Striking a Balance Between a Digital-First & Customer-First Philosophy

Martin Boyle, CEO of IAPCO, the International Association of Professional Congress Organizers, advocates for a digital-first approach when managing an organization... but only if members are put in the centre of everything.

Innovation and digitization or a digital-first approach, as it is so often referred to, are terms used by so many in both the corporate and not-for-profit association worlds today. To be digital-first implies to many that an organization, its leadership and teams are switched on at all times, communicate in real-time to their teams, customers and audiences and have the most cutting edge and efficient technologies available at their finger tips 24/7.

Well, yes, there may be some that embody and practice this philosophy.

When asked his thoughts on the digital-first concept, Prof. Felix Carvalho, PharmD, Ph.D. ERT, EuCP and President of EUROTOX stated that: "Our technological transformation will come from organizational core values and not vice versa. There’s no doubt that EUROTOX will continue to use the digital tools (webinars, etc.) to bring very positive results in regard to efficiencies, data security, applications for our internal processes and administration has transitioned our own IAPCO Annual Meeting in 2021 to a virtual conference along with implementing a suite of software applications for our internal processes and administrations has brought very positive results in regard to efficiencies, data security, and operational practices, especially given that 100% of my team works remotely. In doing so, we connected with our community through our own webinars and online educational programs, in fact, grew our community base substantially over the period. Technologies enable us to focus our human resource on our members first. Those members and the rest of our community remain steadfast in what they want from their association with us. Opportunities to engage, network, and share knowledge and experiences with others continue to be of great importance to them. To help facilitate this IAPCO launched our Members Hub in April 2022. It can best be described as a sort of professional Facebook for members. Initially, engagement was excellent with members joining daily and, like Facebook, it relies on content from its community. Encouraging a membership community to shift from a receiver to a provider of content is challenging at the best of times and ever so much more when professional obligations and responsibilities take priority. Consider how to be innovative in the means by which you request contribution, regardless of the technology used.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Prof. Carvalho continued with: “It’s important to identify the intentions and relationships that fulfill the needs of our members and stakeholders by asking questions like ‘how can this benefit our users?’, and only then, ‘what technology do we need to make it happen?’

I return to the Nairobi event for a final thought. The idea that a young person in Nairobi with a passion for, say, engineering can meet a professional career and contribute to the success of an organization across the other side of the world via technology is perhaps the best example of digital-first in action. Importantly, however, ensuring they feel part of that global community whilst they do so in silo is what I would call customer-first which will be fundamental to their long-term sense of belonging and mutual success.