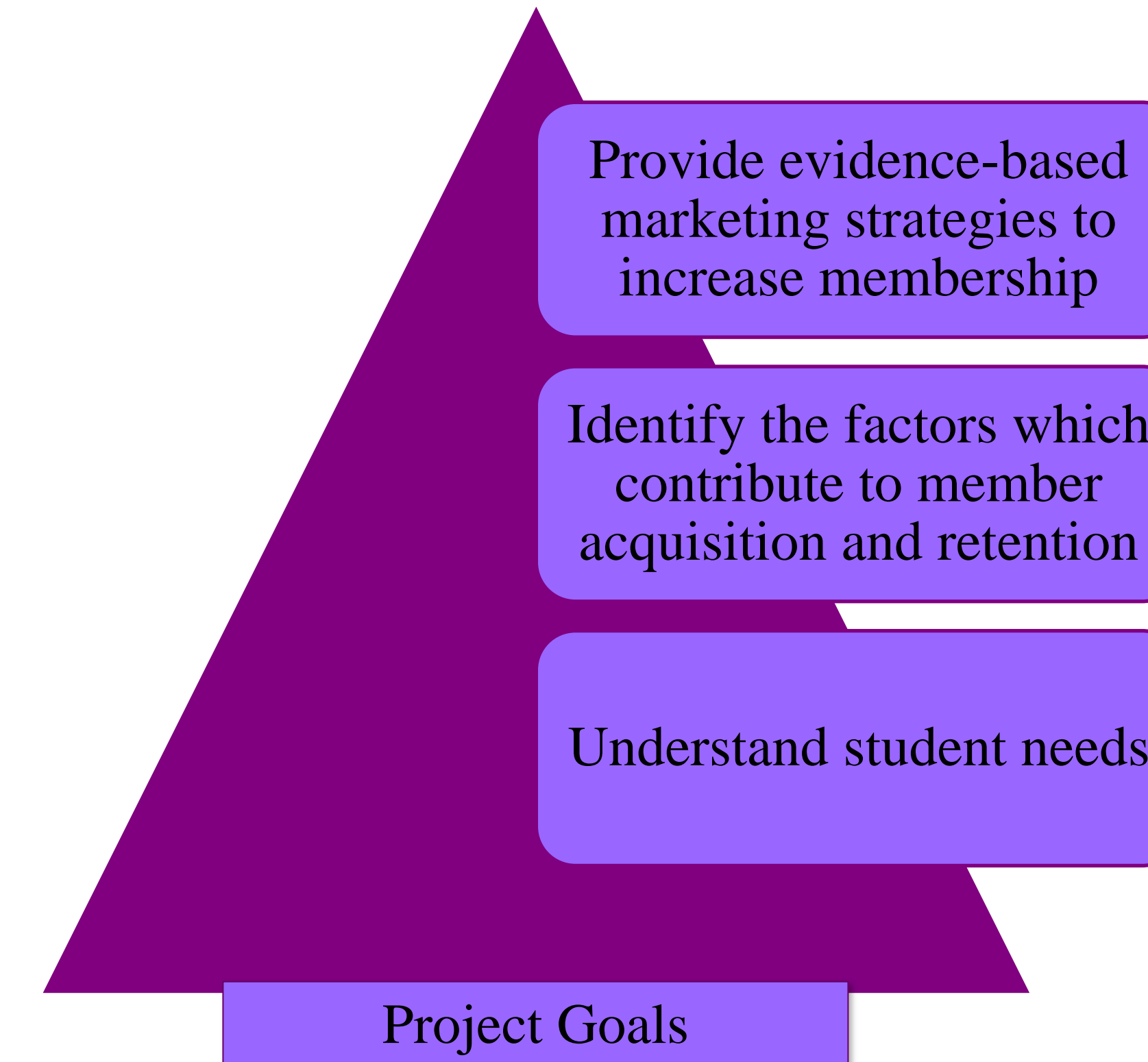
Social identity theory emphasizes the potential effect of group identification on membership decisions (Philips, 2012). Part of an individual's self-concept is derived from the personal knowledge of membership in a professional association combined with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1981). According to research based on social identity theory, membership is most likely to occur when pre-employment (during academic education) and post-training (colleagues/employer) support is present as this facilitates the depersonalization process (Philips, 2012). Membership in a professional association has been demonstrated to increase the socialization of students and junior employees to the profession's norms and values (Koerin, 1990; Hamilton, 2001).

