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INDUSTRY TRENDS
**SUSTAINABLE MARKETING FOR
LONG-TERM REVENUE GROWTH**

Sustainable Marketing for Long-term Revenue Growth

Written by the Association Laboratory

Two of the most common challenges facing association executives today include:

- A rapidly changing environment that demands increased responsiveness from associations.
- The increased sophistication and expectations of volunteers who, in turn, demand increased results.

Never has there been a more exciting chance for association executives to demonstrate their value to volunteers and members. Unfortunately, seldom do they have the tools or training needed to succeed on such a broad front. By developing a marketing organization and creating sustainable marketing as a process, association executives can create mechanisms that allow both organizations and staff to adjust to changing needs and expectations.

What is sustainable marketing?

Sustainable marketing is the process by which an organization supports the identification, evaluation and satisfaction of member needs on a continual basis. It is process-based not task-based, an operational focus not a programmatic focus.

Problem diagnosis

The first step in crafting a solution is to determine the state of the problem. Three questions need to be answered:

- Do I have a problem?
- What is the extent of my problem?
- What information do I need to craft a solution?

Most associations have, over the years, created a complex mix of services, products and programs. This complexity makes it difficult to recognize you have a marketing problem. Without understanding the nature and scope of your problem, crafting effective solutions is difficult.

Common Symptoms

The following are some common symptoms of a marketing problem:

- Negative trends in membership retention
- Negative trends in new membership
- Decreasing ability to recruit volunteers
- Static programs with little change every year
- Lack of turnover in key volunteer leadership positions

If any, or all, of these are present in your association, you have a marketing problem.

Once you have determined that a problem exists, it's necessary to determine the scope or size of your marketing problem. Marketing problems can either be systemic or programmatic. A systemic marketing problem is a matter of survival for the organization. This type of problem indicates that the basic relationship that creates meaning and value between the organization and the member is at risk. A systemic marketing problem may reflect broad shifts in the basic needs of the membership, demographics of potential members or fundamental changes in the dynamics of an industry. A programmatic marketing problem involves just one program, or component of the association's many products and services. In this instance, poor performance does not necessarily threaten the survival of the organization. By identifying whether you have a systemic or programmatic marketing problem, you can prioritize how to respond.

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Marketing research

Marketing research is perhaps the most frequently misused tool in the association marketing tool kit. Many executives are unfamiliar with the techniques of this vital function. In order to place this problem in perspective, consider some of the Do's and Don'ts recently outlined in a marketing textbook, *The Successful Marketing Plan*, authored by Roman Hiebling, Jr. and Scott Cooper.

Do...

- Assess the risk factor of not conducting research
- Always conduct research when the cost of execution is high
- Match the research technique with the type of information you want to obtain

Don't...

- Implement research if you plan on pursuing a set path no matter what the research results say
- Use research as the only means of developing options
- Try a new initiative in all markets at the same time
- Implement the test yourself unless you're willing to deal with the consequences; use professionals

Marketing strategy

Your strategy is the guiding direction to your marketing efforts. It is a clear, concise statement identifying how a specific marketing objective will be achieved. This is vital to focusing your resources and making sure you and other members of your staff keep their eye on the ball. An association without a guiding strategy eventually comes to resemble a Christmas tree. The result is a large collection of unrelated programs and services with no definite link or connection to each other or the purpose of the organization. The development of a guiding strategy consists of two steps, namely positioning and marketing strategy.

Positioning involves creating the desired perception of your association within your membership relative to the competition. Anything that prevents your potential member from interacting with, or participating in, your association is competition. Positioning allows you to establish a reference point in the minds of your potential members in order to help them understand and remember what is being communicated.

A marketing strategy is a statement detailing how an individual marketing objective will be achieved. The marketing strategy is descriptive. It provides a guiding direction to all activities. To develop a marketing strategy, review your organization problems and opportunities, target market, marketing objectives and your positioning strategy. It is very possible that you will create multiple marketing strategies, but remember to take sufficient time in their development and prioritization because they will guide all subsequent activities.

Marketing execution

Define your organization's current status. As a result of your market research activities, you should have a clear understanding of your current financial and marketing status. You should be able to define your current membership profile, highlight trends in membership growth and retention, and understand the financial history of your existing activities.

Define your organization's objectives. Using realistic assessments of market potential and association capabilities, establish end goals for your marketing program. This goal establishment provides a target by which to measure the success of your program. It allows you to identify whether or not your marketing plan is succeeding so that you can alter your activities as needed.

Identify tasks. What are the major steps that need to be accomplished?

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Identify the timeframe. Without a realistic timeframe, your marketing project is doomed to failure. In their book, *Project Management for Dummies*, authors Sunny and Kim Baker outlined the following five-step process:

- Establish your scheduling assumptions.
- Estimate the amount of effort and the duration of each task.
- Determine your calendar dates and establish a master schedule.
- Adjust your resources and task interdependencies to optimize the schedule.
- Chart the final schedule.
- Share this schedule with both staff and volunteers involved in the project. It will help you communicate the information necessary for everyone to remain involved and committed to success.

Assign responsibility. Review the major tasks necessary to achieve your marketing objectives. Assign these tasks to the volunteers and staff responsible. Allow every one to review the entire plan so that each individual involved is familiar with the overall strategy and end goals. Work with each individual to identify interim measurements that will allow you to track success. This gives you the information necessary to make strategic or tactical changes.

Sustainable marketing

In order to maintain your successful marketing activities over the long-term, you must integrate the research, strategy and execution phases into your daily operations. The collection of useful data and the use of this data to create or alter existing programs must be automatic. It must be able to survive changes in staff and changes in leadership. There are several components of a sustainable marketing environment. A sustainable marketing program must implement a marketing information system. This system is designed to get the right information to the right people, in a format that they can understand. Identify and prioritize which data stream is most important and useful to you in decisionmaking.

The association must have a clear understanding of the key processes that impact the perception of your members when they interact with your organization. Your members interact with your organization in many different ways. Consider some of the following:

- Dues payment
- Conference registration
- Submission of abstracts
- Request to participate as a volunteer

Identify the key steps in this process and attempt to make this interaction more convenient and pleasant for your members. Your staff must have the necessary tools to effectively analyze information and execute changes in either strategy or tactics. Ask your staff if they have the tools necessary to do the job effectively. Consider the creation of templates or other documentation. Your staff must have the necessary knowledge base to evaluate information, make decisions, and act as a coordinated team. Association staff members enter the profession from many different industries. As a result, there is no common educational or experience base.

Essentially, you or your staff may lack basic fundamental knowledge necessary to understand and execute sustained marketing activities. Common tools to address this problem include the following:

- Seminars or related training
- Facilitated sessions designed to bridge educational gaps and build consensus
- Customized leadership training on specific topics

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Each of these tools is designed to help your staff understand and adapt to a marketing driven environment. Sustainable marketing is a revolutionary concept for most associations. Traditionally, not-for-profit organizations act as bureaucracies. Staff and leadership create a pyramidal structure of departments and titles that react to changes in the environment only when the impact of those changes is severe.

Visionary executives will attempt to create a pro-aucracy. These are organizations that create opportunities instead of reacting to environmental change. It is a long-term perspective on delivering true and consistent value to the membership. The key to creating a pro-aucracy is to understand, develop and remain committed to a sustainable marketing process for your association.

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About the Author

Association Laboratory is a national consulting firm that specializes in the research and development of marketing and organizational strategy, including professional development, for associations.

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