



What Is an AMS?

A guide to
Association Management Systems

Raise your hand if...

- You're currently using a spreadsheet to manage your organization's membership
- You have disparate systems in place to manage your organization's membership (one for email, one for event registrations, one for your website/content management system, etc.)
- You're doing just about everything manually — sending invoices, collecting (and processing) payments, sending dues renewal reminder emails, etc.
- You're not using technology to increase member benefits
- You lack a refreshing online experience for your members
- You're not communicating efficiently or effectively with your members

If you raised your hand for ANY of these scenarios, it might be time to consider an association management system, or AMS for short.

What is an AMS?

An AMS is a technology solution that allows you to manage your organization's membership using one integrated system (which includes your website and database). Dues renewals, email marketing, event registration, and more — you name it, an AMS does it.

In fact, below are just a few of the many powerful features included in association management systems:

- **Membership database**
- **Integrated website and CMS**
- **Dues renewals and member applications**
- **Individual and organizational memberships**
- **Directories**
- **Email marketing**
- **Event registration**
- **Member engagement community**
- **Reporting**
- **Online transaction processing**
- **Payment processing**
- **Accounting import**

But we'll circle back to those features in just a little bit. For now, let's dive into the root of the topic — the why. Why do you REALLY need an association management system?

Why do I need one?

Well for starters, it saves you time. Like we mentioned earlier, an AMS allows you to manage your organization's membership using one integrated system.

So no longer would you have to jump from system to system to get things done — to update your website, to send out an email notification, to view your list of event registrants, etc. Rather, with an AMS, you can do all of that under the same roof.

And best of all, *because* you can do all of that under the same roof, all of those features (and all of that information) overlap. Here's an example: Because everything is tied to your organization's member database (email marketing, included), you can actually set up automated dues renewal reminder emails. All you have to do is draft those emails, and then as your members approach expiration, the system will automatically send those out. Can you say TIME SAVER?

Next, an AMS adds value to your members.

When you're doing everything manually, you can only do so much. But an AMS takes it up a notch, adding features and capabilities you wouldn't otherwise have. For example, with an AMS, you can provide your members with personalized content - in emails



and on the member landing page (the first page your members see upon logging into your site). Remember, an AMS is tied to your organization's database, so it can pull personalized information (member name, expiration date, member type, etc.) into your emails, making those messages 10x more relevant. Same thing goes for online forms. When a member goes online to renew their membership or register for an upcoming event, the AMS will pre-populate many of those form fields, making the process infinitely simpler. (And the easier it is for your members to do something, the more likely they are to *actually* do it.)

One more example here: With social community features like messaging capabilities, online forums, a directory, and more, an AMS gives your members a place to engage. It allows them to get more from their membership — and that's key when it comes to membership retention.

In fact, that's what all of these features boil down to. They're designed to improve the member experience so your members will reap value and *want* to stay.

In addition to saving you time and adding value to your members, an AMS provides you with a helping hand.

How? Well if you choose the right technology provider, they can actually be a partner in association management. They can help with tech-related issues and provide ongoing training and best practices. Put simply, they can be an extension of your staff — to help your organization thrive. (This is particularly important if you're a small-staff association professional with limited resources.)



Features

Ok, we've touched on the why. Now let's circle back to those powerful features we mentioned earlier...

1 Membership Database

At the heart of every AMS is the membership database. Here, you can securely store all of your member and prospect data. And like we mentioned, the database integrates with other features (email marketing, event registration, dues renewals, etc.), streamlining processes for you and eliminating some of that administrative overhead.



2 Integrated website and CMS

Many AMS providers will host your organization's website, but some will even act as a content management system (CMS) as well. This means you can easily manage all aspects of your organization's website without having to have any technical knowledge. Plus, because your website is linked to your organization's database, you can easily restrict access to a members-only section and personalize the content each member sees. For example, if a board member logs in, you can show them information about their next board meeting. Or if a student member logs in, you can display info about available jobs and internships.

Customizing the content your members see improves the member experience and increases the chances of engagement.

3 Dues renewals and member applications

We touched on this earlier, but we'll dive a little deeper here. With the help of an AMS, you can easily collect member applications on your organization's website and, even better, automate the entire dues renewal process. That means when a member gets close to expiration, the AMS will automatically send out reminder emails for you, without you having to do any extra work. (And again, because everything is integrated, those emails will be personalized as well.)

Now what happens if a member doesn't renew? Well with the help of an AMS, you can quickly configure grace periods and send out automated, personalized email reminders to your organization's lapsed members. And what's great about this is that grace periods often lead to higher renewal rates. In fact, according to Marketing General Incorporated's [2017 Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report](#), associations with an 80% or higher renewal rate are significantly more likely to offer a grace period. All the more reason to set one up (and an AMS makes that extremely easy to do).

4 Individual and organizational memberships

If your association's membership is comprised of both individuals and organizations, an AMS can help you easily manage both of those member types. It can help you link organizations with individual profiles and, even better, streamline operations between the two. So for example, if one key contact from an organization wants to register five-plus people for an upcoming event, they can very easily do so with an AMS in place. Same thing goes for dues renewals. If that one key contact wants to renew all five people's membership, they can easily do so without having to jump through hoops. So not only does this feature save you time (and a major headache), but it saves your members time as well — improving their overall experience.



5 Directories

Remember how we said an AMS can add value to your members? Well the directory feature in an AMS is a prime example. You can set your directory to public or private (if you'd like to reserve it as a member benefit), but either way, once it's in place, there's a lot you and your members/prospects can do. For example, the ability to search. If your directory is public, people who are interested in your industry can search for existing professionals — nearby doctors or plumbers, for example. You can also take advantage of Google AdWords, so that when people do search for those professionals - those nearby doctors or plumbers — your association's directory will come up. That's great exposure for your association and a great way to showcase your value right off the bat.

