

Are associations headed for extinction?

This question was posed to us, panelists, at the recent Meetings Forum 2016 Singapore organized by the Chicago-based Professional Convention Management Association, the Singapore Exhibition and Convention Bureau, and the Singapore Tourism Board.

The premise of this question was that associations currently face multiple threats on their traditional sphere of influence, e.g., educational programs, industry-setting standards and networking platforms. And correctly so, as online service providers, social media and other technology-based applications have been surging and eating away chunks of the usual revenue pie of associations.

To add to these woes, there are at least five current shifts shaping today's associations and other membership organizations, and these are:

Demographic shift. It is estimated that by 2030, millennials will outnumber the baby boomers by about 22 million. There are marked differences in the behavior of millennials vis-à-vis baby boomers in terms of association membership. One big difference is that, while baby boomers join associations as a natural consequence of leading a professional life, millennials reluctantly do so, and only if they are able to contribute to a cause and be recognized for it. This means that recruiting millennials to join an association is more challenging and complex.

Societal shift. Longer life span and customer preferences amid myriads of choices of products and services available elsewhere also have an impact on associations. For example, what value proposition would associations provide to their senior members? What fresh-product offerings would they give to members who are their customers, too? Thus, the "normal" membership recruitment, retention and engagement techniques of associations may no longer apply.

Market shift. Competition from within and outside the association world is getting stiffer and stiffer. Educational programs, both face-to-face and online, for instance, are now being offered by nonassociations and they are on-demand, 24/7 and cheaper. How will associations cope?

Regulatory and legislative shift. New laws and regulations mean new challenges for associations, say, in the mining, transport and information-technology industries, to develop adaptive strategies to better serve their members.

Technology shift. Disruptive technologies in the education space (think massive open online courses or MOOCs, which are free online courses offered by universities) are posing as threats to associations. Then there are numerous sites on social media, blogs, mobile apps, etc. that encroach into the usual domain of associations.

With all these shifts and threats, certainly, anxiety and reality check set in if you are in the association profession. So back to the question: “Are associations headed for extinction?”

I must admit that this response is not that straightforward, but perhaps, it can serve as a “food for thought”: When we were in grade school, our teachers told us about the “3Rs” of good education foundation—reading, (w)riting and (ar)ithmetic. In association management, I have learned through experience that there are also 3Rs of importance, and these are: relevance, relationships and resources.

“Relevance” is going back to the fundamental issue of purpose, which answers the questions: Why do you do what you do? Why does your association exist? Why do you serve a higher purpose (your cause)?

For as long as an association is able to stay focused on its purpose and to rally members behind it, there is a good chance to remain relevant. Building and nurturing relationships in today's "sharing economy" is more crucial than ever. Last, an association needs resources, both human and financial, to weather these challenges and...well, to stay alive!