Associations are now driven to rethink their mission, purpose, values, and the means and speed with which they interact with their members, partners and benefactors. These organisations are compelled to find new ways to be sustainable and resilient in a world where everything is fast, and nothing is ever unique.

Words Gergana Tzvetova

As traditional income streams are eroded by this changing world, associations are searching for new business models. This article will explore the quest for non-dues revenue (NDR) sources. Because embracing progress means nothing less than breaking with old habits.

FUNDRAISING & DONATIONS

All successful fundraising initiatives start with a sound strategy, linking them closely with the association’s goals and mission, all whilst corresponding to the needs of members. Fundraisers could differ in type, duration or style, with fun runs, sports events, gala dinners, etc. being popular. These events could also take place virtually, opening them up to a wider audience beyond members and partners.

The different types of fundraising available stimulate creativity within the association and keep members interested. Meanwhile, if several causes are presented, the audience has higher chances to get engaged, as there are more options on what to support.

But there are risks too. Associations could lose their independence to donors’ wishes, while connection between the donor and the beneficiary could weaken if there is limited face-to-face interaction. Altogether, most donations will happen virtually, which will increase the number of supporters who will back initiatives, even with smaller amounts.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Despite criticisms targeting its trustworthiness and reliability, social media – when used responsibly and reasonably – could boost an association’s income. It is an excellent opportunity for an organisation to guarantee that its fundraising initiatives, campaigns, project updates and membership calls reach those that need to know right then and there.

We must remember that an organisation’s social media and overall online presence (website, electronic newsletters, etc.) is what welds together a community of members, partners, sponsors and policy-makers.

Social media campaigns generally come at no, or very low, cost and are relatively easy to design, implement, and monitor (so long as there is a specialist driving them). They also can reach a very high number of people and are especially appealing to younger audiences. At the same time, all risks usually associated with social media apply, especially the use (or misuse) of information, and online fraud.

In this context, associations will increasingly rely on NDR linked to social media. The demand for experts – those who know the nuts and bolts (and the darkest corners) of it – will increase even more as will the need to utilise social media’s power for increased revenues.

ONLINE EDUCATION

Offering specialised learning materials and resources, online courses and webinars, for a fee has become another way for associations to guarantee a steady revenue stream. Moreover, these organisations have a significant leverage over other providers of online courses due to their content credibility.

The value of an association’s online resources grows significantly when participants who complete the course receive additional credits, such as CME, that is relevant to healthcare professionals. Additional advantage can come when some or all materials are offered in
languages other than English and are addressing specific local needs.

In general, online education is attractive to members who cannot, for a variety of reasons, attend meetings, workshops and courses, and it will keep the association abreast of latest trends, research and development in the field, while creating numerous engagement opportunities through online discussion forums. But, it may, at the same time, lead to some decrease in participation of meetings and workshops, as members can choose to obtain the same content virtually.

As such, the popularity of this NDR source will continue to grow, as associations develop and provide teaching materials in as many languages as possible, to attract a larger audience and intrigue them with interactive formats.

DE-TRADITIONALISING DUES

Membership is still inextricably linked to the existence of associations. People understand that they need to support organisations to receive certain benefits. And they still want to connect and belong to something, maybe now more than ever.

But today everyone is simply too busy. This requires associations to progressively pursue the à la carte approach to membership. Giving members the freedom to uncover what they require at a specific stage of their career or life will be a good indicator of the flexibility of professional bodies and their readiness to adapt to the priorities, interests and needs of their members.

DE-TRADITIONALISING MEMBERSHIP

We could take this analysis one step further and call for associations to look beyond dues, finance, and money. They should strive to go back to the basics of non-profit associations—advocating causes and building communities of like-minded individuals.

Of course, to exist, all organisations must be financially sustainable. But should they not upgrade from preserving a specific number of members to keeping them all engaged?

Swamped by thousands of physical and virtual networks, both individuals and associations struggle to stay relevant. Maybe the main function of professional organisations of the future will be to help people find their way in the overburdened, hurried and chaotic reality in which we live and do business. Ultimately, this could mean guiding them to discover what they really need and, then, giving them exactly that—nothing more and nothing less.

ASSOCIATIONWORLD aims to build excellence in association business management. To do so, the foundation delivers accessible, affordable but premium education to association and non-profit professionals and their organizations.

The workshops are hands-on, tangible, impactful learning experiences, facilitated and guided by a multi-cultural professional faculty of globally experienced experts. In small groups of 15-25 like-minded peers, the aim is to maximize the experience and learning outcome of each participant.

For more information on engagement opportunities please contact Jenny at hello@associationworld.eu or visit www.associationworld.eu.