

The Ultimate Membership Renewal Guide

Practical tips and tactics on how to engage and delight your members. It's time to send membership renewal rates to the stars!





Table of Contents

- 1 Why Do Healthy Membership Renewals Matter?
- 2 Show Your Members How They Benefit
- 4 Make Participation Memorable and Meaningful
- 6 How to Start Improving the Renewal Process
- 7 Don't Forget: Be Kind, Please Remind!
- 8 Find the Right Channel to Deliver Your Message
- 10 Set Up a Multi-Channel Strategy From Scratch
- 12 Reinforce Recurring Membership Renewals With Gratitude
- 14 Use Incentives and Discounts to Nudge Punctual Renewals
- 15 Create a Clear Internal Policy on Grace Periods

Introduction

Running a successful non-profit, club, or association is impossible without passionate and active members. It's tough enough to find and recruit new members, but it can be even harder to keep them engaged and delighted. People are busy and forgetful, and paying annual membership dues can be inconvenient and low on the most well-intentioned member's priority list.

But having an engaged and growing membership is key to any non-profit, club, or association that wants to make a meaningful impact on people's lives – or the world.

In this guide, you'll learn why consistent membership renewals are critical for a healthy and impactful organization. We're going to teach you step by step how to build out or improve your organization's membership renewal process. This guidance is all informed by survey data that we will unpack to reveal the best renewal practices used by small membership organizations.

About the Data in This Guide...

Wild Apricot receives thousands of questions about membership renewals from small to large-sized organizations every year. So, we've combed through the [Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report](#) and other sources to create this helpful guide.

Here are the highlights and important details about the types of organizations surveyed in the Membership Marketing Benchmark Report: This is the 15th consecutive year this survey has been conducted of over 960 association professionals.

The member renewal cycle of organizations was:

- 43%: static/annual renewal (all members renew on the same date)
- 54%: rolling renewal (members renew on their own anniversary date)
- 3%: other

The type of membership offering:

- Individual Member Organization – 42%
- Organizational or Trade – 29%
- Combination – 29%

You can see the full results [here](#).

Section 1: Why Do Healthy Membership Renewals Matter?

Starting or growing a thriving membership is hard work and takes a lot of time. Do you encounter the following challenges as you try to delight new members and keep current members renewing year after year?



- Manually managing member database - adding and updating member records by hand
- Website struggles - creating or improving your website to help members find information and connect
- Informing and reminding members to renew their membership on time

If you haven't found a way to overcome the things preventing your membership from renewing, it's likely your organization suffers from weak membership engagement and unsustainable revenue flow. Its very survival may be at risk.

Improving membership renewal rates ensures your organization stays healthy and grows. You will:



- Spend less time doing admin work and more time welcoming and engaging members
- Retain happy members year over year and capture consistent renewal revenue
- Effectively meet members' needs via mobile wherever they are and grow your ranks

If you are looking for ideas to refresh your membership renewal process, you're not alone! And if you don't currently have a renewal process at all, by the end of this guide you'll be able to create one from scratch.

So let's get to it!

Section 2: Show Your Members How They Benefit

What are the benefits for members that renew their membership? Do your members know what these benefits are? Have you told them lately that you love them?

Focusing on membership renewal rates isn't a once-a-year endeavor. It's a crucial and ongoing endeavor. Delivering the value that your membership expects to receive from paying their dues shows that you honor the rule of reciprocity and motivates members to keep their memberships active and in good standing.

So how to help your members see the value they are getting from their membership?



One way we've seen this done by conducting annual or biannual member surveys requesting feedback on how your organization is doing, and what additional benefits your membership wants to see in the future.

Clearly identify the benefits that your members already receive and frame this value in your communications using two key questions:

-  1. What did the organization do for members this past year?
-  2. What did members do for the organization this past year?

In addition to making members aware of the benefits available to them, another way to maximize your renewals is by delivering impeccable member service.

Here's some questions to help you identify the level of service you are providing your membership:



Are you inspiring your members to reach their personal goals?



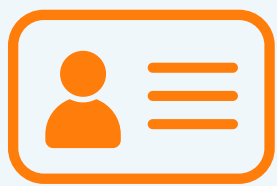
Are you not only listening to, but addressing concerns?



Do you value your members input?



Are you working on solutions before problems arise?



Do you know at least 60% of your members by name?



Are you planning a member appreciation event?



Check out our guide [Your Complete Guide To Increase Member Engagement](#) for more tips on engaging and retaining members.

Section 3: Make Participation Memorable and Meaningful

Of course, once you're sure you are offering valuable member benefits, you need to keep your members informed to ensure they stay engaged and continue to participate. One way to do this is to implement 'new member' mentoring system.

Mentoring System

A 'new member' mentoring system is where a seasoned member will provide one on one coaching or assistance to a new member. An onboarding buddy program can go a long way to helping new members bond with existing members, participate and get a lot of value from their membership.

This will do the following for your new member or "mentee":

- Welcome and introduce them to your organization
- Make them feel comfortable and a part of the community
- Show them how the organization works
- Give new members a buddy to ask for advice and guidance
- Assistance in navigating and advancing in their careers
- Build meaningful professional relationships and provide networking opportunities

This will also help your mentors! They will see the following benefits as a mentor:

- Opportunity to nurture new talent and potential future hires
- Develop their leadership and communication skills
- Raised self-esteem and fulfillment that comes from giving back to another member in your organization
- Opportunity to network with other mentors
- Ability to meet new members and develop stronger bonds withing your org

It is no surprise that members who are the most engaged tend to renew most often. The [2023 Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report](#) found that associations reporting increases in membership renewals are more likely to have an ongoing communication program for new members



Data on Engaging Members to Boost Retention

It can be easier said than done when trying to figure out how to engage your members to keep them retained. The MMBR shows us that these are the most popular communication methods to engage tenured members:

1 Ongoing Engagement Email Series (weekly, monthly, quarterly etc.)
61%

2 Requests to Volunteer
52%

3 Invitation to Follow/Like Organization's Social Media
41%

4 Regular Member Surveys
40%

5 Invitation to Join the Online Community
34%



Section 4: How to Start Improving the Renewal Process

When starting the renewal process, most organizations begin sending renewal notices about one or two months prior to the member's expiration. If you're deciding on when to start the renewal process, here are three tips that can help you out:

