



# Join the Club:

## How to Create a Membership Site



Brought to you by iThemes Exchange,  
WordPress Ecommerce made simple

PUBLISHED BY

iThemes Media  
1720 South Kelly Avenue  
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# Acknowledgements

Thanks to [James Dalman](#) and [Chris Lema](#) for sharing their expertise and insights.

# Introduction

Sometimes free content can only get you so far. You don't have the time for endless searching.

Sometimes things are worth paying for.

Sometimes you need that extra help. Another how-to article or top 10 list isn't going to help.

Sometimes a teacher is needed, not another Internet marketer. A coach, a mentor, a friend. Not another sales person.

Sometimes it helps to know you're getting the right answers. It helps to know you're working with experts sharing real advice.

Sometimes smaller is better.

Sometimes the sales pitch can stop. There's a point when you don't need to be sold anymore. You're on board.

Sometimes it doesn't need to be shared, liked, tweeted or pinned.  
Sometimes it's special because there's not a crowd.

Sometimes the bouncer is your friend.

Sometimes it's nice not to worry about trolls. Community, real community that isn't interrupted by jerks, can be powerful.

Sometimes you just want to belong. You want to join others who are struggling like you and not be alone.

Sometimes you need to join the club.

And sometimes you need to create the club.

Membership sites offer a powerful way to give people the content they're looking for, the expertise they need and a community where it's safe to learn.

Now it's your turn to not just join the club, but create the club.

# Overview

## What is a Membership Site?

A membership site is a password protected site that charges members for access in return for benefits.

People pay the fee to get in, you provide the goods. It's comparable to fan clubs, subscriptions or associations of old.

- For fan clubs you paid your annual dues and received newsletters, T-shirts, backstage passes or other goods and sometimes exclusive opportunities, such as buying special 'members only' releases.
- There's the old subscription model: You paid a monthly rate for a magazine and it showed up in your mailbox every month full of content (and ads, since subscriptions usually weren't enough).
- Professional associations often offered more community-based benefits geared toward professional development: Access to an annual event, training programs, directories, contests or award programs, discounts, etc.

Online membership sites come in all stripes, but they combine many of these models and benefits.

**In every case what you're providing to members is access.** It might be access to content, a community or even yourself. Usually it's a combination.

That access is about expertise and connection. People want to tap into your expertise and they either want to connect with you or with a community of like-minded people. They want to network, learn from others, be challenged and grow.

Membership sites are a way to make money from that expertise and connection. You might charge a one-time fee for a limited length of time or a monthly fee for on-going access. It might look like a traditional monthly subscription model, an annual fee or something else entirely.

There are a lot of options and different ways to structure membership sites. Some don't even use the word "membership." But the common link is that you're building a limited community and charging for access.

Why would that be appealing? We'll cover that next.

## Why Create a Membership Site?

Let's look at five reasons to create a membership site:

### 1. Make Money More Efficiently

Membership sites are about selling access to your expertise. Your expertise already exists. You just need to find a way to package and sell it.

Freelancers often turn to **product creation** as a way to make money from work they've already done. That's the first step to working more efficiently—finding ways to squeeze income out of what you've

already done. It might be an ebook or a plugin, but it's a shift from offering a custom service to a reproducible product.

Membership sites take it a step further by charging a **recurring fee**. As membership marketing guru [Sean Ogle](#) says, "You can't charge a monthly fee for an ebook." But you can charge a monthly fee for a restricted access website with the same content, a community forum and access to a resident expert—you.

## 2. Powerful Community

If you want to create a powerful, active community, membership sites are the way to go. The cost creates a barrier to entry that keeps out the riffraff. It also creates an incentive to get involved. People want to get their money's worth, so they're going to ask questions, contribute and be a part of the community. **Motivated participants and no random trolls—that's powerful.**

## 3. Simpler, Easier, Faster

In many ways running a membership site is a lot simpler, easier and faster than other ways of selling content. Ebooks require a lot of up front effort to create and package the content. A membership site might have similar packaging and setup needs at the beginning, but the content demands are much lower, especially if you're releasing the content over time.

