

MEMBERSHIP MODELS 2.0

Thinking about association membership models is an activity that certainly has gained importance for PCOs in the new millennium. In doing so, PCOs aim to understand their clients better, leading to a service offer that assists those clients in achieving their goals. But then of course, thinking about models has a very academic ring to it, and organising meetings is often a bit less 'intellectual'.

Nevertheless, it helps to take a different approach to daily work from time to time, and operational practice may benefit from some serious thinking. If we are to consult our association clients on improving the value to their membership for example, we need to take wishes and expectations of the individual members into consideration. As much as possible, that is.

No one can escape the changes in communication and social behaviour that have become so apparent in the last decade. Of course there are cultural, regional and other contexts to consider with such a statement, but I trust the train of thought here to be

clear. The immediate access to a digital universe, bordered only by bandwidth, on a handheld device has had a profound impact on how people associate with each other.

MILLION-DOLLAR-QUESTION

The million-dollar-question follows naturally: "Why would anyone join an association?" During an international congress a few months ago, the client (and initiator of this inaugural meeting) had a 'flip-over' board with some coloured markers put up in the middle of the lounge where the coffee breaks took place. There were about two hundred participants to this meeting, from around eighty different

countries. They were invited to write on the board why they joined this particular association. In different colours and styles some very familiar statements appeared.

The statements were ranging from "to be empowered to perform better" and "to participate in the peer-to-peer exchange programme", to the pinnacle "to learn and to contribute". The latter statement absolutely defines the key point of what it means to take up membership in an association, and has become even more important in this day and age of seemingly endless voices, tools and choices.



If you, dear reader, find a monthly or yearly payment to an association the one and only contribution worth considering, please read no further. Disappointment awaits you ahead, here and most likely in real time association life as well. The simple conclusion that a personal contribution to an association is an essential element of its membership must be at the centre of a review of membership models.

WHAT'S NEW?

So what's new then? The suffix '2.0' suggests an update from the earlier version 1.0, or maybe a not-so-subtle reference to the different stages in which we all learned how to understand the use of Internet, becoming a portal of interactivity after previously being used as a passive source of reference.

In general, association membership models are created around the 'purpose of association' in environments where geographical, cultural and economical elements specify the feasibility and attraction of a large enough community to sustain its existence. As such, the variety of models is rather large and therefore this article offers only a focus on recent innovations of well-developed associations.

Combining all of the above, following an established purpose the association membership model would first be determined on the basis of its demographics. An analysis of the (potential) members in terms of gender, age and other relevant personal factors, will provide an insight in existing 'community denominators'.

The next element in the model would be the geographical nature – and opportunities – of the membership. Consideration of the membership scale in terms of geographical areas describes the purpose of association in a model of communities. The association community can be singular and local, or the association can include multiple communities in national, regional or

international environments. Funding plays a crucial role here in the actual feasibility of ambition.

The Internet has allowed for all sorts of communication across borders, including live streaming of content, e-learning, e-libraries, and social media platforms. As individuals we are all part of a globalized economy, and as members of associations

we also part of a global system. For further reference, the company Association Laboratory Inc. has published an interesting white paper on Global Membership Models, focusing on effective implementation of a global membership strategy.

ASSOCIATION SUCCESS

The main element of success in any association membership model however is the role of the officers. Which members engage in the governance of the association, and how soon is the executive management outsourced or otherwise professionalised? Do members contribute to the association in a way that covers all management costs, or are there third parties with a commercial interest available to support?

The meeting as a platform for association members to come together to share their interest and knowledge has long been the main funding resource for many associations. With more (potential) members at a distance successful associations have implemented models, in which the virtual community offers a home to those members, as well as a new source of revenue for the association. Soon enough the generation gap in terms of technology adaptation will not be a factor

of concern, and the membership models will allow a continued development of implementing individualised membership benefits on a global scale. Association Management Companies and Professional Congress Organisers are there to support the associations in providing supportive services, and will grow in their abilities to consult their clients appropriately and effectively.

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Nevertheless, the association still needs to be governed, and for this a personal commitment of members is required. The ways of interaction, education, even participation of members in their association may have changed, and so have the membership models. It is however the purpose that defines the sustainability of the association in the global market, and the efficacy of the membership model. Therefore, any type of membership model should still offer a chance to enthusiastic individuals, who are willing and able to offer their time and expertise to their fellow members at no cost to the association.

This article was provided by the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers, author Michel Neijmann, President of IAPCO, FIGUR, Turkey. IAPCO represents today 118 professional organisers, meeting planners and managers of international and national congresses, conventions and special events from 40 countries.
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