1 Look at historical renewal data

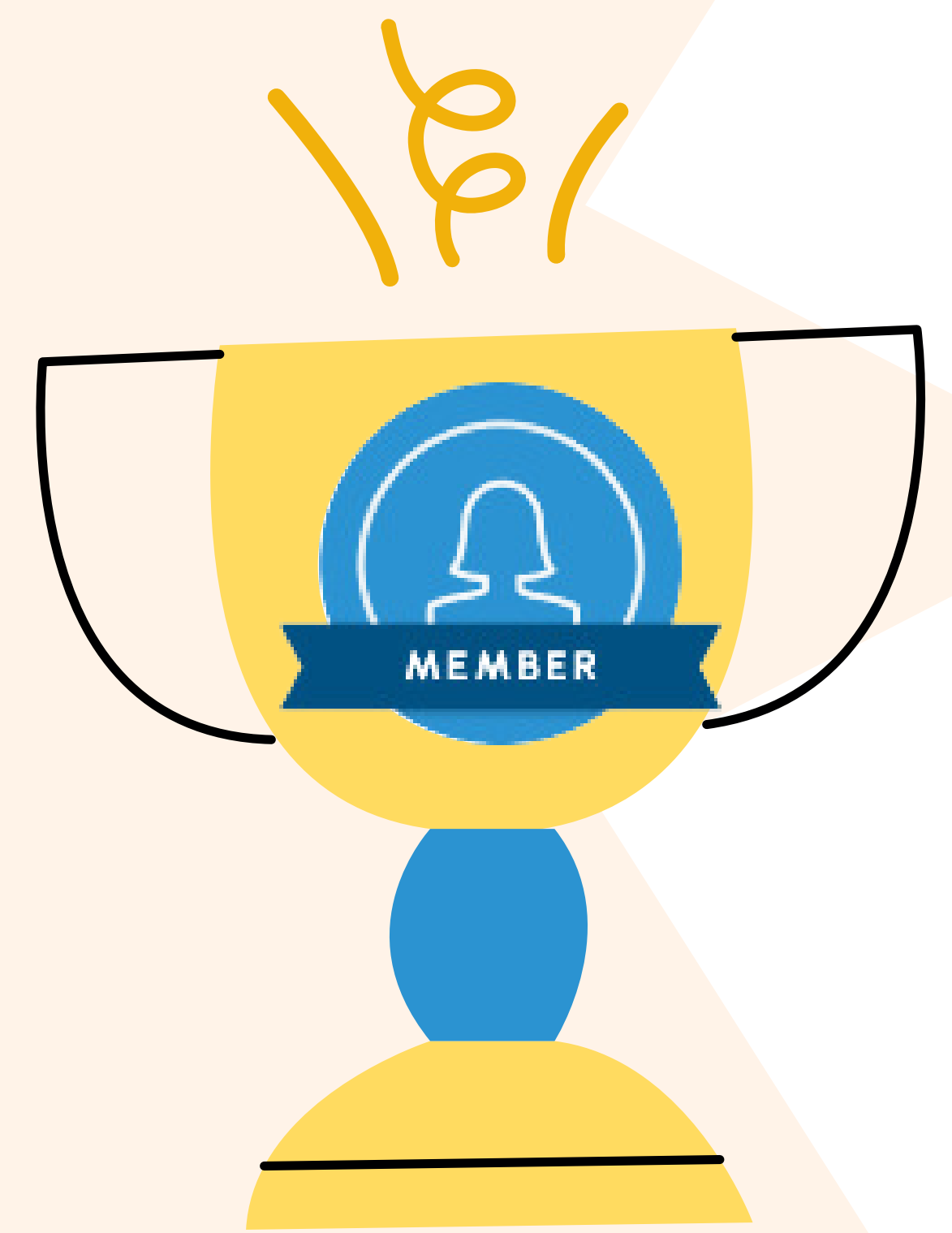
When have you received the most renewals in the past? For example, did most members renew right away after you sent the first notice? If so, your timing may be working. If you are on a static or annual renewal schedule and find members take 1-2 months to renew, you may need to start the renewal process earlier.

2 Consider an online survey

If you're just getting started, have no historical data or just think it's time to check in ask your members what their preferences are, you can use an online survey. Sending one out through your website, via email or on your Facebook page is a terrific way to understand what your members expect from your organization.

3 Take a longer view

If you're sending out invoices or notices just prior to the membership expiration date, consider creating an ongoing year-round membership connection campaign.



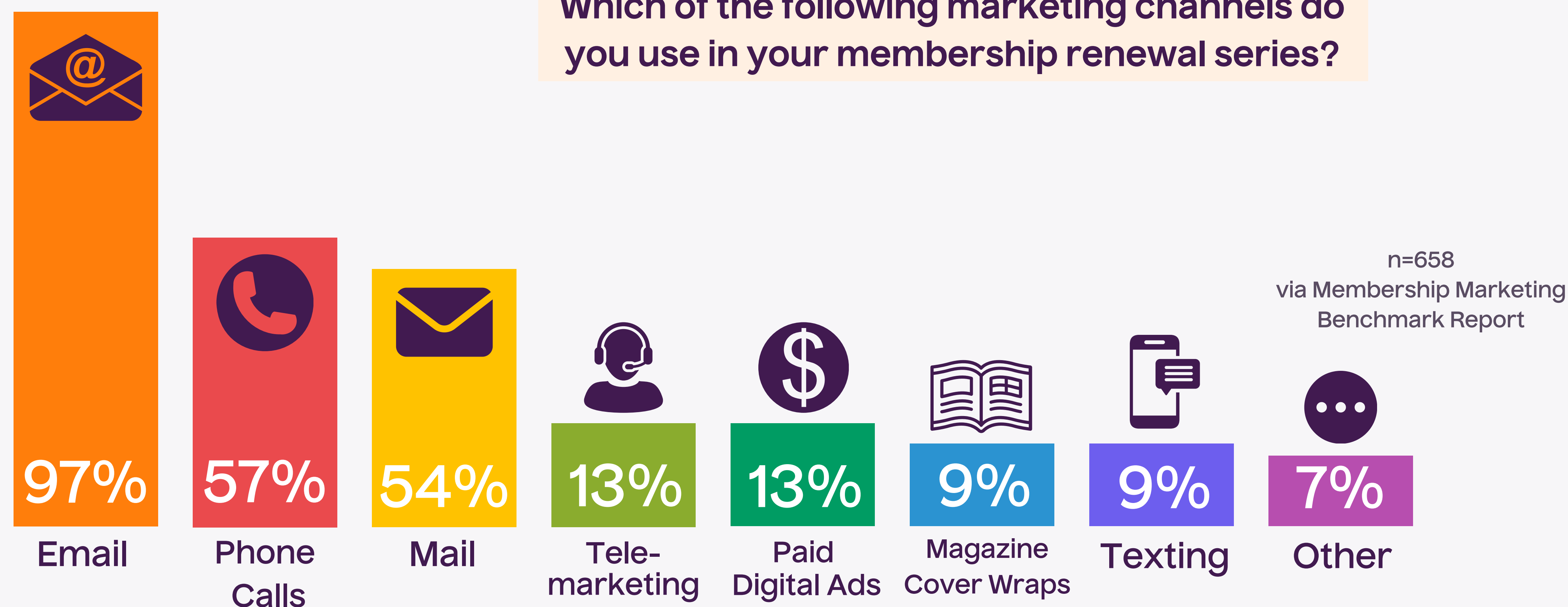
Regardless of when you start the renewal process, one thing is clear: keep your membership database up-to-date. Sending timely and relevant renewal messages to your members showcases your organization's diligence and attention to detail. If you are maintaining a manually updated member database, consider asking members to occasionally update their online information.