To release a new insight to the community, you just post an article. With an ebook you'd have to, well, write a new ebook.

You can also react quickly. With a membership site you can share insights instantly. With an ebook, you have to go through the entire

process over again or, best case scenario, add an update to an existing ebook and re-release it.

Now let's be clear: We're not saying a membership site is easy. There's still plenty of work to do. This isn't free money. But it can be an easier way to package your content than other solutions.

#### **4. Increasing Value**

Membership sites are also constantly growing and evolving. As your forum or message board grows, you have an increasingly powerful set of content to tap into. As you add blog posts or training courses, the value likewise increases. It becomes easier and easier to sell to new members because the value keeps going up.

## Know What You're Getting Into

That's some compelling rationale for starting a member site. But let's consider one reason why you shouldn't: hard work.

**"Passive income isn't so passive,"** says [Chris Lema](#). It's tempting to give in to visions of making money while you sleep with membership sites. But it's not as simple as 'set it and forget it.' A membership site is still going to require work. Hard work.

Yes, the potential is there to make money more efficiently. You're selling work you've already done. It removes the limitation of a direct correlation between hours and income. That's the passive part of passive income. But it's still work.

If you think a membership site is easy money, don't do it.

## Examples

Sometimes it helps to see it all come together. Here are some examples of what we're talking about:

- [A-List Blogging](#) - A training course for bloggers with a relatively high monthly price.
- [Marketing Sherpa](#) - An annual membership fee for access to marketing research and reports.
- [Human Business Works](#) - The courses offered through Chris Brogan's Human Business Works function like a membership site. They don't use that term or pitch the courses like that, but they offer access to content (the online courses) and a community for a fee. It's effectively a one-time payment membership site.
- [Killer Tribes](#) - Help for the blogging community for a monthly fee.
- [Tribe Writers](#) - Online course with a lifetime community and a single fee, currently closed to new members.
- [University of Makeup](#) - A lot of these examples end up in the marketing world, but membership sites don't have to sell marketing expertise. How about just makeup skills?
- [U2](#) - The biggest rock band in the world offers their own fan club for the digital era. They offer full access to their community site, complete with streaming audio and video as well as some physical goods for an annual fee. When the band is on tour, members go to the front of the line for tickets.

- [Upfront](#) - Social media is even getting in on the member action with this new premium social network. They're effectively creating paid membership sites for artists and influencers like Deepak Chopra, Hillsong United and more. They operate on an app instead of a website, but it's the same idea.
- [WebDesign.com](#) - Don't forget our own membership site, our library of WordPress training videos at WebDesign.com.

# How to Build It

That's all well and good. Now how do I actually build a membership site? Good question. The answer is that it's easier than you think.

You really just need three things:

## 1. A website.

It helps to have a site driven by a content management system. You're going to have a lot of content and you want to keep it organized.

What's best? [WordPress](#). It's powerful, flexible and it can do just about anything.

## 2. Payment System

You need some way to get paid. You'll need to add an ecommerce component to your website. There are lots of ecommerce plugins for WordPress, but we recommend our own [Exchange](#) plugin.

## 3. Content Protection

You need some way to lock down your site and only give access to members. And preferably only portions of your site—you'll still want a front page, sign-up page and details that are visible to the public.

WordPress also has lots of plugins for this (and some out of the box functionality), and you'll want something that can play nice with your payment system. We recommend the [Membership Add-on for Exchange](#).

# Planning

If you're going to launch a membership site, there are a lot of details to work out. You've got to do some serious planning upfront.

For example:

- What are you offering?
- What does the pitch look like?
- What's the ultimate goal?

## What's Your Topic?

First you want to think about your topic. What is your membership site even about? According to [Inc. Magazine](#) that's the most important step: find a niche to fill or a problem to solve.

More than likely this is going to be what you're best at, what you're an expert in, what people come to you for advice about. It might be coding or marketing or accounting. It might be a specific skill like laying out ebooks, gardening or auto repair. It might be a hobby like playing bridge, running marathons or even yo-yoing.

