



Reinventing Your Way to Relevance

A Playbook for Associations

Introduction

The pace of change is only accelerating, and all the events of 2020 have thrown many associations and nonprofits into confusion and chaos.

It's time to change, and turn your association into a finely-tuned, agile, and flexible organization that can respond better to the challenges posed by COVID, the economy, and the new generation's needs and wants.

We are at a time in history in which organizations can reinvent themselves and ride the wave of new technologies, or slowly become obsolete and forgotten, replaced by those with ambition and smarts.

Your association deserves a good fighting chance. Read on to discover how you can stay relevant, survive, and even thrive in these complicated times.

Digital Transformation for Associations

Many associations are run in a traditional fashion because they have been working for a long time and haven't seen a need to change, or because of a conservative board of trustees with older members who like and trust the old ways of doing things. If the business processes aren't broken, why fix them, right?

However, this year's health crisis and subsequent financial situation have thrown a big spanner in the works of many an association, whose well-laid plans are now moot and useless, and whose entire way of working, products, and services (meetings, seminars, events) have ground to a halt because of social distancing.

It breaks our hearts to see successful professional associations, with large numbers of members and a great - albeit old fashioned - business model, suffering right now because they lack the technology and tools to respond to the times. And many managers come to us asking for help and ideas to help them persuade the board to adopt more technological solutions to be able to continue providing value to their members and raising funds for their cause.

Do you know what this time calls for?

It calls for a digital transformation.

A digital transformation is much more than using software, technology, and "the internets" - a digital transformation requires a change of mindset and a change in the culture of an association. And a digital transformation is not a fad or a newfangled theory - digital transformation strategies are vital to the survival and success of your professional organization during this crisis and going forward.

Let's start from the top: What is a digital transformation?

What is digital transformation?

Digital transformation initiatives aim to integrate digital business, cloud computing, and technology in general into all areas of a business, through a two-pronged approach:

- Bring the business into the digital age by integrating digital technology and automation into all key roles and aspects of the business: customer experience, supply chain, membership, relationships, etc.
- Change the culture from within, transforming a professional society or association into an organization of independent thinkers who are constantly experimenting, thinking outside the box, and who are comfortable with failure as a path to success.

Digital technology for associations

The technology part doesn't have to be terrifyingly advanced - big data, machine learning, digital twins, and artificial intelligence can wait. However, consider digital applications that make your work more efficient and serve your members better in the short and long term, such as:

- Automating membership and renewal processes
- Making your sales more efficient with an online store
- Offering online courses, webinars, and events
- Digitizing your bookkeeping and HR management

These are just basic applications of technology that are already being used by many national professional associations, and if you think about it for a bit there are really no excuses for clinging to spreadsheets, pen, and paper when you could be working much more efficiently:

- There is absolutely no reason why a member of your staff should spend hours sending renewal reminders by mail, one by one, when there are systems that can do it automatically.
- There is no reason why you should stop all your events, conferences, and courses for the year when you can be delivering them over video conference.
- There is no reason for you to miss out on merchandise sales because you cannot open your office or brick-and-mortar store, when you could be selling online 24-7 to customers all over the world.

Culture transformation

The culture shift is just as important as adopting new technologies. Times have changed, and the COVID-19 crisis has accelerated and put this change in evidence, with the way everyone was suddenly forced to start doing business online.

You cannot force a digital transformation onto an association without ensuring you have buy-in from all relevant parties, from the board to the volunteers (who will probably be the most excited out of the entire organization!) You must really sell the idea that your association has better chances of success if it's leaner, faster, more agile - convince the team that automation is not their enemy, but a friend who will free their time so they can focus on more important tasks instead of pencil-pushing.

There will be resistance within your organization - there always is. Expert consultants agree that there are **three personality types** or groups of employees that either fight changes outright or drag their feet in a passive-aggressive fashion; in both cases slowing the momentum of transformation. Do not ignore them. Target them individually and bring them over to your point of view.

Old-schoolers

Older employees are likely to pooh-pooh your efforts at digital transformation, dismissing them as just another fad and refusing to get on board. They have been in the workforce for a long time, trust their experience and instinct, and are often unwilling to face the discomfort of learning new technologies for fear of failing and “losing face.”

While there are many young people joining the workforce every year, studies show that employees 65 and over are actually the **fastest-growing demographic** in the workplace.

Consider that this is not just a large group of team members - they also have lots of experience, knowledge, and skill, and many are likely to hold high-ranking positions in the organization. Instead of making them feel forced to adopt technology, left out of discussions, or even ignored, take the time for one-on-one talks and make the learning and adoption process simpler and private, so they can see the benefits for themselves and learn to use the new technologies without “losing face”.

Structured workers

There is an easily identifiable group of employees who thrive in a highly structured environment, with a clear chain of command, defined tasks, and sets of processes. This group is different from the previous one, since age is not what defines them, but rather their personality and preferences.