Section 5: Don't Forget: Be Kind, Please Remind!

If you're only sending out one notice or an invoice, but aren't finding this too successful, it may be time to consider additional renewal notices. Think about varying your communications methods and messages as suggested below.

From the survey data, members are contacted across 8 different marketing channels when it comes to membership renewals. With the top 3 being email (97%), phone calls (57%) and direct mail (54%).

Which of the following marketing channels do you use in your membership renewal series?



The MMBR also reports that on average, associations use:

- 6 emails
- 3 pieces of direct mail
- 3 texts
- 3 phone calls

From staff, board members or chapter leaders in their renewal campaigns.



As a general rule of thumb, organizations are okay with sending continued reminders as long as the revenue generated from dues outweighs the cost of sending the reminders (time, money, annoyed members, etc.).

Section 6: Find the Right Channel to Deliver Your Message

As we mentioned in the last section, the three most popular channels for sending out membership renewal notices are email, phone and direct mail.

It's interesting to note that phone is still in the mix. In fact, the Marketing Benchmarking Report found that associations with the highest renewal rates employed phone calls as part of the process.

Finding the best way to use each channel, in what combination, and how to time and target your messaging depends on two main factors:

Is your renewal cycle annual or rolling?

- Do your members renew annually at the same time every year?

With annual cycles, you need to reach every member simultaneously – which means you might want to employ a multi-channel approach to ensure you get each member's attention.

- Does each member renew on their own rolling anniversary date?

You can set up (and test) a series of communications and send these automatically to each member based on their anniversary date.

How do you members prefer to receive communications?

- Is the majority of your membership engaged and responsive?

If so, email can be a great communication channel to use.

- Does your membership base prefer to receive and respond primarily to direct mail?

You may need to focus your efforts on a mail campaign, possibly with telephone follow-up.





Use the insights from your membership survey and any data analytics from your email platform to help you choose the best channels for your organization.

Check out these points of data when choosing the channel that fits yours:

Click Rates

The percentage of people who clicked a link in an email out of the total number of people who received the email.

Open Rates

The percentage of people who opened an email. Calculated by dividing the number of people who opened the email by the number of people who recieved it.