**Your topic should be as focused as possible.** The more narrow your topic, the easier it will be to target your audience and deliver useful benefits.

## What's Your Value?

Next you need to figure out how you can offer incredible value on that topic. **Membership sites are built on delivering massive value.** You'll need to be able to come through.

Think about how you can deliver that value. Will you create a training course or helpful articles or a library of content? What's going to be your delivery mechanism? Sometimes it's a straight forward content piece like ebooks or videos, but other times you might focus more on the community or personal interaction or consulting.

Whatever your value is, remember that it needs to scale. An hour of personal consulting might have tremendous value, but it's also very limited. You only have so many hours to work with and that doesn't scale. You need to think through the value of what you're offering, but also consider the cost to you.

**Successful membership sites maximize value for the member while minimizing cost for the creator.**

**Tip:** Survey your current audience to find out what they want. You might be planning to build your member site around videos when your audience really wants audio. You won't know until you ask, and it's better to find out by asking than by trying and failing.

## Details

Those are the big questions to think through. We'll dive deep into all kinds of details, but the important thing from the beginning is to focus on these big picture questions.

# Content & Packaging

As we dive into the nitty gritty details we'll start with what you're going to offer and how you're going to deliver: content and packaging.

## Content Types

There's a lot of content you can offer to your members. One of the advantages of a membership site is you're not locked in to the type of content you're offering. You could offer a little bit of everything—the Old Country Buffet of membership sites. Or you could have a laser focus with just a single offering. It depends on how you want to package it.

There are a few types of content you can offer:

### **Blog Posts**

Straight up articles are a standard way to share your expertise.

### **Ebooks**

You can also offer up your ebooks to members. This can be a powerful draw for members, especially if you sell your ebooks outside the membership site—there's a clear value for membership.

You just need to be careful about giving away the bank—could a member join, download all your ebooks and quit, making out like a bandit?

Another option is to offer your ebooks without giving them away. Either give your members a generous discount on your books or give them first crack at your book—a chance to buy it before you launch it to the public.

## **Video & Audio**

Plain old text can get old. It's why YouTube is one of the most popular sites on the Internet. People don't always learn the best simply by reading, and offering that audio-visual hook can help some people grasp content better.

Audio and video have a higher cost to create and that can make them valuable to offer in a membership site.

## **Training Courses**

Another way to offer content is through an educational course. Now the content in a course might draw from blog posts, ebooks or audio/video resources, but it really comes together when it's packaged in a class. You may need to add some additional components to make it work for a class—assignments, questions, activities. You want to have that interactive component so members can apply what they're learning.

This is really an amalgamation of other types of content, since you might use video to teach your course or offer a written handout similar to a blog post. But it's all about how you package and present

it. A member expects something different from a course and sees the value differently than a series of videos, even if both offer the same content.

**Tip:** “People need to feel that it is safe to join your membership,” says [Mark Dykeman](#). Make your community a place that’s welcoming and easy to join. Offer ‘read this first’ tips on how to get started and encourage a culture in your forum that embraces newbies. The faster you can get new members plugged in, engaged and tapping into the expertise, the more likely they’ll stick around and become longterm members.

## Other Perks

Not everything you offer your members has to be content. There are loads of other things you can offer:

### **Community**

“Members don’t join to pay dues, or read a lot of content,” says member site expert [Adam Weedman](#). “They join to interact with other members and learn something.”

The most common non-content offering is community. A lot of membership sites offer the opportunity to interact with other members. Usually this happens through a forum or discussion board.

While this can offer some incredible value for members, you also have to work at it. Community rarely builds itself and you need to invest time to build and maintain the community. You’ll want to have some moderators keeping an eye on the community on a daily basis, whether that’s you, some member volunteers (perhaps encouraged with discounts or free membership) or paid help.

The pain factor can also help paid communities grow faster. Membership forums often see better interaction because members are paying for it and have added incentive to get something out of it.