Keep in mind that while you and many of your employees enjoy a less structured environment, with more opportunities for taking risks and experimentation, other colleagues are more risk-averse and want to do a predictable, structured job in which the goalposts don't move and they know precisely how to excel.

Approach these teammates with a less threatening panorama, reminding them that the goals of the organization are the same, and clarifying how performance will be evaluated. Hopefully, they will find a new structure within the digital system and be able to resume working in a way that feels safe and predictable to them.

Introverts

The more interactive nature of a digital enterprise can be too high-touch and draining for someone who just wants to do their job without so many meetings, conversations, and “let's circle back” emails. And these team members may quietly fall through the cracks, since their mute resistance or lack of engagement will be silent and tend to go unnoticed.

It is important to keep all members of your team involved, regardless of their personality or even better, according to their personality. Do not enforce mandatory stand-up meetings or catch-ups - instead, consider other ways in which the team may communicate with one another with less personal interaction. Project management software? An online document that everyone can update and consult?

Diversity makes organizations better and more powerful, stimulates growth and creativity, and is generally a great thing. Cater to it by approaching your employees in the way that suits each of them best, so they can shine and give their all to the association.

How Associations Can Stay Relevant & In Touch

Business-as-usual isn't going to help your association grow and prosper. Things just aren't the same as they were even six months ago. The global pandemic just accelerated something that was already happening: it's a digital world and the rules of member engagement for associations have changed irrevocably.

Don't worry – enSYNC has the technology you need to support your mission, and your bottom line, today and for decades to come.

Are You the Blockbuster Video of the Association World?

Remember Blockbuster? From 1999 to 2010 they dominated the home video market. They had over 9,000 stores at their peak. Now, there's only one. Just one. In Bend, Oregon.

The same things that took down Blockbuster threaten your organization.

Some companies that rented movies saw the writing on the wall and evolved: Netflix went from renting videos to a multi-billion dollar streaming company, while still offering DVDs for those who aren't able to stream content.

And what about Redbox? They offer DVDs at kiosks, but they also offer a streaming service called Redbox On Demand.

People get what they want, what's relevant for them when they want it.

It's obvious, just from these three examples (and there are many more) that you can't keep doing things the same way just because "that's the way you've always done it". Member engagement for association strategies must be nimble and must respond to the current market conditions.

How learningSYNC Can Help Move You into the Now and Secure Your Future

It's not too late, but it's important to act quickly. In today's world, it's all about data and using it to foster long-term relationships and engagement, mostly through mobile.

Take Analytics from Your Virtual Event into your AMS through learningSYNC

You're holding virtual events now because of a global pandemic, and that is probably the "new normal." Are you wasting a valuable opportunity to gather data about your members and your event offerings? Did you know that you can gather important engagement data during events?

This data includes:

- Which members are talking to whom during the online event?
- Which courses are members taking?
- Which speaker sessions are being left before they're finished?

You can take your data, gathered by learningSYNC, and analyze it via missionSYNC or another AMS, then take it right into memberSYNC to better serve your members the way they want to be served, with the content that they want and need.

It Should Never be "One-and-Done." Don't Make Yourself Easy to Forget

So members attended your online event. What now? What can you do to keep current members engaged year-round, keep them, and attract new, younger members to improve not only your offerings but your entire organization? Oh, and of course, your bottom line.

Instead of one large event, think about a number of smaller events, spread throughout the year.

You're used to having one big event a year with a big push that brings in the money. But what happens then? And what do you really know about your attendees? You might have a survey, but that doesn't give you all the information you need to keep them engaged and happy, and to ensure renewing members or to attract new members.

By collecting data, you'll inform your future events – whether online or in-person – to attract current members, who will then message their friends and co-workers during the event, who will be so engaged that they'll attend your next event and the next one... You can see where this is going, can't you? Those word-of-mouth new members are more valuable than gold.

You Need a New Business Model

It's a reality. Your current members aren't going to be here forever. To attract the new, younger members you need, you must change the way you think about attracting members and increasing engagement.

We know it can be difficult, but your mission's future depends on you using the technology that supports it, and at enSYNC, we're more than tech support. We're mission support, and we're here to help you conquer any challenge.

Here are some quick ideas to get you started:

- Try a hybrid approach. Host some events in-person and others online. Be sure to publicize the online events, and send regular, scheduled emails reminding members of the events and teasing the content to keep them engaged.
- Create an online portal where members can view past events. Be sure to have a way that they can engage and share with other members, and collect even more data.
- Move more learning online. Be sure to make it **an engaging experience**.

Don't Be Like Blockbuster

We'd hate to search for you online only to find that you have six members left, your advocacy voice has been silenced and you're shutting down. You must stay relevant to your members, and data is the only way you're going to do it. Don't waste any more time, and start evolving!

Transitioning to Online Member Engagement for Associations

The COVID pandemic has thrown a big spanner in the works of many an association and non-profit. After years of running on a tried and tested system, all meetings were brought to a halt and associations had to find alternative ways to keep members engaged and participating... and very importantly, also contributing financially.

