



Association models: Evolve or die

MCI Malaysia's **Shook Fung Yap** says traditional revenue streams no longer suffice, and diversification is necessary.

“The way forward is to explore building an open community of professional participation.”

In today's fast-changing economic environment, prime challenges faced by Asian associations are no different from their regional and international peers. Most associations are concerned with their ability to continue to meet members' needs in a meaningful way, and to ensure their own financial stability and sustainability through tough times.

Traditional revenue streams will no longer suffice and diversification is not only desirable, but necessary. More and more, associations will do well to take a leaf from the best practices of well-managed and successful private companies.

By definition, associations are founded on the membership of like-minded individuals who join to be informed, educated and supported by their professional community. With the digital revolution, online social networking platforms, and the accompanying free-and-fast information available, the notion of a 'closed membership organisation' is no longer the only option.

It's time to 'open up' and build a more encompassing professional community. Associations need to seek creative and innovative ways to increase membership 'conversion' rates. Staying true to your mission, or DNA, is crucial here. Regularly ask yourself: What do members want, and how do they want it? How does the association's current environment fulfil members' needs, and what more can be done? What are the boundaries, if any?

To appeal to potential new members, associations need to look into executing conferences, publications and courses in a more engaging and inclusive way for positive (and profitable) outcomes. The 'one size' no longer fits all. Associations need to wake up to the fact that members and prospective members have many options and choices now. Some relevant questions for today's associations are: Do you understand your eco-system? Do you listen to different stakeholders' needs? Do you know your competition? Do you know your value proposition?

Defining value; generating better non-dues revenue; embracing technology and capitalising on online events and services; employing the relevant skills and expertise; a sharing and inclusive attitude — all contribute towards deepening the relationship with members.

Ultimately, an association must remain relevant to its members at all times. And financial stability and sustainability is a large part of its responsibility to its members. The way forward is to explore building an open community of professional participation and, in keeping up with the changing environment, not to be afraid of embracing and adopting new revenue streams. ■

This article was provided by the International Association of Professional Congress Organisers (IAPCO). Author, Shook Fung Yap, has close to 20 years' experience as a PCO, and is the managing director of MCI Malaysia.