

Moving from Relevance to Revolution: Leading Association Change with Strategic Solutions!

By Wendy Scott, CAE, and Bob Reed, MBA

There was a major push in recent years to make your organization more relevant¹, which called for making significant changes to association governance, staff expertise, value proposition, and technology – let’s just say a call for changing nearly everything. And, rightfully so, membership growth was under great pressure, older members were starting to retire in larger numbers, and younger members were questioning the value of the traditional “menu of benefits” being offered to all members – one size fits all (or no one). Conference and workshop attendance was declining and online alternatives were replacing in-person educational programs.

Since then, we have seen these same challenging trends presented and discussed numerous times at ASAE conferences, state SAE meetings, and in our consulting with association and professional society leaders. Nearly all of us now understand the symptoms of an organization struggling to be relevant and successful. But how do we identify strategies and realistic planning tactics to create the revolution needed to sustain our associations?

The changes that were predicted five or so years ago are coming to pass, but at a rate never expected. Disruptive technologies are being introduced even faster and the “shared economy” (e.g., Uber, Airbnb) is affecting members directly by offering more options that are more convenient and often less expensive. But the real problem is in making the changes needed to adapt positively to these disruptions, so let’s stop talking about the problems. Association leaders, both Board members and staff, must strive to become experts at anticipating change and seizing the opportunities presented because of it. Let’s create solutions that will solve the real problems (sounds like we’re running for President!).

A useful analogy is imagining that your association and

your members stranded on a deserted island and you are expected to continue to provide services to them. You know your environment has changed and your member needs have definitely changed, but you don’t know the details because they landed on the other side of the island. They may have plenty of fresh fruits and fish to eat, and fresh water to drink – or not. Until you know more, you cannot begin to build the organizational management expertise and acquire the resources you need to meet their new needs. Meanwhile, your members assume you are the same old organization that offers the same old benefits, so you are no longer relevant in helping

them meet their new needs. It’s time to come together in aligning your value with the new member needs.

So where do you start? Plan to meet with your member segments as soon as possible (physically or virtually): new, former, and prospective members. Expanding your research beyond your staff or board members is critical. As you meet with your members, consider their needs in a different way, at a new level of detail,

using an evaluation tool² that provides a deeper dive into exactly what pain your members (Pains) are experiencing and what they hope to achieve in their professions or industries (Gains). Knowing the pains and gains in great detail, for each of your key member segments, will enable you to identify several possible benefits (value propositions), many of them new, that will be very relevant to your members.

The real work starts by morphing your staff and volunteers, its processes, and its resources into a member-centric culture enabling the ability to quickly evaluate opportunities and the right business model for your organization. A NEW way of conducting strategic planning is also needed to truly understand the impact of your decisions on your members and other stakehold-



ers. Using the traditional SWOT approach (strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats) worked fairly well in the old days of more predictable change but is not as effective with unpredictable disruptions in the new shared economy.

Using an Opportunity Assessment Tool³, you can evaluate the fit between your value propositions (benefits) and your member pains and gains. In simple terms, this evaluation allows you to answer the questions for each of your benefits or possible opportunities:

1. Should we do it? Should we continue to offer this existing benefit or offer a new benefit?
2. Can we do it? Do we have the expertise, the resources, processes, and the technology to offer these benefits to our members, and do it very well
3. Is it viable? Can we afford to offer this benefit? If not, can we find a partner that will cover the cost?

Armed with the results of this evaluation process, you will know what needs to be adjusted in your association to meet the new and changing needs of your members. The traditional tactic of appointing a committee or task force to study an opportunity, or a problem and possible solution, can often take weeks or months for outcomes to materialize. Staff and volunteer leaders must be prepared to work differently, choose action over extended analysis, and develop new policies and procedures to achieve group consensus efficiently.

Associations will continue to evolve rapidly using new tools and new approaches that enable them to keep up with the change and thrive as key players in the changing economy. The successful organizations are learning to be experimenters, not planners; willing to test small changes, learning from their failures, and then moving on to the next test.

Relevance will continue to be an important part of value proposition development but the time for implementing a radical revolution is already here. As association leaders, ride the wave of change by applying new planning and member benefit assessment tools while confidently positioning your association to meet the needs of your members and prospects. Instead of fighting the change, buckle up, and enjoy the ride! ☘

¹ "Race to Relevance", Harrison Coerver and Mary Byers, CAE

² "Business Model Generation: A Handbook for Visionaries, Game Changers, and Challengers" Alexander Osterwalder and Yves Pigneur

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Wendy Scott, CAE, has served as an association Executive Director and consultant in the U.S. and internationally for over 35 years, and received the AENC James J. Lowry Award as Outstanding Association CEO in 2011.



Bob Reed, MBA, has worked as an executive for American Express and Disney starting up and operating several membership based businesses. Visit ReedScott for more information and learn about services to help your association be part of the revolution!



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