## **Discounts**

You can also offer discounts to your members. Maybe you have other products available, whether they're ebooks, services, T-shirts or more. You can still offer those to your members without giving them away. Offer member discounts to give them value while still making money yourself. You might offer an on-going discount or a one-time coupon.

This can be a nice way to up sell your members on other products. You're not just pitching more stuff to people who have already given you money—which is a sure way to turn people off. Instead you're offering them a further deal.

Another option would be to negotiate discounts for your members with other vendors. You might have a good relationship with another organization that offers something in the same field and it would make sense to partner and offer your members a discount. Your members can save money, your partners get new business and you get more value in your membership site—everybody wins.

**Tip:** You never know what discounts you might be able to get for your members until you ask. If you have a highly targeted community of any size, that's going to be valuable to other companies and they'll be more willing than you think to give discounts. Ask and see what you can get for your members.

## **Additional Access**

Since access is often at the heart of membership sites, one option is to focus on specific ways to offer that access. This can be especially enticing if you're a recognized expert or celebrity in some way.

You might offer weekly office hours when you answer questions or host Q&A webinars or even just video or chat hangouts where you talk with your members, connect, answer questions and more.

You might offer more focused consulting, maybe one-on-one consulting or mentoring. If it's going to be a drain on your time, you could make it a premium perk or outsource it to some trained help.

Additional access has the potential to be a big draw, but you need to be careful to balance that value with what it's going to cost you.

## **Insider Info**

A different kind of access you could offer is access to information. People want the inside scoop. They want to be the first to know and be one of the lucky few in the loop. You can offer that kind of insider access by sharing details with your members before anyone else.

Share important announcements with your members first. Let them in on the inside scoop. This kind of access is becoming common with social media, but even startup [Upfront](#) is experimenting with social media membership services.

## Events

Not every membership site benefit has to be an online or digital benefit. People like to connect and interact in person. Member events can be a way to solidify the community you've built online and reinforce it with real world connection.

The events might be limited to members, or you could offer extra perks (backstage passes) or a discount for members.

Events may not be for every member site, but there are situations where they're an ideal fit. It's perfect for bands or any other traveling group that is already putting on events. If you or your organization does a lot of travel, local meetups could be perfect. If you have a sizable following some kind of large, annual event might even work.

If your members are nationwide or even worldwide it can be difficult to make events work without leaving out members, but it's definitely a perk worth exploring.

## Physical Goods

We said not everything has to be digital. You could go old school and actually mail something to your members. That might even be the primary focus of your site. It works for [Mike the Gardener](#). His Seeds of the Month Club sends out seed packets to members every month.

Tip: Sometimes being old fashioned is a way to stand out from the crowd. When everybody else is going digital, you stand out when high-quality, hand-packed physical goods show up in the mail. Being tangible has its advantages.

## Content Delivery

How you deliver your content is going to impact how effective your membership site is. Sometimes members will sign up and be quickly overwhelmed with how much content you have available. They drop out because they couldn't possibly get through it all and it feels like a waste of money.

You need to make your content accessible. But it also needs to be impressive. You don't want members signing up and scoffing at how little you actually offer. You need to find the balance between impressive and overwhelming.

This isn't easy, but a few things might help:

### **Drip Content**

One popular way to make content easier to absorb is the drip strategy. Instead of making all your content available at once, release it slowly over time. A 10-part series might be released one part a week for 10 weeks. There are systems to automatically email the content to members. Or, you can slowly release it on the site according to a set schedule with the [Membership Add-on for iThemes Exchange](#).

### **Timing & Packaging**

A lot of it comes down to timing and how you package your membership. Many membership sites are packaged as courses, effectively membership content released on a drip content schedule. These issues of timing and packaging play into the psychology of whether a member feels overwhelmed or enthusiastic.

You might be charging a recurring payment or a one-time fee. You might be offering lifetime access for the one-time fee or just a limited period of time. It all comes down to how you package it and the time frame you're talking about.

It's curious how dumping a pile of content on someone for a small monthly price can be more intimidating than the same pile of content released slowly over a period of time for much larger single price. People are weird that way. But that's how it is.

