

# From Live to Bite-Sized Programmes in Emerging Markets

For IAPCO, **Marcel Ewals**, MCI's Director of Association Solutions in APAC, discusses the challenges that associations face as they emerge from the pandemic and need to diversify their revenue streams, emphasizing the importance of digital engagement.

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The association industry is one of longstanding traditions. Some associations have been around for decades, some even for centuries, and therefore have seen the age of technology become an enabler changing the way associations interact and deal with members. Most have transitioned successfully from paper to paperless and have enhanced their style and means of communication. Slowly over the last few years associations have realized that there are important gaps between the way of communicating with and engaging the young generation. Some associations have deliberately brought younger members into strategic planning and future leader programs have become very popular.

A few years back association leaders started to talk about creating communities and the need to proactively engage the younger generation, whilst industry partners and exhibitors explained that marketing money was shifting to digital, and that more data was needed to justify live event spending.

Online communities sprung up to focus on online membership engagement and provide a new additional place for members to interact. Plans were made and committees were formed to address these.

Associations recognized that there were online communities appearing, mostly of a commercial nature, that started to threaten the association model as they provided a lot of value to our members, often free of charge! We saw the appearance of WebMD.com (known primarily as an online publisher of news and information pertaining to human health and well-being) and similar ones in many other sectors. But for the majority of associations the focus

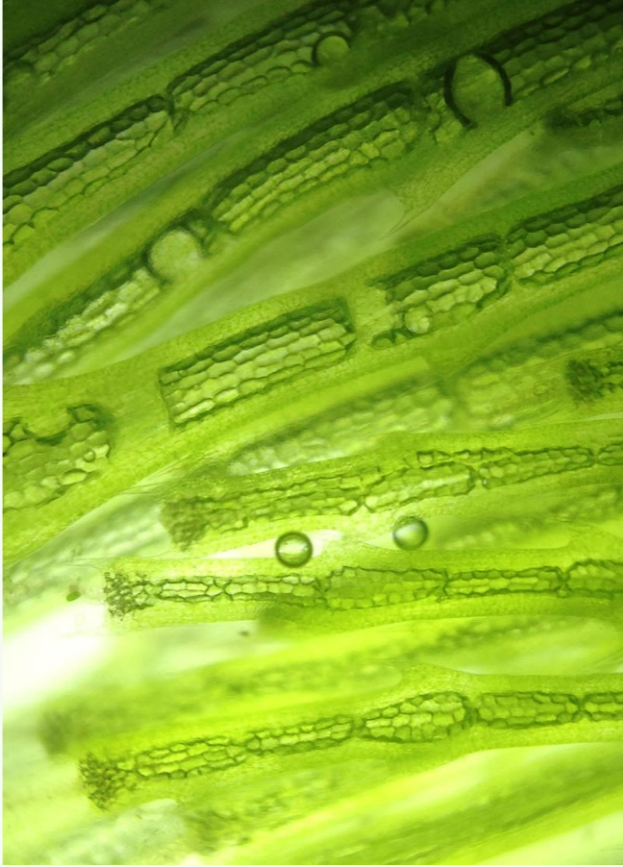
remained as always on the events, which, as per tradition, had been the steadfast annual member value and cash cow of the organization.

### DIVERSIFICATION OF REVENUES

As we all know, the pandemic put a halt to live event and impacted many organizations. Coming out of the pandemic, these associations need to be focused on diversification of revenues.

Let's start with an overview of the challenges that come with this to date.

- Live events are back! Associations need to focus on more than recovery, they need to embrace the new way of engaging and delivering value. Across the meetings and hospitality industries there was a loss of event talents, taking time and focus away from other aspects of association life.
- The marketplace has changed. New digital community platforms that were emerging pre-pandemic have strengthened and eaten part of the associations' pie.
- Industry sponsors started, out of sheer need during the pandemic, experimenting with their own activities. Now they want to retain the momentum and continue moving to live, free (sponsored) activities.
- A declining membership continues to pressure the budget and limit capacity.



With the above and more challenges, associations need to dive head on into making investments into transitioning the organization. On the positive side, digital acceptance has increased dramatically, as long as it is short and precise.

According to MCI's 2022 Association Engagement Index, a global benchmark study of 50+ associations across the world, we learn that members are asking for choice. Choice in communication, multiple channels and choice in engagement. The more choice the more engagement is increasing. It's all about the right channel for the right activity, often referred to as O2O2O - Online to Offline to Online... where the objective is that learning, conversations and engagement should continue 365/24/7 instead of only the traditional event - from start to finish.

### NECESSARY STEPS

With the above in mind associations can determine the necessary steps to achieve this. But before you conclude that the solution is technology, let's determine "how" the members want, to interact before the "what" question. What we know is that the digital attention span is set by the likes of TikTok, that we have about 7 seconds before a user decides if he/she wants to engage in

the content or not. We also know that the majority of content is consumed on mobile devices, and only a small group consumes information on work-based devices.

With the digital acceptance being at an all-time high, now is the time to utilize the digital content in your store rooms and recycle it to good use. It will require time and money to cut down to bite-sized bits to ensure retention of the viewers. One thing that the pandemic taught us is that our digital content needs to be TV Show quality. Short, fast and to the point. New content from live events can be structured in a way it can easily be converted to this.

As we then move to the monetization question, two big factors will need to be addressed. Will there be a major segment of the data openly accessible to the community, aside from members and, what data can we extract to back this up? As community engagement stretches beyond members, paid and/or free, so does the data and the value of the communities. The end game is to commercialize this community with quality data that justifies the advertisers investment. But as associations compete with the likes of Google, the data needs to be solid. A key way of covering the investment is to look at sponsors who will support the program rollout.

A good example on one of these strategies is a small, regional association that I manage, that rolled out several series of webinars post-pandemic, open for all, hosted on YouTube Live and then available for members for a period of time, before opening it up to the public. The content itself has 3 rounds of engagement: Live, members, then non-members before reaching its shelf life. Sponsors receive lasting value as the content becomes public domain whilst the association still earns as a YouTube partner. Building on the O2O2O concept, discussion groups are created to continue the topic discussion and plug further activities.

By focusing on the online engagement and the associated data, packaged properly for the sponsors to validate, you can create a substantial new revenue stream with existing content and new activities.

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