Social exchange theory

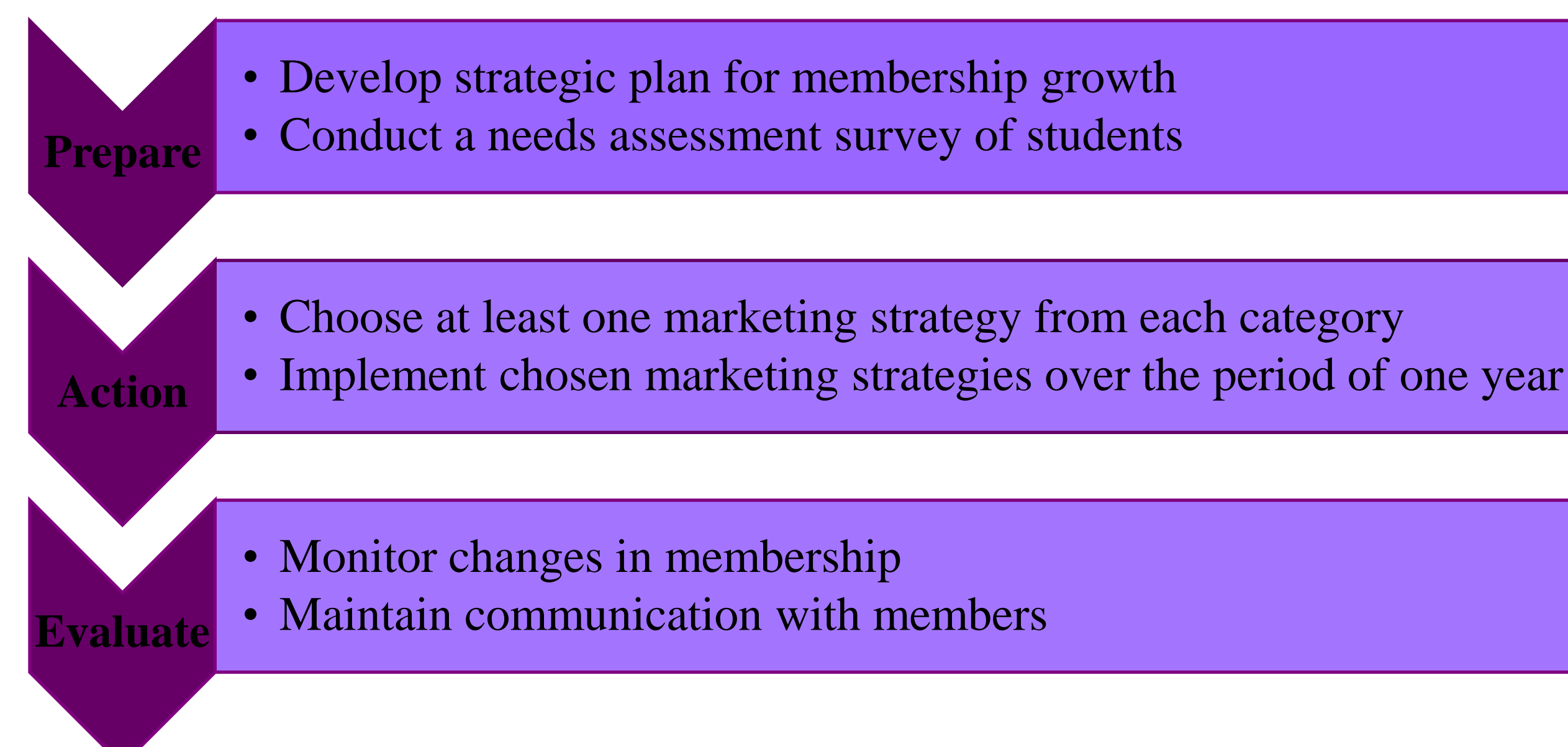
Social exchange theory posits that members exchange dues, time, and expertise for services and products offered by the association (Fine, 1990). Both the member and the association must feel adequately compensated for the exchange to occur. This exchange happens when the perceived benefits of obtaining a good or a service, such as monetary value; information; prestige; status; outweighs its cost (Philips, 2011).

