



WHO NEEDS MEMBERS?

RECRUITING AND RETAINING MEMBERS - A TOP PRIORITY FOR EVERY ASSOCIATION OR NOT WORTH PURSUING?

'WHAT IS THE MEMBERSHIP RETENTION RATE?' 'HOW MANY NEW MEMBERS HAVE WE BEEN ABLE TO ATTRACT?' 'HOW CAN WE ATTRACT MORE NEW MEMBERS?' AS ASSOCIATION PROFESSIONALS, WE HAVE ALL BEEN CONFRONTED WITH THESE QUESTIONS DURING DISCUSSIONS WITH OUR BOARDS.

WE ALL AGREE THAT THE SOLID BASE OF MEMBERS IS NECESSARY TO GIVE OUR ORGANISATIONS A SOLID FOUNDATION AND TO SUSTAIN THE OPERATIONS OF AN ASSOCIATION. BUT WE MUST ASK OURSELVES IF 95% RETENTION RATES AND CONSTANT MEMBERSHIP GROWTH IN TODAY'S FLAT WORLD - A WORLD WITHOUT TECHNOLOGICAL OR GEOGRAPHIC BOUNDARIES AND FULL OF OPTIONS AND CHOICES - IS SUSTAINABLE. ANTICIPATING THIS KIND OF GROWTH MAY BE A MIRAGE THAT CAN EASILY DIVERT CRUCIAL STRATEGIC ATTENTION AND RESOURCES FROM OTHER AND MORE FUNDAMENTAL AND STRATEGICALLY MORE IMPORTANT PRIORITIES.

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One could argue 'au contraire!' - that to increase membership in a 'flat world' may indeed be the top priority. A higher bottom line (reserves and operational budget) would make everything else simpler. Individual members and customers are becoming savvier by the day when it comes to obtaining benefits relevant for their professional needs, placing more pressure on organisations and challenging the traditional raison d'être of associations.

Now should this matter to associations?

The answer, I challenge, is yes and no. While it remains important that associations retain a certain core of members to give them basic stability to sustain their operations, I would argue that the relevance of an organisation and its services/offerings/benefits are what really matters.

Is the end of the traditional association

near? Well, maybe. I would like to challenge that individuals are increasingly moving away from being 'members' to being 'buyers' of

products, services, offerings, benefits, or access to networks and communities.

Modern telecommunications and the internet make it not only a possibility but a reality for associations to compete with each other for members - their time, attention and resources - and at the same time, for-profit entities are discovering that they could take a piece of this cake. Profit making groups typically benefit from a much more direct and fast decision-making process to **adapt to changing market and customer needs** and provide very competitive offerings. They can become formidable competitors to associations.

And in terms of networks, how easily can organisations compete with virtual communities that grow by thousands of new members daily - entities like Connect, Linked-in or Facebook, not to mention Second Life where you might find your organisation's 'virtual alter-ego' doing business in - well, a virtual reality...

Increasingly, associations need to think like businesses and consider that potential members are both customers and shareholders. If an organisation's offerings are truly relevant to the individuals/companies they want to reach, and are of excellent quality, competitive in price, and can be tapped into easily and whenever it is convenient for the member/customer - then the association will enjoy higher levels of 'business' - but this may or may not necessarily be reflected in membership. In some cases, it may actually be financially more beneficial for an organisation to have more contacts than members, as these contacts typically pay premium prices for everything from conference attendance to publications.

One major advantage associations still have is their credibility factor. They do things for



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reasons other than interest in financial gain, and this remains very appealing to many and it makes the associations appear more objective and unbiased. But it may only be a matter of time before for-profit entities establish themselves as very trustworthy and credible providers, and in some cases undistinguishable from the traditional associations. To some degree, this is already happening.

The bottom line is that associations' focus should not be on methods - such as how to retain members or recruit them. Rather, the focus might be on what an association can do to make itself and its products/services/offerings/benefits truly relevant to the customers' - or potential members. If this offering meets or even creates the need of the relevant community, the organisation will encourage interest. As corporations pry into the associations' world, **associations need to refine their products and services** to be able to compete on a level playing field - although profit should not become the end goal.

And lastly, and while every organisation likes to boast about how many members it has and how many more members it has recruited, etc., consider this:

I would challenge that what really matters is not necessarily how many paying members an organisation has, but how many customers/contacts/friends it can a) **reach**, b) **influence** and c) ideally **involve** in its network/community. This can be substantially more important than the number of formal members an association has in its paid-members database, and in essence will decide whether the organisation will achieve its mission.

'How can our association be more relevant?' and 'How can our association reach and influence more individuals/customers?' I would suggest these are the real questions that should be asked during the next Board meeting or strategic retreat. The findings have to be lived and skillfully communicated to the greatest possible degree.

ABOUT TOM REISER

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