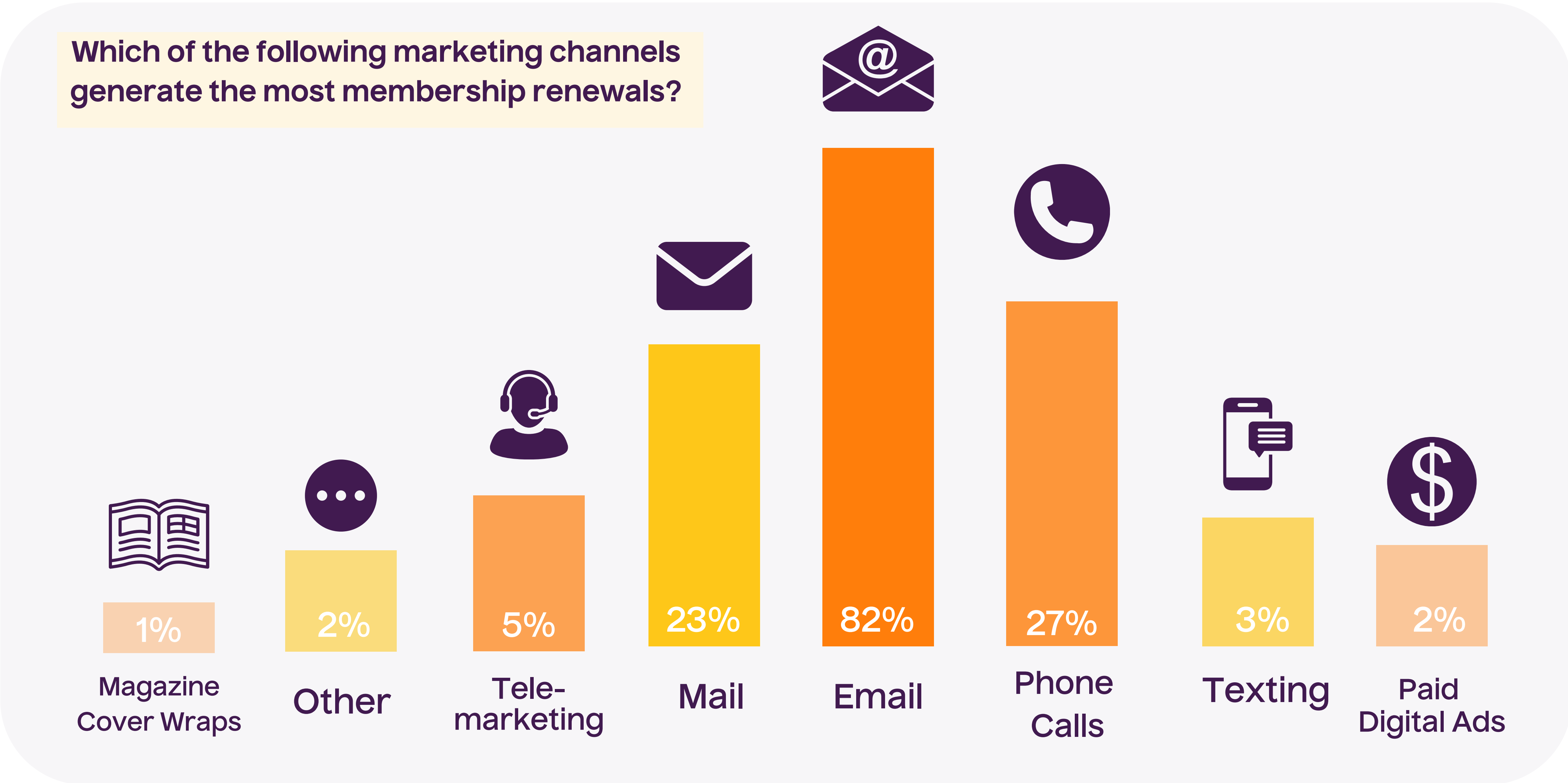
Click Through Rates

How often people click on a link. Calculated by dividing the number of clicks received by the number of delivered emails.

Click to Open Rates

The number of clicks out of the number of opens an email recieves. (This lets you know how your message resonates with the audience of people who actually view your emails.

When selecting your channel of communication, consider the marketing channels that generate the most renewals. Here’s what the MMBR’s data shows:

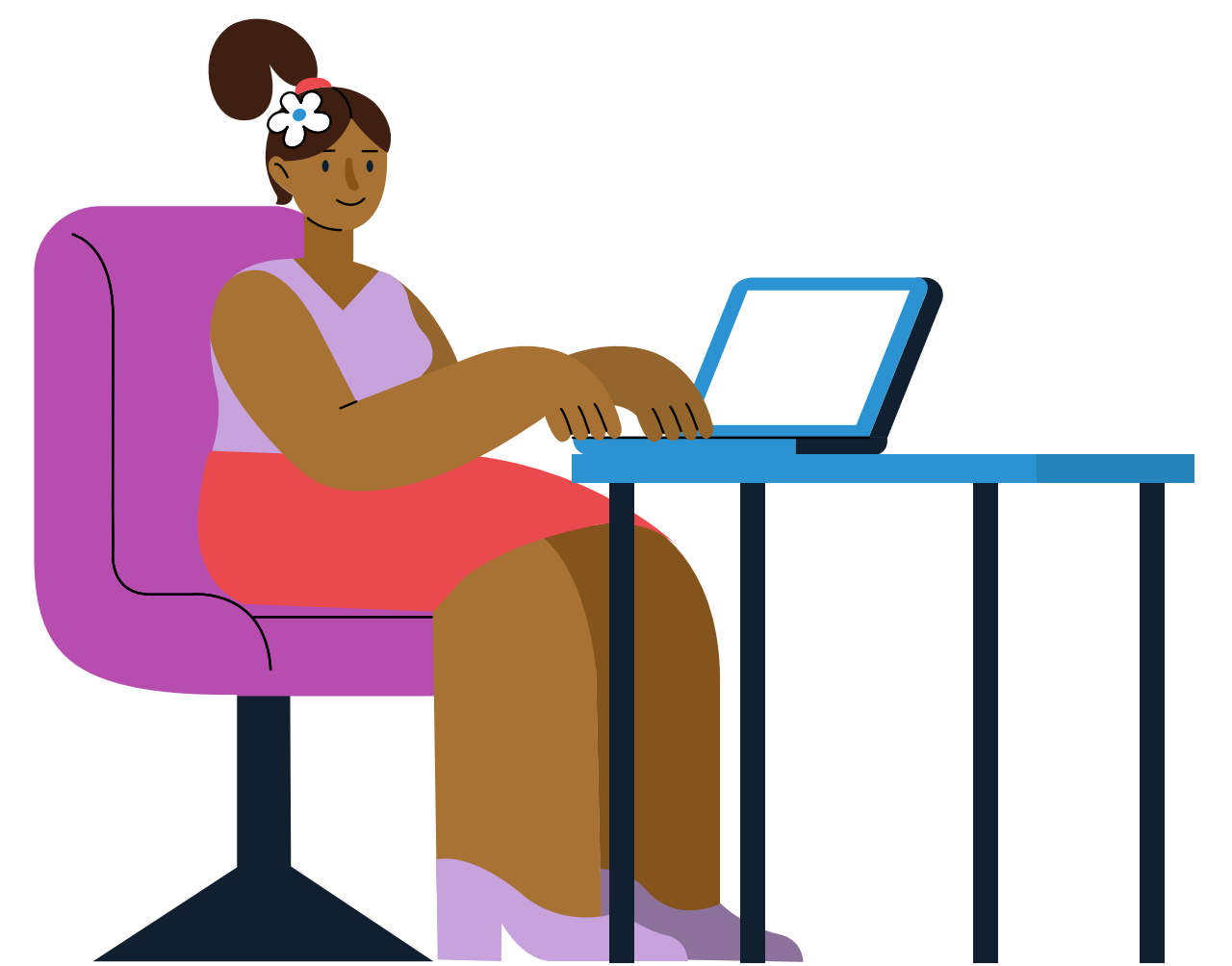


Section 7: Set up a Multi-Channel Strategy From Scratch

Renewal management newcomers might want to consider the following multi-channel approach (resources permitting) – in this order:

