

Overcoming Adversity – Ten Tips for Association Leaders

Practical advice for association staff and volunteer leaders

By Donna Cameron, CAE, President, Melby, Cameron & Anderson

The world of non-profit trade and professional associations is no different than any other field in its concern about how the current economic maelstrom will play out for organizations. There is plenty of evidence that key association factors, such as membership, meeting and conference attendance, tradeshow, and sponsorships are all significantly down. Associations are reporting double-digit percentage reductions in key revenue areas, with far more dire declines among associations representing the hardest hit industry segments (e.g., mortgage brokers, home builders, financial industry...). There, the tsunami experienced by members has spread to their associations—leaving them wobbly and wounded.

Unless your association represents the few industries that flourish in recessionary times—shoe repair businesses, pawn shops, bankruptcy attorneys—you're probably experiencing some sleeplessness and palpitations as you worry about an uncertain future.

Add to this a growing distrust of business and financial institutions and the shell-shock of watching 401Ks, IRAs, and pension funds tank, home values drop, and plans for comfortable retirement fade like the Cheshire Cat. The grin that remains offers little amusement and less reassurance.

Among the natural first reactions to having the rug pulled out from under us are anger, fear, and finger-pointing. And we're seeing plenty of these all around us. While they may be mildly cathartic initially, these behaviors tend to compound the problem if we don't move beyond them fairly quickly. Here are ten tips for association leaders—staff and volunteer leaders—to help you navigate rough waters, keep your organization solid and solvent, and help your members weather tough times:

1. Look for the Opportunities

We've probably all heard that the Chinese word for crisis, pronounced "way-gee," is made up of two separate characters, the first representing "danger," and the second meaning "opportunity." Association leaders would do well to remember this, and to use these times of crisis to seek opportunity in all its guises. Business guru Peter Drucker taught that opportunity is lurking everywhere—we just need to become skilled in recognizing it and then capitalizing on it.

If membership is down because companies in your industry are cutting back on professional memberships for their employees, or if your members are losing their jobs, think about what your association can do to support them—job banks, reduced or waived dues for those who have lost their jobs, career counseling. Invite these people to become more active volunteers during their job search—your association will benefit from their time, energy and efforts, and they will benefit by maintaining crucial connections with peers and potential employers.

If you've been heavily reliant on just a few key revenue streams (e.g., dues, meetings, sponsorships), it's time to look for ways to diversify. Pull together a dozen of your most forward-thinking members—young and old—and have a brainstorming session on alternative revenue sources. Not only will you come out of this meeting with some great ideas, you'll have twelve industry leaders more committed than ever to your success.

Instead of bemoaning the decline in exhibit sales at your industry trade show, look for creative ways to increase the value of the show to those who do sign up. Create an on-line trade show and offer them special placement and links. Promote one-on-one experiences that connect vendor and customer. Increase their visibility so they will be the first to sign up for next year's show, and the first to tell absent colleagues what an *opportunity* they missed.

2. Be Mission Critical

Take this time to evaluate everything your association does and make sure it supports the organization's mission and its members. Are there sacred cows or pet projects that you've been maintaining because "we've always done it," or "the past presidents would have a fit if we stop holding this meeting." If the programs and services aren't serving your members, supporting your mission, or bringing in funds that will help you do those two things, then it's high-time to barbecue those sacred cows.

3. Make the Hard Decisions ... But Not the Dumb Ones

Over the last few months, I've spoken to numerous elected leaders of associations who are "shopping" for someone who will spare their association the pain of this economic environment. They're seeing membership and meeting attendance decline, perhaps the value of their invested reserves has dropped, and they're thinking "if we just replace our executive director or replace our management company," all this will turn around and the sun will shine on us once again. *Balderdash!* If your staff has been doing a good job for you, and working effectively in partnership with the board, committees, and volunteers, you need to trust that they will continue to give their all on your behalf. Replacing staff won't magically make the economy better and fix the job market, any more than it will in your company or the business down the street. What a replacement would likely do is set you back at least six months, as your new executive director or management team transitions in and climbs the learning curve.

Now, this doesn't mean that as you face budget shortfalls and membership declines you may not need to make some tough decisions, including staff reductions. If you're cutting or consolidating programs, the staff who worked on those programs may no longer be justified. Perhaps you'll see that some projects you've always done "in-house" can be outsourced effectively and economically. Just make sure that the staffing decisions you make are strategic and well-thought-out, not knee-jerk reactions to economic factors you cannot change.

4. Increase Contact with Members

Your members are feeling the effects of the economy. They're worried about whether they'll still have a job next month, they're worried about keeping their homes, and

they're looking for support. They may belong to more than one association that serves their industry or profession, and their loyalty and continued membership will go to the one(s) that help them through these challenging times. Look at how you can increase your communications with members—special interest group listservs, on-line chat rooms, blogs, social networking, monthly call-in conversations with association leadership, no-cost or low-cost regional meetings for young professionals or members with shared interests. Now, more than ever, you need to keep your members connected and engaged, and show them the value of their membership in advancing their careers. The investment you make in serving and communicating with your members now will pay off in loyalty and participation for years to come.

