

Techno Troubles...



What's An Association

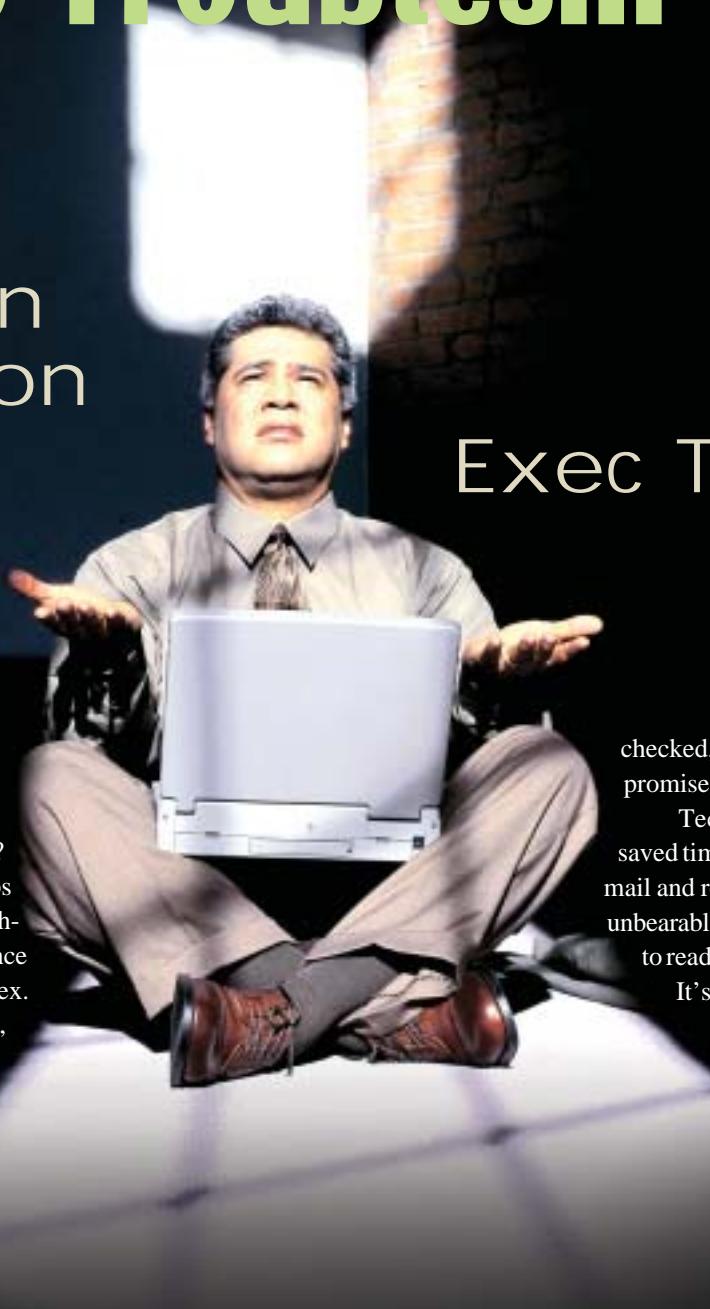
Exec To Do?

By Joanne L. Smikle

What facet of the association world has not been impacted by rapidly changing technology? For some it's been a boon that ramps revenues and member retention. For others, it's been the bane of their existence making simple tasks overly complex. Wherever you fall on the continuum, you've got to deal with technology... it's unavoidable.

Instant access has brought about more ways to sell, to service and to secure resources. Ralph Goodman, Vice President of Sales for the Palm Beach County Convention and Visitor's Bureau, says that in today's high tech market place associations want instant quotes and commitments. This necessitates having a wide array of tech tools at your disposal. The same is true when associations are dealing with their own members. Some people want every request handled yesterday.