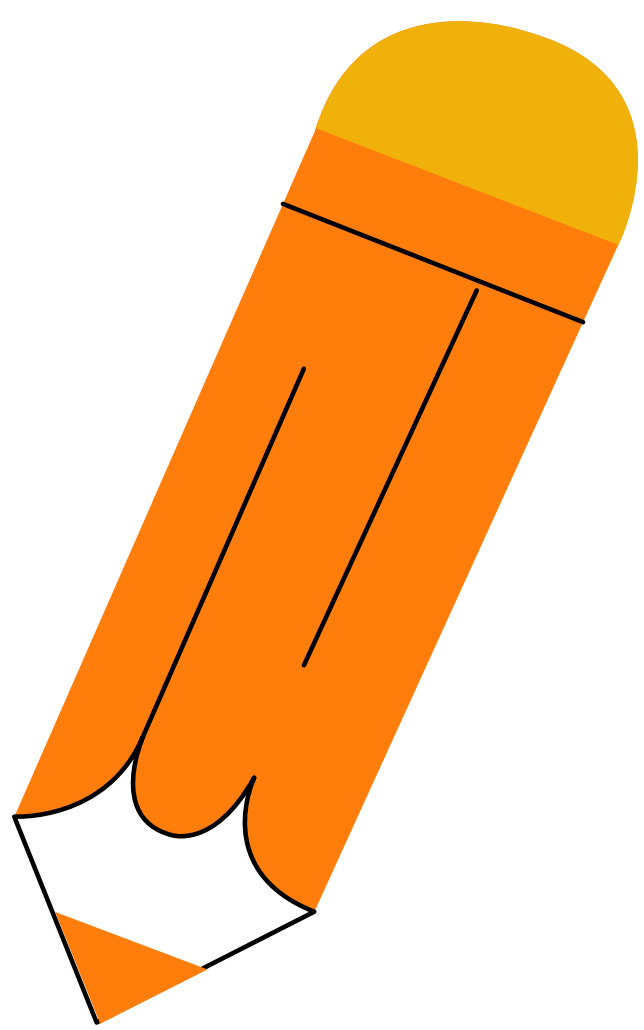
Email Renewal Notification

If you offer online renewal and payment processing, your initial renewal reminder would be via email – with a link to and clear instructions on the online renewal process.



Reminder Letter Via Mail

Next, for those who do not renew after the first email notice, you could send a direct mail letter. Depending on your processes, this letter might include an invoice and also offer instructions for optional online renewal and payment (e.g., include the URL or QR code).



A Phone Call

A phone call from staff and/or volunteers can be a powerful final step for those members who have not renewed after the first two notices. This offers an opportunity for your staff, board members or renewal/recruitment volunteers to address the member's questions or reservations first-hand.



If your renewal cycle is an annual one – where all members renew at the same time – you can also consider including renewal reminders in other communications vehicles. This way your members will always see the renewal reminder.

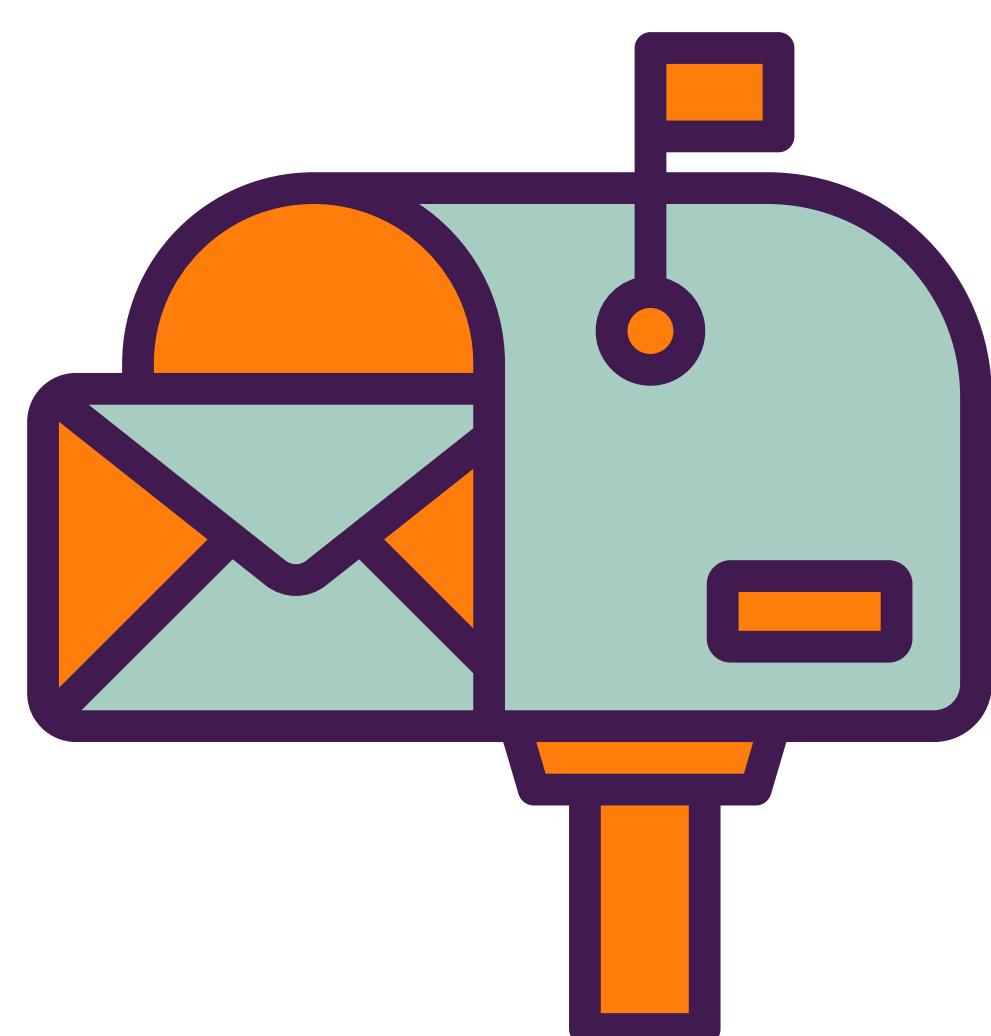
Some examples to consider are:



Online or print publications: try e-newsletters, mailed newsletters or magazines



Your website: include a message on your home page and/or members-only area



Direct mail: send a postcard to all members with instructions for online renewal

Section 8: Reinforce Recurring Membership Renewals with Gratitude

The renewal process isn't complete until you've acknowledged and thanked each member for their renewal payment. This is an important final step.

Your renewal communications, including the thank-you email or letter are part of an ongoing, year-round membership communications continuum – with consistent key messaging of gratitude and appreciation for their continued involvement and support.

