

Education

ISSUES AND TRENDS

BUILD DIALOGUE

If you are experiencing a decline in attendance, consider trying a few different strategies. Begin building on-going dialogue with your membership. Ask them exactly what types of training and education programs they want from the association. Don't just survey every now and then, instead gather qualitative data by calling and asking members about their needs. This may not be the most scientific method of random data collection, but it accomplishes several things. First, it begins building a stronger relationship between you and your members. Second, you get the data that you need to recreate your training and education into something that the market will actually want and buy. Third, it will enable you to gain better insight into your members' issues and concerns.

Don Graham, Director of Human Resource Development for the Virginia Credit Union League, a state trade association, says that he and the rest of the association staff know their members very well. They have made on-going dialogue a routine part of their operation. Graham uses these informal conversations to stay in-touch with what his members want in the future and as a form of quality control. He is constantly seeking direct feedback, beyond the end-of-the-session questionnaire, to be sure his courses are first-rate.

BROADEN YOUR NETWORK

Once you have started talking to your members you will undoubtedly discover that they want some degree of innovation in your programs. That will require you to broaden your network of experts, authorities, speakers and trainers. Instead of using the same instructors time and time again, make it a point to bring in new talent. Members will welcome fresh perspectives. The National Speakers Association publishes a directory of all of its members. Use it to find a fresh crop of highly skilled talent. Consider going to the American Booksellers Association convention to meet the latest

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authors who may also have cutting-edge information to impart to your members. And, of course there is the *Yearbook of Experts*. They have all sorts of data on people who may be perfect for your member's educational needs.

Offering innovative courses taught by knowledgeable, energetic instructors may still not be enough to get your members back in your classrooms. You may also have to offer a broader range of courses. Those initial discussions with members will inform just how broad a range you need. Part of the Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organization's success with their training has been in offering a wide array of courses, the one's that their members need and often cannot get in their own organizations. Jacqueline Bentz, the association's Director of Training and On-Line Services, says that it is imperative that they balance the range of courses that they offer so that they are covering all potential bases from organizational development to legislation and regulations to technology. This is no easy task. It is far simpler to just keep offering the tried and true courses that members have responded to in the past. However, the extra energy that association's like Bentz's expend pays off in a high demand for programs. Bentz reports that attendance is up for their programs. Don Graham says that the same is true for his association. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that both associations offer lots of courses that span the range of their member's interests.

These two associations have something else in common. Both invest tremendous energy in advance planning and on-going marketing. They use a variety of tools to get and keep their message in front of members. Graham's visibility in the credit union community is a constant reminder of the league's existence. He is also a very vocal advocate of his association's wide array of training courses, conferences, web telecasts and the like. Bentz keeps members informed of upcoming courses via electronic advertisements and direct mail campaigns. Whatever methods you choose, marketing is a never-ending process. It is not sufficient to just circulate your calendar once or twice a year. You have to consistently put the message in front of your members.

SUMMARY

Reviving interest in your education component requires a concerted effort to build stronger bridges with members by talking with them about what they want and need. That information will inform your decisions to offer more innovative courses taught by a wider array of experts. There are many, many resources that will help you connect with new talent that will support your efforts to provide fresh perspectives to your membership. Once you have taken these steps you can begin planning a calendar that will pique member's curiosity. Marketing that calendar is a long-term commitment that requires you to utilize many different methodologies, ranging from formal catalogs to course specific flyers to electronic transmissions to faxes. Implementing these strategies will take time. They require persistence and patience. The investment will payoff in higher attendance and greater member satisfaction. ■

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