## **Feedback**

It's crucial to get feedback from your members about this. You need to know if your content delivery is too much or too little, if people are feeling overwhelmed or underwhelmed. You want them to just be whelmed.

**Tip:** You don't need to have all your content created at launch. If you're using a drip strategy, you only need to have that first component ready to go. This can be a huge weight off your shoulders as you try to get a member site up and running. Just remember that whatever you put off you'll have to come back around and create.

## Pricing

Let's talk about money. You'll need to come up with a pricing strategy that works for your site, and there's a lot to consider.

### **Recurring vs. One-Time**

You can offer a one-time or recurring payment. Both have their advantages. Technical issues will come into play as well since not all payment systems can handle recurring payments.

There are also psychological factors at play. A one-time fee is going to need to be larger and will likely have a time limit associated with it. Usually this is the approach a lot of courses take and they last the term of the course. The higher price tag usually communicates the member is getting a lot of value. This works well if you can deliver that value.

But for some industries that high price tag would cause sticker shock. Marketing or financial pros might pay several hundred dollars for a one-time fee, but hobbyists would balk at the idea. This is where a recurring fee might work better. \$10 a month feels pretty cheap and reasonable, though over the course of a year it starts to add up.

The recurring system also has the advantage of charging people again and again and again. Back in the old days of magazine subscriptions recurring charges didn't exist. When a subscription ended the magazine had to convince their subscriber to pay up again. A lot of customers fell through the cracks that way and a magazine had to work hard to get

their subscribers to renew (Remember renewal gifts? Football phone!).

These days renewals are long gone as automation means you can automatically charge that credit card every month forever. The customer doesn't have to be reminded to pay up or renew a subscription every year. That means steady income for you month after month. You'll have to deal with retention, but it's nothing compared to the old renewal approach. There's a lot of potential to earn big bucks with recurring payments and we recommend using the [Recurring Payments Add-on for iThemes Exchange](#).

You're going to have to figure out which approach works best for your site.

## Price

In addition to how often you're charging, you'll have to figure out what you're charging. You'll need to do some math here and figure out what you need to make. You'll also need to consider what your audience is willing to pay.

You might need to experiment with your pricing too. Don't be afraid to play around with it and find what works.

Remember that you also can't please everyone. You need to find your specific niche, and that doesn't mean catering to the cheapskates and the high rollers at the same time.

**Tip:** Know that your content is often worth more than you think it is. Don't sell yourself short.

## Levels

One common pricing strategy is to offer levels. You can have tiers of membership where each successive tier costs more and offers more benefits. It's a way to up sell your members and provide something for every level.

Tiered membership can be a way to experiment and see what people are willing to pay for. Are you losing potential members because your price is too high? Try a low-level introductory level. Do you think members might be willing to pay more? Try adding a premium "gold" level and see how many will pay for it.

**Three levels is the optimal number** to have, according to Chris Lema: "If you give people one option, they're going to make a simple yes/no decision. If you give them two options, they'll choose the cheaper one. If you give them three options, then ultimately they'll strive for the middle option. Once you cross into four to five options you're entering into a different challenge with analysis paralysis."

Instead of offering tiers of membership you could set up your levels as different courses. They don't even have to build on each other. You might offer a course in design, a course in coding and a course in writing. The audiences might not even overlap, which is good, because the designer doesn't want to pay for the coding content. With this approach members only have to pay for exactly what they want. This can also be a way for one-time payment sites to make additional money. You might not have recurring charges, but you have multiple courses members can buy.

You could also use levels to follow the freemium model. Offer a base level that's free membership. Why would you offer free membership? You get members in the door, you get all their information and now they're highly targeted to up sell on higher tiers of membership or other products.

**Tip:** Vary your pricing options. Offer a monthly rate and an annual rate with a discount. Lock members in for a year with a healthy discount. They save some cash and you know they're going to stick around. Win-win.

# Build It

Now that you've figured out some of the finer details of the kind of membership site you're going to offer, you need to build it. We've already talked about the three things you need:

1. A website.
2. A payment system.
3. A way to protect your content.

There are a lot of solutions out there. We always recommend WordPress for your site, but even after making that decision there are plenty of other choices for the payment and membership portion.