But there are human prices to be paid in a microwave world. To quote Goodman, "multi-tasking isn't all it's cracked up to be." There are still limited hours in each day and limited human resources available to both the association, its members, suppliers and various partners. Often our instant access world, which demands instant responses, forces people to over-extend. Un-



checked, this over-extension can compromise quality member services.

Technology hasn't necessarily saved time. Now we have e-mail, voice mail and regular mail. And, imagine the unbearable volume of e-mails you'd have to read if it weren't for the delete key.

It's essential to keep a close focus on the human element when determining which techno tools to introduce in your association.

Services still need to be accurate and customized. Relationships are built over time with continuous contact, which means more than just electronic contact. There's a lot to be said for building strong relationships over a long period of direct contact. That contact can be supplemented with e-mail and other techno tools.

The Benefits

There have certainly been huge benefits from using technology wisely. Consider the case of the Florida School Music Association. They used to utilize a proprietary database that was very costly. The association had to hire someone from the company each time they wanted to tweak their database. The

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hourly fees were high even when the changes were small. This process became increasingly more cumbersome with their conference registration process, resulting in huge expenses. They have now transitioned to an in-house database. It was less expensive to actually hire a staff person to manage the function than to continue using the proprietary database. According to James Perry, the association's Executive Director, they plan to begin maximizing their utilization of electronic communication by using e-zines. This will not replace their hard copy magazine; however, Perry expects that it will address member needs for sound bites of relevant information.

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Today's electronic capabilities enable associations to build bigger databases and maximize their use of those databases to sell products and services. They enable associations to have more regular, personalized contact with members. Targeting the database to members with specific needs also enables the association to be a constant resource for specialized tools. Be sure that you don't confuse large-scale spamming efforts with effective database usage. This strategy will only annoy members and your ISP.

Trial and Error

The trend to using technology wisely requires that association executives relentlessly test various approaches. Some of my clients have played with the idea of offering CD ROM's in place of traditional paper conference proceedings. This innovation has met mixed reviews. Many attendees complain because they miss the visual reinforcement of their learning while in educational sessions. Others complain because this approach ignores the fact that different people learn differently. And yet, others are thrilled to save a tree. To respond to the grumbling, some associations have

combined the CD ROM with a paper summary for each session. Some associations have just gone back to the traditional paper based proceedings. The overuse of PowerPoint has been a constant source of irritation for many association members who attend education sessions. Members complain when substantive learning is replaced with a high tech slide show. Like anything else, misuse of any technological tools can alienate members.

This testing, trial and error approach to technology applies to Web sites as well. Perry tells of his association's on-going refinement of their Web site. Because a solid Web site is a standard component of any successful association, the Florida School Music Association has constantly revised, revamped and updated its site.

They also fluctuate in managing the site. Sometimes site management is contracted out and at other times they find it more beneficial to manage the site in-house.

Last Thoughts

Wherever you fall on the techno tools continuum, there are a few tips that will help you maximize your use of the latest and greatest innovations. Be wary of tools that exceed your member's capabilities. Spending a fortune implementing ideas that members will not or cannot use is wasteful. Bring them along slowly and give them time to adapt to the changes. Learn to distinguish between things that really are urgent and things that are not...just because we can now get information instantly doesn't mean it's worthy of our immediate attention. Making every

little request a priority will only exhaust you and your staff. Be sure to be both strategic and thoughtful when prioritizing. Don't eradicate the old before the new has been accepted and successfully implemented. Removing one without a replacement leaves a gap in the services that you provide to members. One association was ending its monthly paper newsletter to birth a new, bi-weekly electronic variety. They stopped presses on the paper product six months before they were ready to launch the e-communication. Members complained about being without information. This vacuum led to all sorts of suppositions and conjectures on the part of members, making the association look a little less than ready for prime time. The last tip, don't be too quick to ignore human contact. A call, a note, a letter—they go farther than an e-mail. Focusing on the human element helps you build and maintain strong relationships that ensure association survival. ■

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