Remember, too, that most of your members are unlike the folks who sit around your board table. They may be younger, newer to their profession, they may look for different benefits from their association, and have different expectations about communication and meeting formats. Be sure to show them that you can understand and serve their needs as well as you do the “good ol’ boys.”

Increasing communication extends to staff, as well. Don't keep them in the dark about how the association is faring. Ask for their revenue-generating and cost-saving ideas, and make them feel like full partners in keeping the association healthy.

5. Avoid Isolation

For many people, the response to challenging times—layoffs, declining business, financial challenges—is to hunker down. Work harder. Work longer. Go home and curl on the couch where you feel safe. Sometimes the answer is to stretch beyond your comfort zone, and we know that trade or professional associations are among the best places to do that. Individuals and companies that cut professional memberships and industry meetings from their budgets in an attempt to save money are likely cutting a lot more than they realize. Attending professional conferences and monthly meetings of industry trade groups is how people stay connected—it's where they hear how other companies are navigating the recession, it's how individuals develop professionally so they provide value to their company, it's where they may learn of job opportunities if the worst has already happened or appears to be on the horizon.

Associations would be wise to look for creative ways to assure the affordability and value of attending meetings: discounts for multiple attendees from the same organization, reduced fees for unemployed members and students. As ambassadors for the association, volunteer leaders (board officers/directors, committee chairs/members) have the responsibility of promoting membership, urging retention, and helping to make participation an enjoyable and worthwhile experience.

6. Maintain Trust

A culture of trust is the basis of a strong association. If there is trust, you can have the difficult conversations, and make the tough decisions, all the while knowing that it's right even if it is hard. In an organization where low trust prevails, you find hidden agendas and interpersonal conflict: progress crawls. In a culture of high trust, transparency

thrives, communication is effective, win-win decisions are sought: progress is swift and measurable.

A wise colleague once suggested that every meeting be opened with the agreement that “*we assume one another’s good intent.*” Amen to that. If we trust the motives and intent of our colleagues around the board table, if volunteers trust staff and staff trust volunteers, the work we do will be honorable, and the decisions we make will come faster and better. Of course, this good advice extends beyond associations to every interaction among humans. Trust doesn’t come automatically; it has to be proven and earned. As Warren Buffet wisely stated, “*It takes 20 years to build a reputation, and 5 minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.*” Think about the level of trust that exists in your association and what you can do to enhance it ... starting today.

7. No Surprises

It’s an extension of trust that association members should not be surprised by news about their association. Keep the channels of communication wide open and flowing in every direction. Members know these are challenging times. They’re seeing their own businesses make cut-backs and lay-offs. They’re seeing budgets trimmed, and programs eliminated. If the association is having to make similar hard choices, let your members know. Invite their input, share the board’s reasoning, listen—really listen—to their concerns and their ideas. They may see something you don’t. Involve everybody. Likewise, at the board level, don’t save up the bad news for board meetings. Communicate lavishly between meetings. Share the bad news and the good news; offer data, forecasts, and options to be considered. Keep leaders apprised of what’s happening and what it means for the association. Save the surprises for birthdays or awards.

8. Reinvent Yourself

Going back to the original idea of seeking opportunities in every challenge, these are ideal times for organizations to reinvent themselves. If you have a cumbersome governance structure that doesn’t allow you to make quick decisions or alter your course as circumstances change, this is the time to take a hard look at your structure and eliminate processes, policies, or layers of bureaucracy that are slowing you down. If your traditional focus is narrow, think about whether you should be broadening it to expand your market and include emerging or related fields. If you’ve been doing everything face-to-face, look at on-line options that may allow you to do more—and reach more people—with less. What about partnerships or alliances with other organizations in related fields, where you each share what you do best? Nobody ever said you had to go it alone. Anything you do *because you’ve always done it that way* should be examined. Human nature is such that we rarely see the need for change when everything is going smoothly. So, look at these tumultuous times as a gift that offers us the chance to make needed changes ... to our organizations and to ourselves.

9. Maintain Optimism

While it might sound like Pollyanna, the fact is that we usually create our own reality. If we expect the worst, the worst will find us. If we look for what’s right, for what we

need—whether it’s a solution or just the right person at the right time—that’s what we’re likely to recognize as it approaches us. One of the best gifts you can give your organization is to create a culture of positive people looking for positive outcomes. It takes practice, but it reaps substantial rewards.

10. Remember Why You’re Here

Your association has a mission and distinct purposes. That’s why it was formed. That’s why the IRS granted you not-for-profit status. Whether you represent health care professionals, construction industry trades, business professionals, attorneys, retail businesses, community services, or the myriad other trades or professions associations serve, you have a constituency of members. As you make decisions, you need continually to be asking if you are best serving your members, the industry they work in, and the public they serve. Effective association leaders within vibrant organizations will always answer with a resounding, “Yes!”

Indeed, these are challenging times for associations. The world we’re operating in is very different than it was just a year ago. How we respond will determine the futures of the industries, professions, and people we represent. Having worked with associations, association professionals, and volunteer leaders for more than 25 years, I have no doubt that we’re up for the challenge.

Donna Cameron, CAE, is President of Melby, Cameron & Anderson, an association management company based in Edmonds, Washington. She welcomes your comments and questions. You can reach her at 425.774.7479 or donna@mcamgmt.com.