Our own membership site, [WebDesign.com](http://WebDesign.com), has a course that [compares multiple member site solutions](#). Since creating that course, we've also built our own ecommerce plugin, [Exchange](#), and the [Membership Add-on](#).

Of course we recommend Exchange. It's got a lot of what you're going to need and doesn't needlessly complicate things.

## More Technical Tips

Once you get your basic site set up, there's still a lot you can do to improve the experience for your members.

### Custom Login

If you're using WordPress to power your membership site, you probably don't want to remind your members they're on WordPress. Use a plugin, such as [Tailored Login](#), to give them a custom login experience.

### Performance & Caching

Membership sites can have unique performance issues. Standard caching plugins often won't work because they don't maximize performance for logged in users, which will be most of your traffic. If you've got a site with lots of members, you might need to look into it. [Chris Lema](#) has a great blog post that gives an overview, explores some potential options and ultimately suggests finding a smart developer to help you out.

### Search Engine Issues

Search engine optimization (SEO) can get complicated with a membership site. You want Google to crawl your stuff and bring people in, but you don't want to give everything away. The specifics of how this works will depend on your plugin, but in most cases, if you're password protecting your site for members only, Google will be kept out as well.

This can create an SEO problem since Google is no longer ranking your stuff. There are two potential solutions:

1. Maintain some kind of online presence outside of your membership site where you post articles or other quality, search engine friendly content.
2. Make a portion of your content visible to the public as a teaser. So logged in members would see the full content, but anyone who's not logged in would see a brief teaser and a pitch to join the site. That teaser gives an opportunity for some SEO juice.

"The heart of the question is how are you bringing people to your site?" says Chris Lema. "If you're building value then you don't have too much to worry about."

## **Protecting Downloads**

While you might have your content properly protected behind a subscription wall, you need to make sure your downloads are likewise protected. If you just upload your files into WordPress, there's nothing protecting those files. A member could easily share that link with their non-member friends.

Most good membership solutions will properly protect your files. But some don't. There's a surprising number in our [membership plugin decision tree](#) that don't have file protection, so be sure to check.

## **Serving Video**

Video can be another complication with member sites. Popular video hosting services such as YouTube and Vimeo do have some private

video features, but you'll need to be careful with the settings if you want to lock them down for members only.

Other options for video hosting include [Brightcove](#) and [Wistia](#) or hosting it yourself with Amazon S3. It's going to depend on how much you want to invest, how much control you want and how much you need to clamp down on the ability to share your videos.

# Marketing

You've thought through the big picture issues with a member site, sorted out your content and figured out how to build it. Now how are you going to pitch your site to potential members?

Actually selling your site and getting paying members is the goal, so let's talk about ways to make it happen.

## Sales Page

The single most important page for your membership site is the sales page. This is where you pitch your member site to prospective members and (hopefully) close the sale.

There's a lot of information out there about creating effective sales pages. You can probably find a membership site to teach you how to create a sales page for your membership site.

With plenty of resources out there we'll just offer a couple highlights:

- Your sales page should be relentlessly focused on pitching your membership site. Ditch the sidebar. Ditch most of the navigation. Focus on the sale.
- The button, form or link that closes your sale needs to be obvious. Brain dead obvious. Don't be afraid to slap a huge arrow pointing to the 'join' link.
- Focus on benefits, not features. Yes, you'll have blog posts, discounts and a forum. Those are features. That doesn't say anything. Talk about how those features will actually help members. That's what benefits are and that's much more important to highlight.
- Make sure everything is pointing potential members to this single sales page. You want to funnel everyone through this one page for sign ups.
- Experiment to figure out what works best.

## Pre-Launch

One effective strategy for launching your membership site is a pre-launch campaign. You want to pre-sell your membership, explaining the tremendous value you'll offer and building buzz.