Why Member Appreciation Matters

Showing gratitude to your members makes them feel appreciated and will make a huge difference when it comes to retention. Nurturing the personal connection to your members and strengthening the bond you created when they first joined is key.

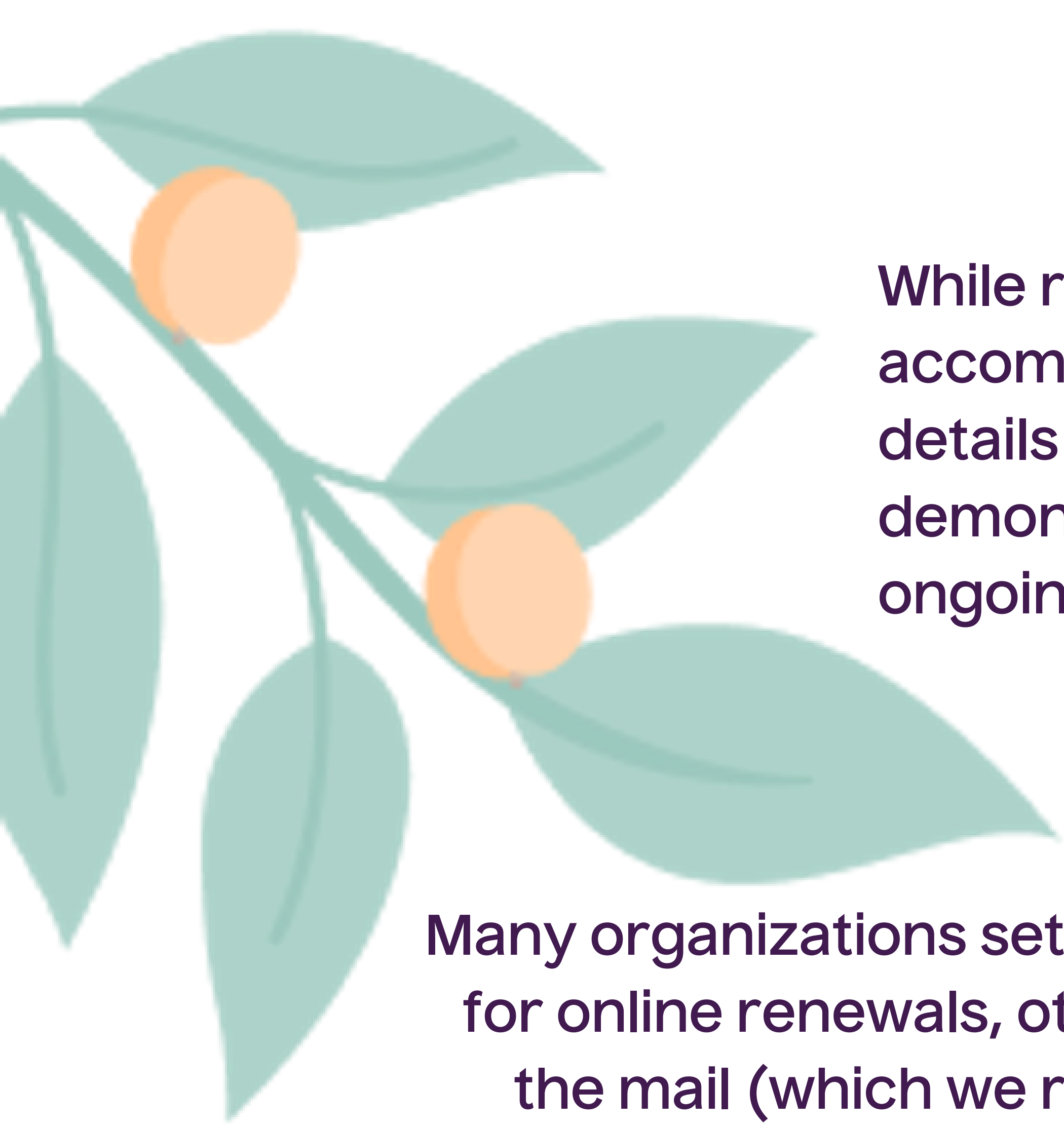
Here's a couple ideas to help you show appreciation for members to boost renewals:

Host new member welcome events: By starting your members off with a warm introduction with other members, they'll be more likely to renew.

Member spotlights: Highlighting your members and their achievements allows them to feel valued and appreciated in your organization.

Milestone awards: Celebrating members' 1-year, 5-year 10-year and beyond is key for retention! Especially since the first renewal is the hardest to get, extra appreciation might seal the deal.

Personalized thank you's: Utilize services like Canva and Vistaprint to create beautiful digital or physical cards to show gratitude to your members. These should include personal details about your members like the years they've been a member, events they've attended and signatures from your board or staff.



While renewal reminders may talk about accomplishments, your grateful follow-up might include details of upcoming activities or issues that demonstrate the value of the membership and prompt ongoing participation.

Many organizations set up automated “thank you” pages and receipts for online renewals, others send personalized “thank you” letters in the mail (which we recommend!). Experiment and find the right method for your organization and membership base.

Check out these resources on member appreciation to keep retention high throughout the year, not just during renewal season!

[10 Member Appreciation Day Ideas + 6 Quick Steps to Show You Care!](#)

[How to Host a Member Appreciation Week \(+ 10 More Ideas!\)](#)

[How to Create a Member Spotlight \(+ Sample Questions and Examples\)](#)



Section 9: Use Incentives and Discounts to Nudge Punctual Renewals

The Marketing Benchmarking Report found that associations that offer an early renewal discount were more likely to see an increase in renewal rates over the past year. From their data, 35% of associations' members utilize early renewal discounts as a part of their membership renewal.