Problems can always be turned into opportunities, and this is the perfect opportunity for you to start taking advantage of the many powerful digital tools available for expanding and deepening your organization's relationship with your members.

Online communities in the United States and abroad have proven to be fiercely loyal, highly engaged, and motivated, and have even been mobilized to achieve great results.

A silly example would be the fact that fans of Sonic the Hedgehog persuaded a film studio to redesign the characters for an upcoming film.

A more serious example can be found in the many cases in which powerful people have been brought to justice after massive online movements and petitions.

Before you start your migration to an online model, make sure to do the following:

- Ensure your organization's goals are up to date and crystal clear
- Get all your stakeholders on board and clarify everyone's roles
- Make a list of your priorities

With your basics clear, it's time to start transitioning your member base into an online community.

Communication is key

When you transition online, some of your loyal members may be cautious at first, and feel they are missing out on personal connection and communication both with you and fellow members. Show them all the ways in which social media and other online engagements can actually work towards improving member contact and engagement.

For example, many membership organizations have private Facebook groups, in which they share information and make announcements, but also allow the members to start discussions on shared interests and “build community”.

Some popular platforms to encourage member engagement are:

- Facebook or other platforms, where your members are already spending time, that allow for discussion forums, member interaction, and collaboration.
- Zoom or another web conferencing technology, where you can host meetings, deliver training, and discuss and debate in real-time with your community. An added plus of this is that you can record the sessions and make them available on-demand to members, or even use them to recruit new members through training. These online training videos might even become a new source of revenue.
- A blog can also be an excellent way to create content and attract new members while keeping current members engaged with quality content. A good blog post will spark discussion and debate, which you can then take to any of the platforms mentioned above.

Remember your members can also contribute with any of these methods, by creating content, writing blogs, and even delivering lessons themselves.

Interact and learn

Technology has forced us to define engagement, teaching, and learning all over again. Forget about a blackboard and print-outs - online learning experiences are fully interactive, and can even feel like a game. Learning can be a lot of fun for everyone involved!

For example, these are just a few of the methods used by online learning tools to keep learners engaged and excited about their progress, which you can also apply to a lively online community to encourage interaction:

- Progress markers like badges or visual representations of a path traveled.
- Healthy competition can be encouraged via leaderboards and awards, which are virtual and cost nothing to issue, yet provide great satisfaction to users. Issue awards for answering other members' questions, creating new content, attending live sessions, and more.
- Certificates of completion for various lessons and courses, which can be displayed as badges, making it easy for you to know each member's progress.

Make it personal

For large enough organizations it can be challenging, if not impossible, to keep an eye on every individual member's attendance, engagement, and desire to renew their membership. Technology makes it super easy to not only have insight into these aspects, but also to use them to personalize your interactions with members depending on their preferences, personality, and history with your association.

Leverage the tools at your hand to send personalized messages and guide members through their journey. Some ways in which you can do this are:

- Automating chat responses to deal with the most frequent questions, and using the questions asked to glean info you can use to better serve your members.
- Setting up automated emails and messages when members reach a certain stage, or when they haven't interacted in a while, or when their membership renewal is approaching. By directly addressing them at important moments, you help them move along the path to progress.
- Setting up alerts to help you determine which topics are more important to your members, whether anything is a hot topic that requires your attention, and which videos or lessons are more or less popular with which crowd.

Keep your options open

One of the most beautiful things about working online is how flexible everything is. An online member engagement plan does not have to be a one-size-fits-all affair - you can tweak, adjust, and tailor the many available options to keep your members happy and active.

If something doesn't work, it's quick and easy to roll it back and test something else without worrying about a venue, catering, mailing flyers, or any of the other concerns you used to have when you were engaging members offline.

Your members don't like social media? Try sending an email newsletter. They don't respond to video conferencing? Try a podcast!

Embrace all the possibilities that online tools have to offer you, your organization, and most importantly, your members. Don't be afraid to change your strategies if they are not giving you the results you want, and double down on the ones that resonate with your members and attract new ones.

Moving into an online setting can only help improve and increase your members' participation and engagement if you use the many tools available to you. You must navigate the technology so you can focus on your loyal members and achieving your and their goals.

Conclusion

Your board of directors may have pooh-pooed software solutions before, complaining that they're automated and impersonal. However, technology is the opposite of "cold and impersonal" - in fact, social media and similar technologies help people connect more and better than ever before.

Your organization will need a profound transformation - some might even say evolution - to adapt to the times and attract and engage new members. Your mission is worth it, your members deserve it, your organization has to make it through this crisis and come out stronger and better equipped.

We hope this ebook helps you get the buy-ins you need to start moving your organization forward. May this crisis turn into a lot of opportunity for your organization, contact us if you need help getting equipped to take advantage of all of it!

Let's Talk!



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