

Belinda Moore | Membership is Dead?

A number of powerful generational, cultural and economic forces are colliding to create a perfect storm that will make the next 5-20 years some of the toughest ever faced by associations. Associations who don't adapt face a slow decline into obscurity as they are replaced by newer, more innovative, less bureaucratically challenged, less change resistant competitors. While the idea of membership will continue, the antiquated models of recruiting, retaining and engaging members cannot survive in an increasingly challenging and ever-changing operating environment.

Are younger members joining your association and then leaving after a year or two? Or not joining at all? Are you struggling to get people to your events? Are you battling to recruit quality volunteers? Is your board full of men aged over 50? Are competitive organisations forming around you?

These are the stirrings of the "perfect storm" of generational, cultural and economic forces that are combining to challenge the way associations operate.

Association leaders need to effectively position themselves to deal with these challenges and take advantage of the opportunities they bring.

Following are some of the major issues that association leaders should be addressing now for the future success of their associations:

Baby Boomers are retiring

Baby Boomers started their adult lives determined to change the world and they have certainly done so. During their working lives they have been the most likely to join, the most likely to renew, and the most likely to volunteer with associations.

Perhaps more importantly, they are more likely to join an association with the understanding they will need to work to assist the association to achieve its goals.

The fact that Baby Boomers are generally willing to contribute their time and expertise to develop the associations they choose to join strongly contributed to the rise in the number and strength of member based organisations from the 1970s onwards.

2011 represented the start of a big change for many associations. This was the year that the first Baby Boomers turned 65 and started to retire. By 2029 most Baby Boomers will be retired. By 2034, the last of the boomers will be 70 and you will have very few members of this generation left as members.

It will not be long before the membership - and leadership - of every association will consist almost entirely of people from Generation X and Y.

As Sarah Sladek discusses in her book, *The End of Membership As We Know It*, the departure of the Baby Boomers from the workforce heralds a massive change for associations as they can no longer rely on these active, engaged and supportive Baby Boomer members to support the growth of their associations.

The one mitigating factor is the economic issue facing many Baby Boomers today. The lifestyle aspirations of the Baby Boomers means that nice cars, holidays, bigger homes and other luxuries are seen as "needs" rather than "wants".

This, combined with the effect of the recent economic turmoil on investments and retirement savings, is likely to see many Baby Boomers extend their retirement age past 65 with many already indicating they will need to work until 75 to achieve their financial goals.

While not great news for Baby Boomers, extended retirement dates will soften the impact of this generation's departure from the workforce by giving some associations more time to adapt. However, it is a temporary period of grace and not a reason to delay implementing necessary changes.

If your association is to thrive into the future, you must be attractive to all generations. Your entire organisational culture needs to reflect a generationally diverse, welcoming and engaging community.

Skilled staff and volunteer leader shortages are here

In Australia the actual number of Generation X individuals in Australia, 4.4 million, is much smaller than the number of Baby Boomers, 5.3 million, and this poses a couple of challenges for associations.

The exodus of experienced Baby Boomers from senior roles into retirement means we are going to experience a shortage of talent at senior levels across all sectors. This creates an issue for associations seeking both paid staff and talented volunteer leaders.

For associations, where salaries are not on a par with the for-profit sector, this may result in a struggle to attract senior staff capable of navigating their association through turbulent times.

The quality of association boards will also be affected as the reluctance of Generation X to upset their work-life balance, combined with their smaller numbers, will create a much smaller pool of potential volunteer leaders to call on.

Associations must actively encourage, nurture and involve their future leaders now.

Associations are heavily geared towards Baby Boomers

Because Baby Boomers are so actively involved in their associations, the products and services, communication channels and decision making structures within most associations are geared almost entirely towards this group.

This has seen associations concentrate their financial and time resources towards Baby Boomer orientated activities at the expense of investing resources into products and services geared towards younger people.

Indeed, the Decision to Join research project conducted by the American Society of Association Executives found that association leaders gave low importance rankings to the services that young people valued as important (eg: access to career information). The survey also found that young people gave associations poor performance ratings on the delivery of those services.

Creating an organisation that appeals to younger generations means instilling an innovative, proactive and member responsive culture throughout the entire organisation.

This isn't just starting a Facebook page. It isn't setting up a Young Professionals group that isn't resourced nor connected to anywhere else in the association. It definitely isn't a board made up almost entirely of white men over the age of 50. The kind of change required needs to be embedded throughout your entire organisation.

In the absence of associations that are responsive to their needs younger members will find, or create, their own solutions. Associations who don't adapt will see a proliferation of competitors entering the market, seeking to fill the void they have created.

If your association is to thrive into the future it needs to be proactively engaging younger members now.

Generations X and Y need clear, tangible, compelling value

Generation X grew up during times of high divorce rates where it was very likely that both parents were working. They are highly independent, and very protective of their work-life balance.

Generation Y grew up with the internet and a constant barrage of messages from a variety of media. They are highly educated, innovative, entrepreneurial, cause driven, marketing savvy and globally focussed. They are very aspirational and are attracted to successful brands.

Generations X and Y have vastly different expectations to Baby Boomers when it comes to association membership. To justify the investment of time and/or money into an association they want to see very clearly defined, tangible and compelling value - and not just when they join. Younger members are constantly reassessing the value of the organisation to them so your value needs to be regularly reinforced even after they join.