Here's the full breakdown of what percentate of organizations membership utilize renewal options to give you ideas for your renewal strategy:

- 82% Regular Annual Renewal
- 35% Early Renewal Discounts
- 19% Renewal Bill Me
- 11% Automatic Annual Credit Card Renewal
- 9% Multi-Year Renewals
- 9% Installment Renewal Payments
- 9% Automatic Annual Electronic Funds Transfer Renewals
- 5% Lifetime Membership
- 2% Accomodations for Member Hardship

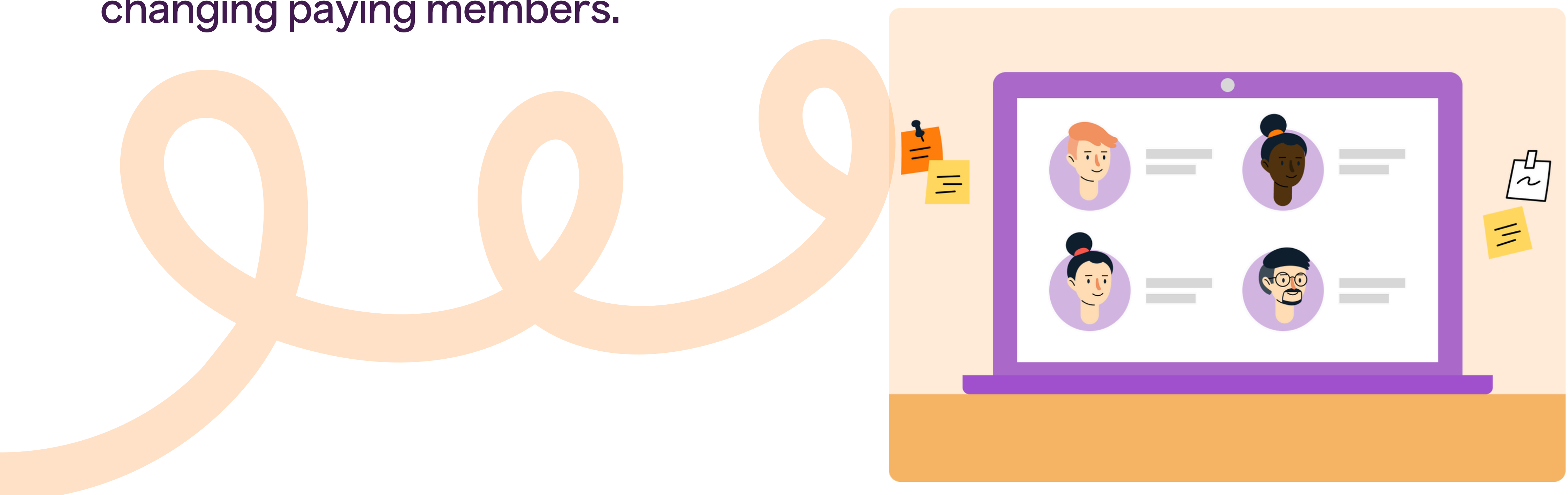
Another idea we've seen work well to encourage on-time renewals are contests. Consider promoting a renewal contest in the "Members Only" section of your website. Implement a fun countdown (ahead of your annual membership date), of your organization's annual renewal deadline. If you reach your renewal numbers by the deadline, host a big party to celebrate!

Whichever strategy you try, our top advice is to test its effectiveness. Don't implement an early bird discount incentive if you find it's not actually worth the return on investment, or that people aren't taking advantage of it. The point is to find something that works for your members.

Section 10: Create a Clear Internal Policy on Grace Periods

A grace period is an agreed period of time, following the membership expiration date, after which if fees are not received the membership is considered lapsed or terminated. Most organizations surveyed implement a two-month grace period for their members.

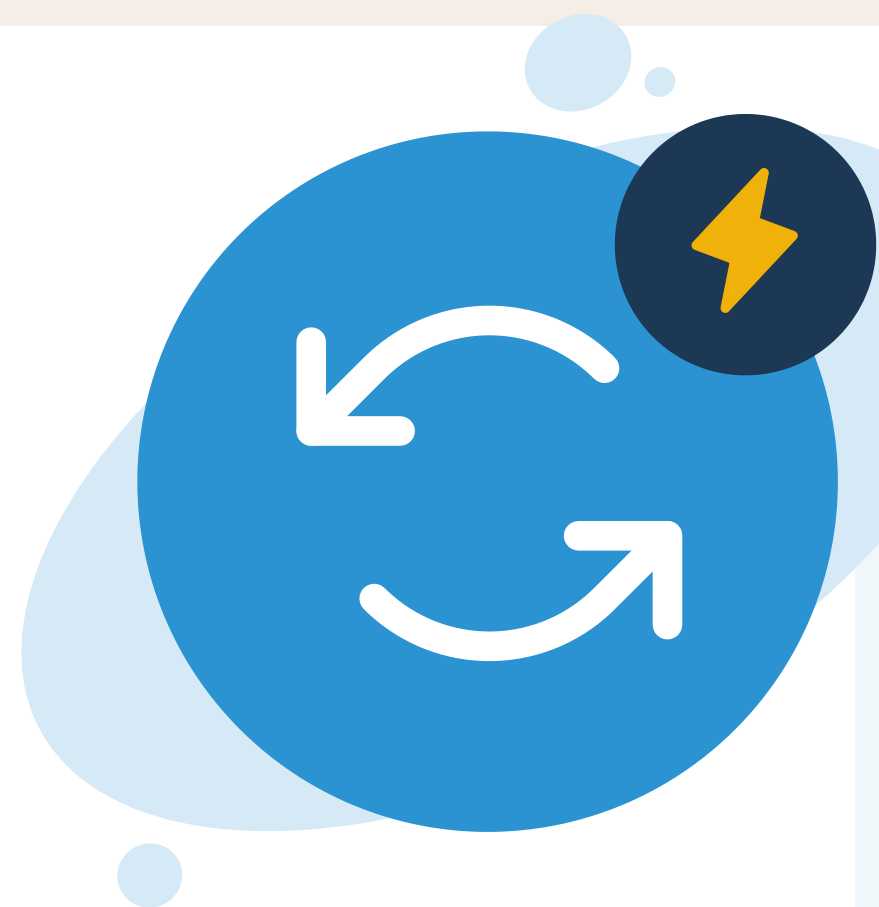
If you're wondering whether you should implement a grace period, there are a number of factors involved with deciding on the optimum time frame. The real issue comes down to whether you continue to offer member benefits – such as admittance to member education, events, access to proprietary information or publications, etc. – or whether these benefits are denied until membership fees are received. It's a delicate balancing act between trying to keep existing members and bring back lapsed members while ensuring you're not short-changing paying members.



