

Creative Membership and Sponsorship Structures

Associations are changing. Traditional models formerly used to grow membership in associations have become obsolete. Attracting professionals to become a member means more than just having them fill out forms, pay an annual membership fee and receive a monthly journal.

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Transformation in the world today is coming from all directions, we are looking at disruption in many sectors, from the effects of the sharing economy to the far-reaching changes in technologies. No business or organisation will be exempt. In this fast and ever changing environment, associations will need to redefine “membership” if they want to be competitive and shift from a closed membership model to an open professional community.

More and more we see associations making an effort to be more relevant to their members. The value of associations is today defined more by the stakeholder than by the organisation. This is the reason associations are now offering “levels” of membership, a kind of *à la carte* option that serves different needs varying from full service to being able to pick and choose those products/services they need. The menu list is long and includes congress participation, traditional training, certification, participation at special members’ interest groups, digital membership, on-line education, and more. This catalogue of options allows each member to play their role within the association according to time, money, interests and professional age. The golden rule of any association is to understand what your members need and how to meet those needs.

Some may be interested in becoming directly involved in governance while others will pick and choose their activities. Yes, the core of the association remains those all-important full voting members, who pay for the full package of services and contribute to strategies and leadership. While the others may choose to benefit from selected services

and programmes offered, they are no less a member and feel part of the community. This model summarises members' behaviour in a phrase, “levels of engagement”. Associations who have adopted new membership structures say they did it not only from necessity but to make them more relevant and valuable. This process is not implemented overnight. It takes time but by offering new options they provide flexibility and stay competitive in an increasingly tight market.

The same approach must be taken with association sponsors and corporate partners by offering customised corporate services aligned with the company's needs. Sponsorships can introduce new audiences to your organisation, particularly if you choose your sponsorship partners carefully. While traditional packages have value, there are ways to creatively add value. And if we think of the opportunities of the sharing economy and technology, changes mean more opportunities for new types of sponsors.

For example, we can work jointly with sponsors for digital marketing opportunities, developing illuminated smart walls, more social media interaction, game lounges to facilitate networking, mindful community building and the creative development of matching opportunities. We have evolved from the days when sponsors and event hosts were content to plaster logos on advertising and banners. Certainly, signage is still very important – the second largest sponsor “wants” branded items according to one survey – but experiential marketing and expanding digital platforms are increasingly providing a more innovative approach.

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Both corporate brands and PCOs are getting creative by elevating a sponsors' return on investment and building truly symbiotic, long-lasting partnerships. They are increasing sponsors' engagement by working to optimise interaction with attendees even before the event begins and right through event registration. This can take the form of a contest to show how sponsors back a winner. Awards and competitions can be the highest profile features of an annual event, generating the most excitement, and providing long-term returns through media coverage.

Another creative practice is to allow sponsors direct access to attendees. It could be a product launch, and opportunity to collect data on attendees or times for a face-to-face encounter, interactive connection is of considerable value to all concerned. Sponsors love exclusivity. If the association's values are aligned with this strategy, proposing collaborations that extend beyond an annual event will offer long-term investments.

And, sponsors love the younger generation. They will be the members and leaders of tomorrow's association. More and more we can assist by providing specific programmes within the association congress that are dedicated to younger participants like designating younger member meeting corners, collecting their ideas, and sponsoring contests, awards, and specific training/sessions.

Come up with your own unique suggestions to make sure the organization's goals and values are represented through any offered

sponsorships. Remember, the association should understand what their members need and how to meet those needs.

In conclusion, both creative membership structures and relationships with sponsors can provide revenue sources that open up the world for everyone. By doing so, we can create excellent opportunities to pull more members into events, to ensure financial success and to attract corporate revenue to the association. Take the challenge and start thinking differently about what it means to be a member of a community of professionals; think more broadly about how technology can add value. New strategies for growth are how we stay vibrant and alive with the 21st century.

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