

Provide a 'SPARK' in your association's strategic plan

IN “Business Associations for the 21st Century”, the Washington, D.C.-based Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) describes associations as voluntary business-, professional-and community-improvement groups that combine their synergistic power by working together to solve mutual problems. Often partnering with government, associations have developed programs and encourage public policies that help expand economic bases. “Were it not for business and professional organizations, other societal institutions would face added burdens in such areas as economic development, product performance and safety standards, continuing education, public information, professional ethics, geo-economic research, industry statistics, community service and consumer information,” the publication noted.

Associations, therefore, are communities of like-minded institutions or individuals that bind themselves together to share a common purpose and vision. As structured organizations themselves, associations too, like their corporate counterparts, need to be strategic and sustainable. Here is the “SPARK” framework and rationale that my organization, the Association of Development Financing Institutions in Asia and the Pacific (ADFIAP) has used to spell out its direction and efforts for its new five-year strategic plan:

Sustaining membership—A large, progressive and active membership, as well as the positive experiences of the members, through the association’s meaningful program and activity offerings, are essential to its success and sustainability. As such, having a robust membership with relevant member services should be the main objective of the association. Simply put, if there are no services, there are no members and, if there are no members, there is no association to speak of.

Promoting advocacy—A focused and credible commitment to a specific advocacy, as well as the association’s active engagement with same-purposed and respected institutions in this avowed advocacy, are crucial elements in taking the

association to a leadership role. The association, thus, has to engage, shape and advance policy and advocacy positions that impact its industry or profession and, at the same time, improve the membership's capacity to do the same.

Advancing human-resource development—A professional, skilled and multi-disciplinary human resource brought about by the continuous educational and certification programs offered by the association is a vital component of its members' organizational efficiency and long-term growth. An association must therefore advance the development of its members by establishing standards, credentials and core competencies; improving their skills and prominence; and guiding them into recruiting and retaining talented and committed individuals in the profession.

Revving up resources—A financially healthy and partnership-friendly association will be able to muster the value and strength of these resources toward the benefit of its members, as well as contribute to the public good. A key effort of an association is to innovate on and expand its available pool of human, financial and relationship resources to support the operational needs of the association and its members to undertake their mandated mission.

Keeping alliances—The bond among members, affiliates and partners in the same community committed to a common cause and vision is the currency of an association. Maintaining and invigorating these relationships will make the association even better and stronger in the long run.