

# Future trends in association membership

Membership, they say, is the lifeblood of every association. Indeed, membership recruitment, retention and engagement are issues that associations face in their day-to-day operations. So it was fitting that the topic of membership was discussed at the recent fourth annual Associations Summit (AS4) organized by the Philippine Council of Associations and Association Executives (PCAAE) at the Philippine International Convention Center.

The conference, themed “Race to Innovation: Winning in the Age of Disruption,” was attended by over 200 board members, executive directors and staff from associations and other membership organizations here and abroad.

The Washington, D.C.-based, 22,000-member American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), represented by its China office head, Maria Tong, covered the subject of future trends and innovation in association membership.

The five membership aspects that affect the future of associations are as follows:

On providing value—An association needs to shift from an “association defines value” to a “members define value” mind-set. Oftentimes, associations fall into the trap of deciding unilaterally what value to provide its members and not reaching out to members what value matters to them.

In this age of millennials, associations also need to segment and personalize their membership campaign and communication to better serve their members.

On recruiting members—Associations of today have to expand their view of potential sources of members and begin to look at “influencers,” such as family, faculty advisers, senior colleagues, etc. Marketing and communication to these “influencers” also need to vary to help prospective members in their decision to join associations.

On changing roles and responsibilities—An association now belongs to a larger community and with greater social responsibility.

Associations also face competition from social media and even from for-profit enterprises in their traditional market sphere, such as in organizing conferences and providing training and technical information. Associations, therefore, need to come out with more unique and exclusive member offerings, undertake collaborative partnerships and craft a competitive edge “brag sheet”.

On collection and use of data—Associations amass a lot of data but do not always collect the right data or rarely use it to their full advantage. Members, on the other hand, receive too much information and experience difficulties in coping with this flood of data. It will help if associations make a thorough data inventory, organize these in terms of relevance, and prioritize them accordingly to the benefit of members.

On member engagement—as the demographics shift from boomers to millennials, associations must employ a variety of tools and media channels to effectively engage with their members. A few examples include gamification (the concept of applying game mechanics and game design techniques to engage and motivate people to achieve their goals), online community discussions, knowledge dissemination (e.g., alerts, “webinars”) through mobile-phone applications, and other new technology-based activities.

If an association has to remain relevant and survive into the future, it needs to step back, have a rethink of their current ways of doing things, and adapt as quickly as possible to the call of the times.