

The Change Factor Strategic Positioning in Trying Times

By Joanne L. Smikle

It's not business as usual in the wonderful world of associations. Rapidly changing technology has created new business demands and new business realities. Budgets no longer afford the perks of the eighties and nineties. In fact, many associations are struggling to survive while operating in the red. Add to this the fact that sponsorships are drying up at an alarming rate and members are more demanding than ever before. They want more targeted programs focused sharply on their needs. They require even better products and services. Members want the highest caliber staff interacting with them at every encounter. As if all of this weren't enough, neither staff, managers, nor members have the loyalty characteristic of a by-gone era. They can pick, choose and refuse. So, what's an association executive to do?

Controlled Flux

First, executives have to recognize the fact that there is a need for even more change. There is no rest for the weary. It is essential that associations embark on creative, innovative paths in order to maintain professional significance. Today's association is responsible for becoming the most relevant professional clearinghouse, a source of limitless information and expertise on industry issues and trends. Associations must be on the cutting edge of advocacy, research and education. Conferences, conventions and meetings have to be dramatically revamped to capture both new members and those who have gone astray. Judy Huschka, Executive Director of Sales and Marketing Executives of Milwaukee, maintains that association leaders have to first be business leaders. Associations cannot be managed like social clubs. There must be structure and continuity from year to year, in spite of the changes in volunteer leadership.

SME Milwaukee has an interesting history, perhaps one illustrative of the profound need for controlled flux and the consequences of inertia. The association has been in existence since 1922. Roughly fifty years ago they became an affiliate of Sales and Marketing Executives International. Then, last year,

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after many, many years as a faithful dues paying chapter, they ended their affiliation. According to Huschka, they were not the first chapter affiliate to defect, but they were the largest. She also noted the fact that discussion of ending the affiliation had been stirring for many years. While they left on amicable terms, as amicable as a defection can be, Huschka and others cited the main reason for this dramatic change was the fact that the international association was no longer meeting their needs.

Having firsthand knowledge of the negative affects of inertia on the survival of an association and wanting to keep their members fully engaged, SME Milwaukee developed a sound strategy for staying professionally relevant. They invested time and energy in strategic planning, developed leadership training, a fresh awards program and incentives for recruiting new members. According to Huschka, they have also paid close attention to programming. Their monthly meetings reflect the needs of the membership, not simply the interests of the program committee. The overall goal of the association is to provide tangible value to their members.

As the SME Milwaukee example shows, even the longest relationships can be severed. Associations that remain relevant are destined to remain in a state of controlled flux, constantly seeking fresh approaches. This is tough for those who would prefer a more comfortable coast. But coasting is a luxury few can afford. Controlled flux requires constant, purposeful motion with the impetus being member satisfaction, member

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retention and revenue growth.

Members have choices at every turn. If an association is to survive and flourish, active association membership is one of the choices every association employee, whether staff or management, must work to ensure. Cathie T. Siders, PhD, is an avid member of the American Psychological Association. A member of their Council of Representatives, she is quick to point out the importance of both her association affiliation and her active service. While Siders could belong to any number of state and national associations serving psychotherapists, consultants or mental health professionals, she chooses to maintain active membership in APA because of what she refers to as “member-friendly association leadership.” Siders highlights the fact that her association leadership is both approachable and accessible. This can be a pivotal point when people are weighing whether or not to belong. Siders frequently compliments the APA on both its advocacy for the profession and for the mentally ill. She is also pleased with the welcoming climate the leadership has created for members. Siders continues to be an active volunteer because, in her words, “I believe in service to the organization and, it’s a worthy organization.”

Leadership Responsibilities

So, what are the leadership responsibilities in tackling the change factor? First and foremost, leaders are responsible for leadership. That may sound silly; it is so basic that it is often ignored. Association leaders often think that their primary responsibility is political, to lobby and advocate. Not so. Association executives certainly have political responsibilities, but more important, they have the responsibility to skillfully lead in the association itself. This is no easy task. It requires that executives have the ability to build internal coalitions. Internal coalitions, when mobilized for improving the association, promote progress. They support innovative approaches and foster culture change within the association. Without the right internal coalitions, the forces of inertia cripple the organization. Internal coalitions, characterized by staff and management working collaboratively to propel the association forward, spell the end of complacency.

