

Staying Relevant in these Unprecedented Times

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Frances Hulme asks how, in these unprecedented circumstances, associations can continue to add value for their members and maintain sustainable sponsorship and revenue streams.

We find ourselves in a rapidly changing world and there has never been a more pressing time for organizations to adapt their engagement strategies. A lot of traditional face-to-face engagement modes are having to be reconsidered in the current environment. In this turmoil, knowing that your association is there to provide guidance and a sense of community can be a breath of fresh air for members dealing with the current uncertainties.

In the long run, associations that successfully navigated these times and valued their stakeholders will be the ones benefitting from a loyal member-base. In these unprecedented circumstances, how can associations stay relevant, continue to add value for their members and maintain sustainable sponsorship and revenue streams?

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Adopting digital engagement strategies will foster a stronger sense of community,

through online continued education and networking for 24/7 engagement. We live at a time when, if organizations – be it non-profit or for profit – don't apply a digital data-driven mindset when serving their key audiences, they are missing out on constructive insights. The risk? Becoming irrelevant to those people they should matter the most for. Digital transformation allows associations to stay future-proofed, increase member value and drive revenue growth.

With all the varied networking opportunities, learning platforms and advocacy programs available, core associations' benefits can now be accessed without belonging to an association. This makes it more important than ever for professional associations to fully harness their databases to address members' challenges, meet their needs and drive value. New digital approaches in sponsorship will also increase value and align with sponsors' ROI (return on investment) and ROO (return on objective).

Size doesn't matter. Any organization can be digital and implement simple strategies for blended scalable platforms to curate valuable content, trigger knowledge sharing and e-learning while bringing automation into their processes.

THE NEED FOR A PLAN

Digital transformation is not just about technology; choosing a suitable technology platform does not result in an online community. A clear digital strategy needs to be tailored to your association's objectives with community management solutions that fulfil engagement, growth and value.

MCI UK's Director of Digital and Online Media, Damian Clarke made the following analogy: *"At the moment people are scrambling around for tools when they need solutions, having a tool is just the start if you don't have a fully developed plan of how to use it. If I buy an oven and some ingredients, I won't be able to make a soufflé. The true*

challenge of running a digital community is not just the technology, but a reinvention of your engagement strategy to work effectively in a virtual space. The focus on the members' online experience, through effective online community design and management, ensures a rewarding and engaging digital platform for everyone."

Having a dedicated digital community platform provides multiple benefits for associations including:

- Reaching a wider global audience and growth of your membership
- Added value for members with co-created and curated content, on-demand learning and industry resources
- Networking capabilities, dedicated topic forums, knowledge sharing, interactive discussions
- Increase in sponsorship revenue from growing membership and online engagement which grants sponsors 24/7 access to your members

- A deeper understanding of your audience through data-driven insights gained through analytics – this also can inform the content your organization creates plus topics in event programs, based on engagement trends across the platform

- Host live-streamed sessions via your community platform for your members to participate in the live online interactive experience

- Community managers can ensure sustained engagement across discussion forums, by managing curated personalized content and automation triggers

ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Online member communities provide associations with innovative digital engagement solutions to foster interaction between members, sponsors and other key stakeholders.

One thing is for sure, as we go along, no area is untouched by technology. Membership organizations need to make the jump in order not to be left behind. Technology and associations need to go hand in hand in order to remain relevant and successful. Even if it might get bumpy along the way, we are in it together.

This article was provided by the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers, author Frances Hulme, Marketing & Communications Manager, MCI UK. IAPCO represents today 140 companies comprised of over 9,900 professional congress organizers, meeting planners and managers of international and national congresses, conventions and special events from 40 countries. www.iapco.org

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