

March 2020

wpawlucy@associationoptions.com

Demonstrate Strength in Uncertain Times

Bill Pawlucy, CAE and Bob Harris, CAE

Now is the time to demonstrate strength, leadership and strategy. Members expect to hear confidence and solutions from their association.

Associations have always been resilient, during wars, recessions and crisis. Boards and staff should portray a positive, “can-do” attitude.

Position chief elected officer and executive director as primary, trusted communicators for the sector. Convey an authentic, reassuring message for members about steadfastness.

Avoid posting old news, fearing members will find more reliable sources elsewhere. Realize non-members and other stakeholders may be visiting the association page to search for news and solutions.

Use the strategic plan as a platform. Though it is a multi-year guide, focus attention on 2020 and how the leadership is making quick adjustments during uncertainty.

Appoint a task force to work virtually and collaborate online to identify and address immediate needs of 1) members and 2) the organization. For instance, less emphasis on summer conference and more focus on resources such as tech solutions, rumor control and support. Dues structures and billing cycles may have to be adjusted. Transmit a confident message.

As with all messaging, members may not read the details. Brief is better.

Create an infographic depicting the process for how the association is responding. Transition from a focus on long-term goals to immediate needs.

Repositioning

In a conversation with association leaders in mid-March they said, “We plan to use our strategic plan as the platform for survival. We’ll emerge as a stronger organization.”

Not all conversations have been so optimistic. Some fear they will not endure the crisis. “Our association has lost members and revenue. The situation puts us in a place where we may not regain relevance.”

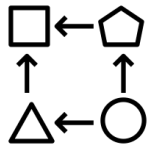
Many will dip into financial reserves, wishing they had a minimum amount of half their annual budget set aside for an emergency.

A few organizations still rest on history. Their website still boasts of being founded 50 or 100 years ago. Now more than ever members will be asking about association value. Remember what happened to some of America's best-known institutions such as Oldsmobile, Sears, Boy Scouts of America and Ringling Brothers Circus.

Guidance

In organization conversations, four principles were suggested:

Adapt – Maintain relevance by being responsive to members. Do business differently.



Use technology and social media to conduct meetings, provide critical updates and deliver services.

Adapting to meet member needs is a non-negotiable item. How we serve members *now* will be remembered when it is time for dues renewals.

Some organizations will have to adapt their dues model. Offering waivers for hardships, accepting staggered payments and other changes.

Communicate – Associations are the trusted partners to members. Messages should communicate empathy and understanding. Nobody knows the business sector better than you; step up to the plate.



How strong is your message and can you stay ahead of the curve? Members will find other news sources if the association is repeating old news or sounding weak. Check the strength of your messaging and reset it if necessary.

Start on-line discussion groups. Provide forums in which members can share experiences, ask questions and receive survival information.

Position the officers and staff as accessible experts and solution solvers. Tell members about new ways to reach the leadership team if the office is closed.

Lead – Portray the board and staff as trusted leaders. Communicate how the leadership is addressing challenges. Convey confidence.



Some associations are known to be slow at responding to market conditions. Now is the time to be decisive.

The leadership should be listening to members' concerns. Task directors with monitoring and reporting developments to the association. Ask task forces to develop innovative solutions.

Identify the leaders on the website, members want to know *who* is driving recovery. Plan to convene leaders frequently (through technology) to agree on deployment of

resources and immediate needs. Facilitate opportunities to receive member input; don't leave them in the cold wondering what their association is doing.

Strategize – Make changes to the strategic plan that address immediate needs and priorities. What programs, revenue and expenses need to be adjusted to remain relevant?



If the plan is full of fluff, hard to read, or a dozen pages, reformat to be an easy read for members. Let the strategic plan speak for itself with an easy to understand message from the association. Revise performance measures and realign committees to address the situation.

Strategize now to position the organization for a new environment. Redeploy teams, make internal adjustments, take a realistic approach to the immediate future.

Doing nothing is not an option.

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Note: Bill Pawlucy, CAE, is President at www.associationoptions.com. Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.