The association executive is responsible for directing the constant flux. That means directing the myriad of activities that comprise daily association life. This is not micromanagement. It is gently guiding the bright, capable folk that are doing the day-to-day work. Next, the executive is responsible for being a shield. It isn’t necessary for staff to know each and every potential threat that is on the horizon for the association. They don’t need to know about every squabble that goes on at the board level. So, executives need to shield staff and management, allowing them to feel only the pressures that really matter lest they become overwhelmed or desensitized, thereby unable to respond when it really matters.

The association leader is also responsible for shaping norms, using their own behavior as an example. For instance, if one of the norms sought in your changing organization is an emphasis on two-way communication, you, as a leader, should send fewer memos and e-mails. Try talking with people. Consider holding informal discussions that utilize free-flowing communication. Create ways

to abolish unilateral communication in the association.

Lastly, the leader is charged with managing the inevitable conflicts that arise during a state of flux. That does not mean squelching the dissonance and discontent that are inevitable components of change. Instead, it means harnessing the best from the myriad of divergent ideas and opinions borne of the flux. Creative ideas can come from even the most contentious conflicts.

Strategic Positioning

Seriously addressing the change factor means a change in attitudes and behavior. The emphasis shifts from maintaining the status quo to creating opportunities for progress. The association executive has to work from the inside out, focusing first on the attitudes that create innovation. Working from the inside out means striving to become the employer of choice. Flex hours, job sharing, on-going education and training are all components of the most desirable employment situations. Leaders have to expend the energy and effort to measure the organizational climate. Yes, that means measuring the experiences and expectations of staff and members alike. Find out exactly which innovations both groups would like from their association. And then, once you have that data, act on it while it is still fresh. Many organizations make the mistake of gathering data and then pondering it until it gets stale.

Strategic positioning also entails creating leadership opportunities throughout the organization. Pushing decision-making down to the lowest possible level in the organization is a vote of confidence in the abilities of every staff member. This type of empowerment awakens talents that may have been dormant for years. It allows people to flex their cognitive muscles.

After much diligent internal work, the process of external strategic positioning begins. One facet of this external positioning is the revitalization of marketing efforts. Marketing has to be consistent and targeted. Try using mediums that are on the edge, catchy enough to reach your targets and draw them into the association’s ranks. Marketing materials need to be different enough to catch the eye of prospects and distinct enough to reinforce your association’s brand image.

Remember, in your external thrust as well as in your internal, diversity does matter. Marbelize the association with appropriate recruitment and retention aimed at the myriad of folk who make up our mosaic. Marbelize the membership by launching programs that meet the needs of diverse membership bases. Linda Roll, Director of Minority National Affairs for the American Psychiatric Association, stresses the importance of understanding, addressing and managing diversity in her work. Roll says, “Diversity changes the dynamics of the organization. We cannot operate like we’re a homogenous entity. Cultural differences impact the work of the association.” Those differences require associations to examine their policies, procedures and practices. They also require heightened sensitivity. Roll is quick to stress the fact that sensitivity is necessary from everyone in the organization, not just those in the cultural majority. She cites the need for more active efforts from everyone in the association, regardless of the diversity they represent, to foster inclusion. This means being aware of the composition of committees and task forces, monitoring recruitment and

retention trends and paying attention to the overall climate of the association. It is the inclusive spirit that reduces the tensions often characteristic of diversity initiatives.

Conclusions

Maintaining professional relevance in rapidly changing markets is tough work. It requires constant, purposeful motion aimed at improvement, innovation and ingenuity. Creating and maintaining constant flux is the job of today's association executive. It is that flux that enables associations to capture the latest generation of potential members. Recruiting and retaining legions of loyal members compels the association to have a few nips and tucks. The organization cannot look like it looked twenty or thirty years ago, nor can it operate in the same antiquated manner. The association leader has to keep flipping the script, trying different approaches. Success with strategic positioning comes not from rote repetition, but from using the change factor to revitalize the limitless talents in the association. ■

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