If your directory is private, that's perfectly fine too. Your members can conduct similar searches, and by various categories as well. For example, they could search by zip code to find professionals nearby to network with. Or, they could search by specialty to find others even more like them.

Another benefit: The ability for your members to brand themselves. If they know people are searching for them — or people like them — they'll want to look their best, and your directory would be a great platform for them to do that.

Put simply, directories provide a lot of value, and with an AMS in place, that feature is easy to fully leverage.

6 Email Marketing

With an AMS comes a very powerful marketing tool: email. Having an integrated system in place allows you to send personalized *and* automated emails. Going back to the example of the dues renewal reminder emails, all you have to do is set those up once, determine when you want them to go out (three months prior to expiration, two months prior to expiration, one week prior to expiration, etc.), and the AMS will handle everything else for you. Now let's say a member pays after the first email goes out. Well in that case, the system will automatically halt all the other emails. (A huge time saver for you and your staff.)

Another benefit of the email marketing feature: The ability to easily create segmented lists. Let's say you want to email your board members only, or members of a certain committee. Well with an AMS, you can do that with just the click of a button. This is huge because the more targeted your communications are (with content that's relevant to your different member types), the more likely people are to engage with your association.

7 Event Registration

Events are likely a huge source of non-dues revenue for your association, so you want people to register, and having a seamless registration process in place plays a big role in that. The good news: an AMS makes that process simple (for both you and your members). Again, because you're dealing with an integrated system, you can choose to pre-populate form fields, so your members don't have to enter the same information time and time again. Plus, an AMS incorporates online transactions and payment processing (which we'll get to in just a little bit), making online payments a breeze.

On the back end, an AMS allows you to easily keep track of and communicate with your event registrants. You can set up automated, personalized email reminders for your event registrants (to minimize no-shows), and if you use the system to actually check people in at the event, you can easily distinguish between members, prospects, and no-shows. The benefit of that? You can then follow up with those groups accordingly. For example, you could send your prospect attendees an email thanking them for coming and encouraging them to join your association (by listing your top benefits). For your no-shows, you could send them a separate email saying you missed them at the event, but you hope they'll join you for other events in the future (and then list your next three or four events).

These targeted communications are MUCH more effective in terms of not just open rates, but getting your members and prospects to actually take some kind of action.

8 Member engagement community

It's no secret that the more engaged your members are, the more likely they are to stay with your organization. So giving your members opportunities to engage is huge — and that's exactly what an AMS does. An AMS provides your members with a full-fledged online social community, giving them a place to ask questions/start discussions (via forums), post pictures, interact with special interest groups (committees, for example), search your organization's directory, and send member-to-member messages.



9 Reporting

If you're using disparate systems to manage your organization's membership, reporting might be a nightmare. But with an AMS, everything is in one place, simplifying that process and perhaps giving you insights you wouldn't otherwise have. For example, with an AMS, you can quickly pull membership reports, showcasing how many active, pending, graced, and lapsed members you have. You can also pull event reports (how many people registered for your event, how many people registered for XYZ session, how many people actually attended your event, etc.), form reports (what people selected in a survey, on an election form, etc.), and financial reports (all sales, payments, refunds, etc.).

Having all that data at your fingertips not only saves you time (by having everything in one place), but it also gives you the insights needed to make your organization better. For example, if you know which events and sessions were the most popular among your members, you can then offer more of those (or more *like* those) in the future.



10 Online transaction processing

With an AMS comes the ability to process online transactions — membership dues, event registrations, sponsorships, etc. But what's great is that, depending on the system you choose, you can actually send automated invoices to your members and prospects.

But an AMS doesn't just make the online transaction process easy for you; it makes it easy for your members as well. With an AMS in place, your members (and prospects) can pay for things with just the click of a button. (Keep in mind, the system can store their info so they don't have to enter it time and time again.) That one-click payment feature VASTLY improves the member experience and increases the chances of people following through with the purchasing process. (Drop-offs *do* happen because of complicated payment processes.)

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Payment Processing

You hear a lot about data breaches these days, so one of the great features of an AMS (again, depending on the system you choose) is that it can keep your members' sensitive data (payment information, especially) secure. Plus, with the right AMS provider, you can feel comfortable knowing that your association is PCI compliant (in other words, abiding by the guidelines for how to handle, disseminate, and store credit card information).

Having an AMS provider who understands security not only eliminates some stress for you, but it helps put your members' minds at ease as well, knowing their information is secure.

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Accounting Import

Accounting is a big part of association management, but it can be a pain depending on how you handle it now (especially if you're using a disparate system to handle payment processing). With the right AMS in place, you can handle all transactions *in* the actual system. Think of it as the transactional system of record. You can also easily transport those transactions to your financial system of record (whether that's QuickBooks or something else). But remember, this varies by AMS provider, so if you're seeking out an AMS, be sure to ask how this process is handled. Ideally you want a system that makes that accounting import seamless. (More "free" time — and less stress — for you.)



As you can tell, an AMS can do a LOT. But the real benefit lies in how it can make your job more efficient and your organization better. Not only does it save you time, but it adds tremendous value to your members who are, after all, the backbone of your association.

Thinking it might be time to invest in an AMS?

Check our free buyer's guide, **Selecting the Right AMS**, to help with the shopping process!



Click here to check it out!

More about MemberClicks

MemberClicks offers all the tools that membership organizations need to make the most of the web. From online databases and event registrations to custom-designed websites and member communities, our products are tailor-made for small-staff organizations.

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