You might want to offer some teaser content, like a value-packed ebook or training video. Give people a taste of what you're going to provide, something useful they will share with their friends. Make sure it pushes people to your sales page. You might even offer a discount for those early adopters.

A pre-launch strategy becomes especially important for member sites with one-time fees or one-time courses. A recurring membership site will only have one launch. But if you're doing courses that stop and start or you're adding new courses that existing members have to pay for, each new launch can have a pre-launch push.

**Tip:** The pre-launch buzz can't be sustained forever. You need to keep this initial period short. A week to 10 days is ideal. Don't drag it out.

## Continued Sales

So that's how you can build buzz before you launch—but what about after you launch? What's your strategy for continued sales? You'll want to keep bringing new members in.

- Make sure your protected content is still getting some SEO juice and then points those searchers to your sales page.
- Consider some freebies you can throw out to lure in new customers. This might be the same teaser content you offered during the pre-launch, repackaged to work for the long term.

- While much of your membership site might be for members only, you'll need to decide what's for members and what's for the public. Offering some free content for the public can be a good way to continually show value and entice new members. You don't want to hide everything behind a login and watch your public profile take a nosedive. Maybe you have a free blog or podcast that's open to the public. Keep something public.
- Webinar or chat events can be a way to generate continued interest in your membership community. Make it more than just a sales pitch. Offer some genuine content and showcase what members are getting out of it.
- There's a tendency for member sites to be insular bubbles. Don't. You don't want to cut yourself off from the public and only appeal to your members. That's a good way to see your new sign ups trickle to nothing. You still need to be active in social media and offer something to the public.

## Affiliates

Many membership sites thrive on affiliate sales. Your members are often going to be your best salespeople, so why not offer them an incentive? There are plenty of affiliate sites that can help you manage this process, including [E-Junkie](#) and [Clickbank](#).

If you don't want to go with a full blown affiliate program, another approach is to offer discounts or free months for referrals instead of paying cash. This way you can still tap into the power of affiliate marketing but you're not cutting checks and paying out cash.

Ultimately you'll have to decide if an affiliate program works for you. It can be a good way to reward your best customers and bring in new ones. But it can also be a lot of work to maintain and there are ways for people to game the system.

**Tip:** Offer special incentives to your first members. They got you off the ground and joined when there was no community. If they stick around, they end up paying the most for the community (if it's a recurring payment). Give them something for it. Gold stars in their profile, extra access, a free month of membership, etc. "Founding member" status should be a badge of pride in your community.

## Proof

A major component of marketing your membership site is backing up your claims. Anybody can say they're an expert, but how do you prove it? Anybody can claim they have a valuable community, but how do members know it's actually helpful?

**Testimonies** are one powerful source of proof. Get comments from your members and use those to pitch your site to other members. Add quotes from happy members to your sales page.

Another way to prove your membership site actually has members is to show people. Using screen capture software, take a video tour of your member site, showing the engagement you're getting. Show the active discussions in your forum and offer a glimpse of your stats showing how many members have joined. This little behind-the-curtain view will build trust with potential members.

**Tip:** Offer a money-back guarantee on your membership site. A guarantee removes the risk and encourages people to take the plunge. You might want to put a limit on your guarantee and be

especially careful if your content is all accessible and downloadable up front. You don't want anyone taking advantage of your guarantee by signing up, downloading everything and then asking for their money back. The drip content strategy is a great way to protect yourself from this kind of abuse.

## Closing to New Members

One interesting strategy is to close your site to new members. This is fairly common with courses based on a time period that are paired with a community. While members can start the course at any time, it usually works better if a bunch of people are going through the course at the same time—the community is more active. If you're not doing a big push for the course, the sign-ups might slow and the community might be dead. It might be better to shut your doors to new members so your community won't be a letdown.

For others this approach could be about building anticipation and creating an exclusive club. It could also help with retention—you don't want to quit because you won't be able to get back in.

Just make sure you have good reasons and you're effectively communicating to your members. You don't want to inadvertently send the message that you're shutting down if you're not.

# Retention

Membership sites are built on, well, members. For recurring payment sites, keeping those members is key. Your site won't succeed if you lose too many members.

