

That Thing You Do

It's a common mantra at associations: "We give our members what they need."

If it's an organization on the rise, it's a boast. For an organization on the wane, a goal. Across industries and professions, "meeting the needs of members" is just, you know, what associations *do*. Or try to do.

So why is it that so many different associations, serving different markets, all do very similar sorts of things?

Is it pure coincidence that small businesses and large manufacturing firms, licensed specialists and middle managers, doctors and lawyers, all need the same things, according to the associations that represent them? That they all just happen to need meetings, and magazines, and tradeshow, and committees, and legislative action days, and handbooks, and webinars, and social networking, and ... and ... ?

Or is it possible that "meeting the needs of members" isn't really, you know, what associations *do*—that in fact, what associations do are just the sorts of things that associations do?

During ASAE & The Center's Annual Meeting & Expo this past August, several people encouraged associations to embrace social media by tweeting, "Associations are for associating."

Which is a fine (if simplistic) sentiment, except for the fact that it's wrong.

Associations do not exist to "associate." They exist to promote the interests of the constituencies they represent. Simply "bringing people together"—which, coincidentally enough, is basically what meetings and magazines and tradeshow do—is what most associations have become, but it's not why they exist.

The problem isn't just that committees, networking, and all the rest may not be meeting member needs. The real problem is that many of the activities that associa-

tions have built themselves around are going through earth-shattering, fundamental changes, or vanishing altogether.

Advertising revenue? Face-to-face meetings? Decision-making processes and product development built along a hierarchy of small groups? Let's face it: Technology has already altered all of these things. And it's not done yet.

The biggest opportunity that many associations will miss over the next few years is the opportunity to completely reinvent what we do—to realign ourselves toward meeting true market needs and toward our real purpose of promoting the interests of our unique constituents. Technology and societal changes are giv-

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ing us a rare chance to investigate not just how we're doing what we're doing, but whether we should be doing it at all.

Instead, many of us will just exchange meetings with webinars and newsletters with blogs or Twitter. Then we'll replace those with whatever comes next. We'll go to meetings with other association professionals, listen to what they're doing, and then adapt it for our own organizations. We'll call it "best practices."

But meeting market needs requires associations to look beyond the obvious to find ways to make our constituencies thrive. It may involve completely different products, completely different services, completely different membership models—or even business models—than any other association offers.

Obviously, I don't know enough about your marketplace to be more specific.



You'll only discover your opportunities by looking within your market.

It would be much easier if all associations were exactly alike, if we could take "best practices" of one organization and plop them into another, if we could face the same revolutions and evolutions at the same time in the same way.

Alas, that's not how the world really works, though it's tempting to pretend that it is. We may be able to copy our way to comfort, even competence, but we'll never copy our way to greatness.

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