

Membership readiness audit

This audit created by Membership Puzzle Project team members and consultants is designed to help a pre-membership newsroom or newsroom consultant assess whether the newsroom has a strong foundation for membership. It could also be used to help identify problem areas if the organization is struggling to reach its membership goals.



Getting started

Which best describes your membership stage?	• We are just getting started with membership • We already have a membership strategy in place, but we are falling short of our goals
Why are you pursuing membership now? Highlight all statements that apply.	• We cannot cover our costs with our existing revenue sources • We want to make it possible for our audience members to contribute more than just their financial support. We value their knowledge, expertise, and participation, too. • We need to cover a major budget gap, quickly. • We don't want to have a paywall. • We want to monetize access to our content. • We want to guarantee our editorial independence by diversifying our revenue sources • We've heard about how well it has worked for other news outlets and want to try it in our newsroom. • We want to test out audience members' interest in supporting us.

	• There is a strong sense of community among our audience members, and we think people will pay to access that. • We have some reporters and editors who enjoy working with audience members.
Could you summarise what you expect to get from pursuing membership in one sentence?	
Have you ever asked your audience for financial support before?	
If you have asked for financial support before, how many people gave? How much did they give, on average?	

If you (or the newsroom you're working with) are still struggling to identify why you are choosing membership over other models, MPP suggests the following readings:

- The Membership Guide | [Defining membership](#)
- Poynter | [Demystifying 'membership lite'](#)
- A Media Operator | [Subscriptions are perfectly fine, but community can give you so much more.](#)
- Reuters Institute for Journalism | [How media startups overcame the business model crisis](#)
- Reuters Institute for Journalism | [How to build a successful subscription business](#)

Strategic readiness

Organizational	
What percentage of your newsroom is enthusiastic about membership?	
Who in your newsroom is enthusiastic about membership?	

Who is going to do the work associated with membership?	
Is there anyone you need support from who is not enthusiastic about membership?	
Resources	
What financial and staff resources can your organization devote to membership?	
What are your revenue streams? Identify them in order of their contribution to your total revenue.	
Value proposition	
Thinking about what makes your newsroom different from others and valuable to audience members, complete the following statements: • We are the first ones to... • We are the only ones to... • We are the best at...	
How will membership help you deliver on that?	
Evaluating success	
What metrics are you tracking regularly? In other words, how do you measure your success at serving and reaching your audience?	
What metrics will you track in order to measure the success of your membership effort?	

What's something you did recently that was successful for your newsroom? How did you know it was successful?	
How do you invite audience members to participate in your journalism? Check all that apply.	• We invite them to comment • We invite them to suggest sources • We invite them to contribute proofreading • We invite them to share their expertise • We invite them to share their experiences • We invite them to share their questions • We invite them to vote on newsroom decisions • We ask them to fill out surveys to shape our coverage • We invite them to contribute story ideas • We invite them to meet our reporters and editors • We invite them to help us recruit members • We invite them to host conversations and events on our platforms • Other (detail below)
How do you know when a specific story does well?	
Do you have a way of tracking the impact of your work?	
How do you communicate impact when you have it?	

Ability to test and learn	
Briefly summarize a time that you tested an idea with your audience.	
What did you learn from that test, and how did it influence your work going forward?	

The following readings might be helpful if this exercise has helped you identify gaps in any of the areas above.

- Hearken: [Getting your boss to sign off on your great idea](#)
- The Membership Guide | [Making the business case for membership](#)
- The Membership Guide | [Discovering your value proposition](#)
- The Membership Guide | [How Chalkbeat defined and measured membership success](#)
- The Management Center | [SMARTIE Goals Worksheet](#)

Audience readiness

General audiences	
Who are your audiences?	
What methods and data have you used to identify who your audiences are? Do they match the audiences you aspire to serve?	
Are there any audiences you've lost over time?	
Are there other newsrooms serving the same audiences? Do any of these newsrooms have an audience revenue stream?	
What do your audience members value about your	

work? How did you find that out?	
Which of the below do you use to connect with your audience? Please explain what organizational goal each selected channel serves (Choose all that apply)	• Newsletters – <i>We use newsletters to...</i> • SMS • WhatsApp • Commenting • Online communities • Telegram • Facebook Groups • Events • Other
Loyal audiences	
What do your most loyal audience members have in common? Think behaviours, attitudes, demographics, and geographies, for starters.	
Are you reaching those audiences?	
If not, what methods for reaching them are available to you?	
How do you define a loyal user based on... (Answer for all that apply)	• Site visits • Newsletter open rates • Social media interaction
What percentage of your site visitors... (Each of the figures to the right are industry benchmarks)	• Visit your site 5 times or more a month? • Visit your site 15 times or more a month? • Are subscribed to a newsletter?

	• Open a newsletter 75% of the time? • Have attended an event (live or in-person)? • Listen to at least 80 percent of your podcast?
What other activities or opportunities could you offer to strengthen the relationship between your newsroom and your audience members?	
Assessing the membership opportunity	
Do you know what would motivate loyal audience members to become members?	
Do you know how much they would be willing to pay for membership?	
What information are you lacking about your audiences in order to plan your membership strategy?	
How will you obtain that information?	

Useful reading

- The Membership Guide | [How do we assess how well we are converting audience members?](#)
- Google News Initiative | [Reader Revenue Playbook](#)

Logistical readiness

Program design	
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Have you identified your membership value proposition?	
Have you identified the most desirable and feasible benefits to offer?	
Have you designed a draft of your membership program and tested it with a few loyal audience members?	
Have you evaluated what it would cost in time and money to fulfill those benefits and ensured you can cover those costs?	
Retention	
What steps have you taken to prepare to retain your members?	• We have created an onboarding series • We have identified a person and process for providing good customer service. • We have a process in place for people whose credit cards are declined. • We have made our default payment option a monthly or annual recurring payment. • We have created an FAQ for members.
Do you have a plan for dealing with each of the following reasons someone might cancel their membership?	• Their credit card information changed (an accidental cancellation) • They don't feel heard by your organization • They don't feel they are getting value from their membership • They're financially unable to keep their membership • They disagree with an editorial decision you made

Are there any other reasons that people might cancel their membership to your organization? Are they specific to your organization, or more general?	
What would you say to someone who wants to cancel their membership to try to win them back?	
Tech	
Have you mapped out your existing tech stack?	
Have you identified any technical constraints that could prevent you from growing?	

- The Membership Guide | [Retaining your members](#)
- The Membership Guide | [Building your tech stack](#)
- The Membership Guide | [What types of membership costs can we expect?](#)
- The Membership Guide | [Discovering your value proposition](#)
- The Membership Guide | [Designing your membership program](#)

When a newsroom has gotten to this point, there's still the launch to prepare for! We have a membership program launch checklist, as well. You can find that in [the Membership Guide](#).