



# Thriving in the digital age

MCI Dubai's Alexander John talks relevance, value and growth opportunities.

“While members want to be part of the international collective, being locally relevant is just as important.”

While the digital economy will be the new normal going forward, associations can strategically innovate, accelerate growth and provide great value to their audiences and, in some cases, even the world. Building new markets or reinvigorating existing ones requires re-visiting the fundamentals. Here are four recommendations:

## Thought leadership

In the age of 'hyper-information', credibility and reliability become critical. Delivering peer-reviewed and certified content is paramount. Associations should cultivate subject matter experts (SMEs) to strengthen their position and develop industry standards. SMEs positioned in the right environment (such as in consulting or working with government agencies) help position the association as one that is adding exponential value to the economy.

The American Society for Quality (ASQ) used SMEs as an extension of their brand. This strategy helped position them as thought leaders and multipliers for government standards programmes. It also helped them grow their revenues and influence as the premier 'standards' brand in institutions.

## Registered service providers (RSPs)

Associations can sell content in various ways. One is to appoint RSPs to represent the association's product and become a generator of value and opportunity. Choosing and knowing the strength of a RSP is important

because they not only represent the association but also generate growth by attracting new and renewing existing members. This approach helped ASQ grow 15 per cent year-on-year in the MENA market.

## Growth through academia

Associations have a natural affinity with academia as both institutions focus on expanding a body of knowledge. They offer opportunities in R&D and partnering with such institutions adds academic credence.

Academia and universities can offer co-branded certifications, adding industry knowledge and standards to the learning curriculum. Universities may also become RSPs that drive both academic and industry growth.

## Build local/regional products

While members want to be part of the international collective, being locally relevant is just as important. Defining products, organising local or regional conferences, workshops, and issuing certifications and research give associations local relevance while growing globally.

To reiterate, while digital innovation may be the buzz, content is still king. Associations embody the knowledge and influence of their industry, and hence must be relevant and valuable in order to grow. ■

*This article was provided by the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers (IAPCO). Alexander John is regional director — business development (India, Middle East & Africa) at MCI Dubai, an IAPCO member.*