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## Commentary: What Makes Membership Matter

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# What Makes Membership Matter

By Michael Maihofer, DDS  
MDA Immediate Past President

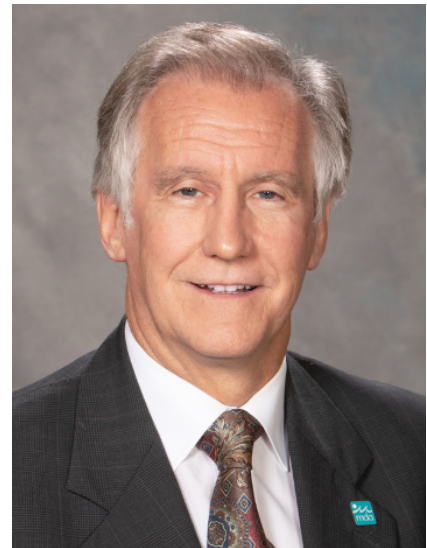
Last year the ADA announced that its membership market share, which has been spiraling downward for the last decade, has now fallen to 59% of all American dentists. This is a definite cause for alarm, because should that market share fall below 50%, it would not only threaten the long-term financial stability of the organization, but even its very purpose to exist. It'd be difficult to convince anyone that the ADA truly represents and speaks for America's dentists should that happen.

Despite several unsuccessful attempts to address this trend, the ADA is now moving quickly to try and turn things around. Its research seems to indicate that this market share decrease, while partially related to increased dentist retirement, has more to do with fewer early-career dentists joining, and many new dentists leaving membership. In fact, the national market share for new dentists has now fallen to a dismal 49% (the MDA's is 70.7%). It's no surprise then that the ADA's focus has primarily become centered on early career and new dentists. ADA leaders have begun working diligently to address adding value to membership that reflects the values

our young practitioners want in their professional organization.

There has even been a new realignment of the ADA's governance to better address this issue of early career dentist engagement. This new *strategic forecasting* initiative, passed in October by the House of Delegates, is designed to be a more nimble and responsive system to facilitate aligning ADA member values with those of these new dentists.

In order to accomplish this, much important research has been done. The result seems to be a new envisioning of what membership means. And while that's understandable, what some find alarming is the new language being used to address this new membership paradigm. Instead of speaking about "members" or "dental professionals," we're now hearing terms like "the people who purchase our products" or "the customers with whom we engage." In what appears to be a bold attempt to increase market share, the ADA seems to be moving from a non-profit professional association model to more of a for-profit corporate model. It's even been suggested that it's unimportant if a dentist hasn't paid



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their dues, as long as they purchase a certain dollar level of ADA products.

There seems to be a strong belief that if we can only collect more data through some new membership software and sell these "customers" more products — the ones the new algorithms suggest they'll want — we can save the ADA and organized dentistry. After all, it's worked for Amazon and Google, who have the most loyal customer/members, so it should work for us. Or will it?

Of course, times change, people change, and values change. If the ADA is to survive it must also adapt and change. Yes, the often-heard mantra "What's gotten us here won't get us there" is true. You've got to wonder, however, whether this per-

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"We can't afford to sell our new members short. I've got to believe that values like professional comradery and support, ethics, and advocacy are still on their radar if organized dentistry can properly provide them."



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ception of new dentists as simply customers for ADA products isn't selling them short. Such a re-envisioning seems to imply that new dentists aren't as committed to much of the traditional idea of professional association and all it encompasses. Yet, while we all realize the dental workforce model has changed — it's more diverse and offers more career pathways than ever before, and that's great — I'd like to believe the dental *professional* model hasn't.

It's inconceivable that new dentists, educated to be health care professionals, would eschew being part of a professional organization created to represent them and advocate on their behalf, and instead only want a buyers' club-type relationship. I've got to believe that values like professional camaraderie and support, eth-

ics, and advocacy are still on their radar if organized dentistry can properly provide them. Things like professional support, ethics, and advocacy aren't products that can be purchased. They grow out of professional collaboration aimed at creating a better profession. That's what makes membership matter.

The challenge for all of us will be to better listen to all member (and non-member) concerns, and then identify, align, and deliver what they consider their professional values. Of course, they'll only express those concerns if they can truly see themselves reflected in our association — and see that it's honestly committed to their values of diversity and inclusion in all its forms.

While both the ADA and the MDA have begun the important investigative process, we need to keep moving further, and digging deeper. We can't afford to sell our new members short. Both our association's and dentistry's futures depend on it. ●

### About the Author

**Michael Maihofer, DDS**, is the immediate past-president of the Michigan Dental Association. He is a former editor of the *MDA Journal*, former chair of the MDA Committee on Peer Review/Ethics, as well as a past-president of the American Association of Dental Editors and Journalists, among other posts. He currently chairs the MDA House of Delegates Nominating Committee. Maihofer's editorial writing and articles on dental ethics have appeared in numerous publications throughout the United States.

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