Motivation theory

According to Herzburg's two factor model, there are two types of motivations which can describe work-related needs and desires: extrinsic and intrinsic (Ronen & Kraut, 1980). Extrinsic motivators are punishments and rewards given by administration. Intrinsic motivators come from within an individual where the individual finds satisfaction from the work itself (Ronen & Kraut, 1980). Intrinsic motivators include concepts such as achievement, recognition, responsibility, and growth (Ronen & Kraut, 1980). Research indicates that intrinsic motivation leads to participation and job satisfaction while extrinsic motivation does not (Fitts, 2006). Administration in an association can develop an environment which promotes intrinsic motivation and encourages greater engagement by fostering members' autonomy, mastery, and purpose (Pink, 2009).



Discussion and Recommendations



Results: Marketing Strategies

Public Relations

Membership recruitment has become very technical and specialized. Developing public relations is the primary prerequisite to devising and implementing marketing strategies.

Strategic Planning Regarding Membership

- *Create a plan:* hire a marketing consultant, develop a marketing plan, increase visibility
- *Membership renewal:* four reminders
- *Membership categories:* redesign for effectiveness

Communication to Members and Potential Members

- *Customer service:* review procedures and provide training where necessary

Internet Presence

Harnessing the power of the internet could create a surge in the number of students and early career professionals who join the association. The internet is a more useful tool to connect with students and young people than with any other demographic (Dalton & Dignam, 2007).

Official Website

- *Engagement:* design, storytelling, symphony, empathy, play
- *Table:* identify each benefit and the cost saved with membership
- *Licensure map:* interactive and searchable for all states
- *Job search/employment services:* classifieds section; resume recommendations; informational videos; links to useful job search databases
- *Ethical consultation:* WebMD feature; ethics e-learning game; include NASW Code of ethics on website; continuing education course; discussion forum; decision form

Social Networking

- *Appeal to the voyeur:* ad outtakes, service prototypes, "A Day In the Life" videos
- *Appeal to the brander:* form a brand community
- *Appeal to the narcissist:* "celebrity" endorsement by leadership, co-produced content

Relationship Development

Members who communicate with leadership and other members are more likely to remain a part of the association (Dalton & Dignam, 2006). Strategies which focus on relationship development encourage the type of member to join who will be active and involved in the association and most likely to be future leaders.

Relationship Building

- *Mentorship program:* build relationships through guided discussion
- *Resource sharing:* resource list, virtual book club

Leadership Development

- *Leadership skill development:* expand voting rights and board representation
- *"Inverse webinars":* student-led discussions

Incentives

Incentives may raise the perceived value of the association to surpass the cost of joining, and thereby increase membership rates.

Monetary Incentives

- *Cost of membership:* engage the ideal price point
- *Membership discounts:* early career discounts, peer referral discount
- *Scholarships:* member-sponsored support of students

Non-monetary Incentives

- *Partner with academic institutions and internship agencies:* membership discount, liability insurance, assistance with research, editing, publishing
- *Front-end prospecting:* provide small gifts to potential members before they join

Needs Assessment Survey

The best way to understand the needs of a changing association is to develop and administer a needs assessment survey targeting students. Questions should be composed to gather specific information regarding the interests, needs, limitations, and obstacles for potential and current members.



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