**Retention is how you tell if you're providing good content.** If members stay on month after month, you're doing it right. If you're losing members to attrition, something needs to change.

## Stats & Feedback

First and foremost you need to have the right systems in place to track and collect retention information. You should have stats in place tracking how many members you have, how many you're gaining and how many you're losing, broken down by month or even week.

You should be able to tell at a glance how you're doing and whether things are going up or down. You should be able to see some longer term trends and know when trouble is coming.

Knowing you need to act is the first key, and stats will help with that. Knowing what to do is the second key—and you get that from good feedback mechanisms.

You should be soliciting feedback from your members all the time, but especially when they decide to quit. Learn why they're leaving and take action to fix the problems.

**Tip:** You can head off potential problems before they start with good customer service. Have processes set up ahead of time so you can respond to concerns quickly and keep your members happy.

## Above & Beyond

One way to help with retention is to go above and beyond the call of duty. Whatever you offered as a part of membership, do more. You want to under-promise and over-deliver.

If you offered one hour of consulting per month, give two. If you said you'd do four member Q&A webinars every year, do six. If you promised a few partner discounts, add a bunch more. Be generous with your members.

## Don't Overwhelm

We've talked about the dangers of overwhelming your members before and it applies to retention as well. You might be losing members not because you're not offering enough, but because you're offering too much. Overwhelmed with the amount of content, some members might decide they'll never be able to get through it all and it's not worth the hefty price tag.

If this is a problem your feedback mechanisms should clue you in and then you need to act. The drip content strategy can often help, holding back some content so it's not all visible at once.

## Attrition Isn't All Bad

While you're trying to cope with attrition and retention, it's worth remembering that some attrition is good. Your membership site won't be a match for everyone. Some people will try it out and discover it's not for them. That's OK. You can't please everybody and you shouldn't try.

In setting up your membership site you need to narrowly focus on a specific audience. If a member isn't quite in that audience, they might not stick around. You shouldn't worry about that kind of attrition. They weren't right for your site in the first place. Whatever you do, don't cater to this member or you'll lose your focus and only boost attrition.

There are also some high-maintenance members that will never be happy. It's just fine to say goodbye to these members. You don't need to be catering to anyone who's going to be a drain on your time and resources.

## Expectations

Sometimes retention is a matter of what people expect. You might be losing people because you have a disconnect between what people expect and what you're offering. If that's happening (and it will become clear from your feedback) then you need to work hard to fine tune your pitch and manage those expectations.

# Parting Thoughts

Designer and web pro [James Dalman](#) has experience launching membership sites and we picked his brain for some parting advice:

## Audience First

Be sure to build an audience first. It sucks to launch a membership site with valuable content but not have anyone ever see it. Do all that you can to start building a fan base around the content you plan on delivering. You can do this through blogging, webinars and podcasts. Plus these materials can be added to your membership content.

## Help Them Work Through It

Think through your content and how it should be consumed by your audience. Don't throw everything at them and hope they can wade through it all and be happy. Drip your content or set up your site so that working through your lessons is easy to do.

## Less Is More

Ensure your website design is simple and not overwhelming. More is not always better.

## How You Build It

Spend time evaluating what plugins and payment options you will use. It can be quite challenging to go back and change your system after you've launched and it could cause a drop in membership rates.

## Perfection Not Required

Launch your content without trying to achieve perfection. You can spend hours and weeks trying to create studio quality video and audio only to miss the boat completely. You don't have to be perfect. Just do the best you can with what you have.

## One to Three Levels

Don't offer too many membership levels or payment plans. One to three options is plenty. Any more and you will cause confusion and have a drop in conversion rates.

## Something New

Keep your audience in the loop with new material and updates. Sometimes people don't log in consistently and you need to keep reminding them why they should come back.

## Free Samples

Offer a trial membership for 14 days or less. Let people experience what you offer without having to sign up with a credit card or any commitments.

## Give It Time

If you don't get the results you wanted, don't be discouraged. It takes time and the right mix of ingredients to achieve success.