A Brief Guide to Association Digitlization

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Digitilzation is already underway, so embracing it is not a matter of if, but instead of when and how. In this article, **Frank M. Waechter** takes a look at the most effective strategies and solutions that associations can use to achieve this.

According to the World Economic Forum, digitalization is one of the key disruptors of the 21st-century[1]. This process has caused profound changes in the way we interact and go about our lives, and has also transformed the nature of work and organizations. Ernst & Young suggests that the digital transformation is here to stay[2], and so it's essential for associations to jump on board, embrace the digital mindset, and bring added value to their members - especially to new generations who are digital natives.

SHOULD YOUR ASSOCIATION GO "ALL DIGITAL"?

The first step to kick-start a digital transformation strategy is deciding what to implement, how to do it, and in which time frame. Although it might be tempting to go "all-in" on digital, this isn't always practical or necessary. Implementation success rates seem to be rather low - under 30% according to the McKinsey survey[3].

On the other hand, those who are successful take an incremental approach to digitalization. Digital organizations don't become so overnight, they work and rework their strategy until they are able to create new and stronger forms of engagement with their members. Therefore, it is wise to make gradual changes strategically, using carefully chosen digital tools to enhance existing and more traditional operational models.

LOW-COST, HIGH IMPACT SOLUTIONS

Mindset is as important as tools when it comes to the digitalization of associations. The process starts with building digital skills into the association's culture[4], bringing key stakeholders on board, and breaking down silos before going all out. You can achieve this with limited financial resources - it all starts with the right mindset and with the disposition to make small-scale changes that have a significant impact.

Free content analytics tools are an excellent place to start. These tools enable data-driven decision making, which forms the basis for digital strategy. With this anticipatory intelligence, you can discover which content drives interaction best and which digital technologies your members are already using. The information can be used to predict what your members need and to formulate digital marketing campaigns using the format and channels your members prefer.

For example, setting up an online community on a social media platform allows members to share and network 24/7 using tools with which they are already familiar. Some organizations, such as the Association for Clinical Research Professionals,
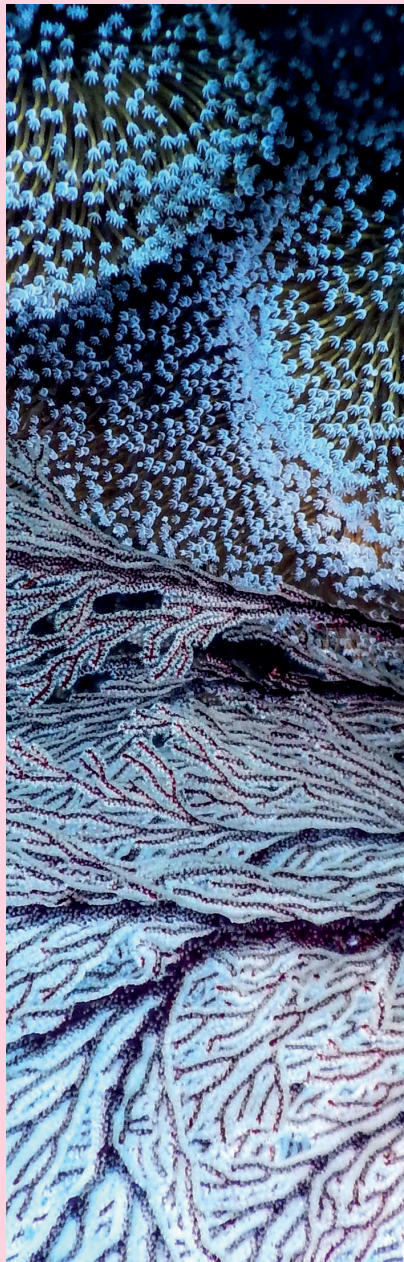
[1] reports.weforum.org/digital-transformation/understanding-the-impact-of-digitalization-on-society/

[2] www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/The_digitisation_of_everything_-_How_organisations_must_adapt_to_changing_consumer_behaviour/$file/EY_Digitisation_of_everything.pdf

[3] https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/unlocking-success-in-digital-transformations

[4] https://www.delcor.com/resources/blog/how-associations-are-embracing-digital-transformation

[5] https://community.acrpnet.org/home#_ga=2.32365755.40168502.1565203227-613253853.1565203227

[6] https://www.tuc.org.uk/national/training

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have created their online community platforms[5], whereas others (like Trades Union Congress) offer their members online training in a webinar format[6], all through their website.

Another cost-effective tool is marketing automation. While not free, these software packages can save on labour costs and, at the same time, deliver highly targeted communications that reach the right person with the right message at the right time. Also, consider the products or services your association already offers and how can they be digitalized. With marketing automation, it is possible to segment members based on their interests and goals, and offer them tailored content.

Digital tools such as machine learning or artificial intelligence have enormous potential for success, and they don't need to be costly. Chatbots can be quickly built on social media platforms and drive a conversational approach to member interaction. And since they can learn autonomously and become more accurate over time, they are a sound investment.

OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

Conferences and events are other areas of opportunity. Event apps are replacing printed conference guides, making them more portable and user-friendly. Organizations like the National Association of College and University Business Officers are building membership value into their events using year-round, multi-event apps that not only deliver smooth registration, networking and personalized content but also engagement, interaction and intelligence[7].

Another example of how digitalization can strengthen the reach of events: BILD[8], a Toronto-based land management association, went paperless for its annual awards event. To do so, they implemented a CSP (content services platform), which bridges the gap between digital experience management (DxM) and content management. For the annual event, this move allowed members to submit and manage applications on a self-serve basis, reducing greatly time-related inefficiencies and risks of human error. Content management systems can be pricey, but there are affordable options too. In the beginning, association leaders may want to explore basic packages and solutions, making sure their features target the most important goals for a particular event.

The digitalization of associations is complex and multi-faceted, but its benefits outweigh the challenges. Taking a gradual approach to digital transformation can help your association remain competitive, future-focused and member-oriented. Start taking steps now to give your association a strategic advantage and establish it as a trusted leader in your field. It is never too late to become digitally aware and lead transformation successfully.

7 https://www.eventmanagerblog.com/association-event-appmep-on-twitter-european-elections-parliament-2019/

7 https://advantagecsp.com/stories/bild