

GLOBAL STRATEGIES FOR ASSOCIATIONS

Professional associations play a crucial role in the economic development of their respective communities, and as such, they are not immune to globalising trends. A 2016 study by the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE)* highlighted the need for associations to take an increasingly global focus to bring value and strengthen the relationship between the organisation and its members.

Developing effective global strategies can also create a more favourable impression among the general public and attract prospective members, furthering the value and reputation of the association in question. In this article, we discuss some ways in which associations can plan and develop services that are in line with a global (but also local) audience.

GLOBAL STRATEGIES FOR ASSOCIATIONS: TWO KEY PRINCIPLES TO BEAR IN MIND

Effective strategy planning involves two fundamental principles: adopting business management practices and approaching their communications and management strategies globally but without overlooking the regional/local needs of the association's members.

Applying management principles and techniques does not equal adopting a corporate strategy, but rather retaining the association's identity while taking a rigorous and business-like approach to strategy research and development. In this regard, SWOT analysis, business mapping, field measurement, demographic analysis, assessment of current and desired impact of the association into the local community, and the creation of action plans are only some of the techniques available that can help associations develop a solid presence in both the international and regional arenas.

When it comes to creating global strategies for organisations, it is equally important to adopt robust and consistent practices both at a global and a local level, as most modern associations have two separate

audiences with distinct needs. The focus should be on quality rather than quantity and on making every effort to ensure that the association's product and service portfolio includes a local/regional focus. In short, associations should strive to develop a global vision that nurtures local identities and needs and that actually caters to the expectations of every one of its members.

EFFECTIVE MEMBER ENGAGEMENT FOR ASSOCIATIONS

Strategic member engagement plays a crucial role in promoting an association's core values and message. Engaged members can act as "brand ambassadors" and become a key asset able to transform passive members (those who pay their fees but have limited or no involvement with the association) into loyal members who make extensive use of the organisation's product and service offer.

The Global Engagement Index report for 2016** highlighted that continued, and positive member engagement relies on the organisation meeting a few fundamental criteria with regard to the services offered. The survey findings mentioned in this report reveal that successful member engagement needs to fulfill the following requirements:

- **A personalised and relevant range of products and services** exclusively available to members. There is no "one size fits all" when it comes to delivering engaging products and services that bring value to members. Some associations will benefit from developing and offering services that

focus on training (online courses, certifications, webinars, etc.), whereas others are more likely to take advantage of creating opportunities for networking, such as organising annual meetings, career fairs, conferences, one-day events, etc.

- A clear definition of the **benefits and values** involved in membership. Members expect that belonging to an association will have a positive impact on their careers, professional reputation, or help with their networking efforts. Therefore, member services offered by associations must be aligned with these expectations.

- **The quality of information and communication**, usually assessed to how personal, timely, up-to-date, and relevant communications between an association and its members are. Equally important is the availability of information in formats and channels that suit members' needs. In this respect, an association's digital strategy needs to be carefully planned, as members do not only expect to find valuable information on the website but also in social media, blog entries, printed or online magazines/newsletters, etc. In short, associations should diversify their communications strategy and try to reach members through meaningful information that is accessible, easily available and cannot be found elsewhere.

- The availability of **responsive and professional customer service**. Associations that have a nationwide scope should ensure that the needs of their members are catered to at local and / or regional level. Likewise, it is important to note that member support does not have to be limited to e-mail or phone, but can also include live chat options, FAQ sections, and how-to guides.

INCLUSIVE GLOBAL STRATEGIES

In the 21st century, the member base of many associations comes from diverse cultural, social, economic, and geographic backgrounds. As a result, it is crucial to develop inclusive products and services that cater to a global and diverse audience.

Creating inclusive services can start with things as simple as using recognised international standards



that apply to dates, currencies, and written communications, and can extend to other aspects of the association's operations, such as developing an inclusive and research-based content strategy that takes members through an enjoyable digital content discovery experience.

Moreover, the Global Engagement Index report hinted at how conferences and events can be made more inclusive by focussing on accessibility, proximity to the attendees' place of residence, and ease of reach. Also by including female speakers and ensuring that presentations cater to different learning styles and do not alienate any section of the audience.

GAMIFICATION FOR ASSOCIATIONS

Technology can help associations develop successful services that promote their core values at key events, such as conferences or special gatherings. These events strengthen relationships and build awareness about an organisation's goals, activities, and ethos, particularly when gamification strategies are in use, that offer clear value to participants and motivate them to achieve specific goals.

Common gamification strategies include tweeting about an event or uploading pictures and in exchange receiving virtual badges, free access to the association's publications, or discounts on relevant products and services. Creating event-specific mobile apps is one of the most effective ways of bringing gamification into an association's event, and so are Audience Response Systems that

facilitate direct interaction and live-polling between the audience and speakers/presenters.

Other ideas include planning immersive conferences that offer the audience an active role. This can be implemented through the use of speech recognition, 3D and 4D technologies, virtual or augmented reality sets, or motion gesture solutions.

Additionally, gamification can be incorporated into the association's digital marketing strategy by offering tailor-made challenges, virtual gifts and awards, featured leaderboards, or contests to members who share and interact with published content.

In today's globalised world, associations have a challenging task ahead of them: to reach and bring value to a diverse audience that has both local and global needs. This can be achieved using a multi-faceted approach to their product and service development strategy that involves focussing on engagement, inclusiveness, and by making the most of the new technologies. 

This article was provided by the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers, author Frank M. Waechter on behalf of IAPCO Council member Alain Pittet, Congrex Switzerland. Congrex Switzerland is an internationally operating agency delivering integrated solutions especially for non-profit clients. IAPCO represents today 115 professional organisers, meeting planners and managers of international and national congresses, conventions and special events from 41 countries. info@iapco.org www.iapco.org

* <https://www.asaecenter.org/publications/108717-association-compensation-benefits-study-20162017-edition>
**<http://www.engagementindex.org/home>