When deciding on your grace period policies, consider looking at the average lapsed time for renewals and/or the actual success rate for reinstatement of lapsed members. You might also do some discreet investigation into whether members are aware of your existing grace period and whether this encourages some to postpone payment.

According to the MMBR, Email is the most effective in generating the most reinstated lapsed members at 73%. So consider creating an email campaign in which you send a series of emails to draw your lapsed members back in. This can be where you mention a grace period, if applicable.

WildApricot Automates Membership Renewals and Reminders for You



One of the biggest complaints membership managers have is how much time it takes to process member renewals by hand. Fortunately, software exists to completely automate renewals, so you never have to lift a finger again.

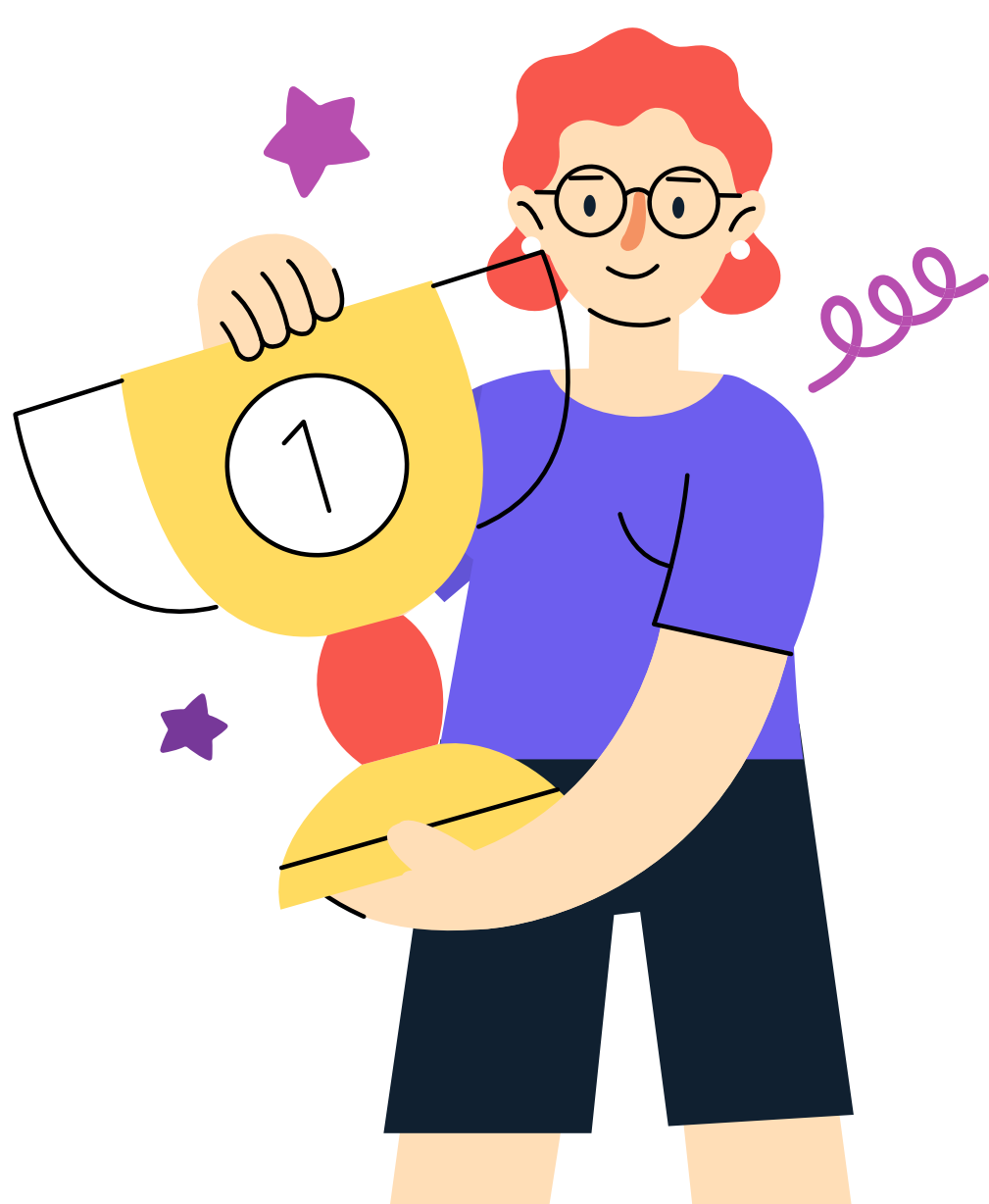
It's called membership management software and it does much more than just automate renewals.

Membership Management Software is an all-in-one solution for any type of membership organization. It completely automates new member and event registrations, website updates, database updates, finances, newsletter emails, and more.

Here at WildApricot, we've been refining our membership management software for more than ten years. Some of our customers save up to 20 hours a week in administrative work.

With WildApricot you never have to worry about outdated, inaccurate, or duplicate database entries. Plus you can automate the whole renewal process, from collecting and processing dues online, to automatically sending out email reminders.

If you are using WildApricot's automated renewals, you can set up customized emails, varying the message in each communications piece and automatically following up with a thank you email to any members that decide to renew.



**"As our club grew from the 60's to in excess of 150 members and the need to collect dues and establish membership categories arose, it became very hard to manage everything with the paper system we had been using. WildApricot solved all that perfectly."
- Fred Finney, Vistoso Cyclists**

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Wild Apricot is the #1 rated MMS and trusted by over 26,000 organizations. You can start a free, 60-day trial of WildApricot today (no credit card required) by visiting www.wildapricot.com.

If you have any questions during your trial, or if you'd like to learn more about whether WildApricot is the right solution for you, get in touch with our coaches at coaches@wildapricot.com

[START YOUR FREE TRIAL](#)

You can also join our free online Boot Camp to become an expert in WildApricot in just four days. This series of four 60-minute webinars will show you how to add members, create events, set up payments, and much more. Click below to watch now.

[Boot Camp](#)

Our goal here at WildApricot is to be the all-in-one solution for nonprofits and small to medium-sized associations as well as a thought leader and resource. We have a massive content library filled with blogs, guides and templates for you to utilize to improve your mission. Check out that content [here](#) and subscribe to our newsletter to receive helpful content monthly.

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