Younger members are also much less willing to be a part of an association that needs work. They would rather be associated with a responsive, innovative, socially aware organisation that they perceive to already be successful. If they can't see that in your organisation they will look elsewhere.

Associations need to understand the value they can deliver to their members. Are members looking for a fantastic career, a great lifestyle, a happy family, a successful business, a healthy planet, or something entirely different? Find out what their aspirations are and proactively provide tangible products and services to help your members more quickly and effectively achieve them.

The value returned to each member needs to far exceed the membership fee invested. This may mean a more creative suite of products and services, or restructuring of membership fees.

Associations who have predominately organisational (rather than individual) members will be affected similarly as it is individuals within those organisations who will make the decision to join or renew their membership. Over the next 20 years, it is more and more likely that person will be considering membership from a Generation X or Y perspective.

If your association is to thrive into the future, you need to clearly understand what value you can deliver to younger members and be able to strongly provide that value. In addition you must understand the best means of communicating that value to both prospective and existing members in such a way that it motivates them to join and engage with your association.

Associations can create value by becoming content curators

Many associations promote the fact that they provide members with information. However members can take their question to Google and find 1,000,000 search results. This makes Google one of the biggest competitors to most associations.

However Google's strength is also its biggest weakness as users get many results with no guarantee of accuracy.

Many people are overwhelmed by the massive volume of information inundating them each day and few people have the time to keep on top of everything.

This provides an opportunity for associations to generate significant value for their members by becoming content curators.

If your association is to thrive into the future, you need to pro-actively collect information relevant to your members and filter that information into smaller streams of timely, critical and considered information that flows to the different individuals that require it.

Involved members are more likely to renew – so create and promote ad hoc volunteering opportunities

The more actively engaged a member is with your organisation the more likely they are to renew.

One of the most important strategies you can implement to move a member from being uninvolved to being actively involved is creating and promoting ad-hoc volunteering opportunities.

These short term or one-off opportunities for members to contribute to the association. Some ideas include having members:

comment or post discussions on your online forums ,attend events as Member Ambassadors whose role is to engage with new and prospective members to ensure they have a good time, participate in your advocacy work, speak at events, and write an article for your publication.

You can enhance the take up rates of ad-hoc volunteering opportunities by communicating the value of the opportunity for the member (eg: having your article published will raise your profile in the industry).

You can make the opportunity even more appealing by also communicating how the member will be contributing to a cause they believe in (eg: by attending this forum you have the opportunity to address a significant issue that is about to affect you and your industry).

If your association is to thrive into the future, you must create engaging ad-hoc volunteering opportunities, actively promote the fact they exist, provide adequate staff and financial support to activities utilising ad-hoc volunteers and recognise those volunteers for their assistance in appropriate forums.

Associations need to facilitate and enable communities

The old-fashioned model of an association maintaining a transactional relationship with members, where the main communication channel is a one-way trip from association to member, is no longer sustainable.

Successful associations facilitate communication between themselves and between members to enable the creation of relationships that increase the ability of members to create value for themselves and others (whether that be success personally, in business or otherwise).

Younger generations want to be part of a dynamic, engaging and innovative community. By focusing on creating engaging, innovative and strong communities – both online and offline – you will create an association that is very attractive to younger members.

If your association is to thrive into the future, you need to reposition it to connect people in ways that will provide them with meaningful, positive outcomes. Your association needs to be the instigator of meaningful conversations rather than simply a provider of information.

Communicating effectively is as important as the message

The younger generations are highly connected individuals. They consume information voraciously and through numerous online and offline channels.

They want to be kept up-to-date with what's happening ... while it is happening. If the information is interesting, relevant and tailored for them they want to know it. They definitely do not want to be spammed with every piece of news their association wants to get into the marketplace.

For your messages to successfully compete with the myriad others being sent to your market through a wide variety of channels it is imperative you become an expert at communicating to your members.

Some associations are having significant success with viral marketing campaigns conducted entirely via the web, bypassing traditional media. Others have found creative ways to integrate traditional media and social media tools to generate results.

If your association is to thrive in the future you need to understand your different membership segments, the kind of content each segment is seeking, and the communication mediums each individual wants their content to be delivered via.

Associations are too slow to adapt new technologies

There have been more technological advancements in the past 20 years than in the past 200 years. Generations X and Y grew up during this time and are very quick to adapt to the new opportunities that technology creates. But for traditional associations who have relied on pretty much the same communication models for hundreds of years, keeping pace with these changes is difficult.

There are still associations promoting as a major benefit that they "keep members up-to-date with the latest news" – and yet only send members a monthly or weekly newsletter. To a generation who are adept at using Twitter - where a couple of hours is a very long time - the associations' claims are seen as a bad joke at best.

Technology provides associations with opportunities to streamline service delivery, decrease costs and increase responsiveness. At the most basic level, a membership database integrated with your website to enable people to manage their own members is critical. Once those basics are in place, you can start to look at the possibilities presented by social media, online communities, smart phone applications and more.

If your association is to thrive into the future, you need to become adept at taking advantage of technological advancements and integrating them into your communications and member service strategies.

Social media is too popular and powerful to be ignored

Social media is massively popular yet, according to research by Sue Froggatt and Marketing General, few associations are having more than moderate success using the medium.

The few associations that are successful generally have staff dedicated to managing their social media presence and a co-ordinated strategy that integrates social media tools into overall communication plan.

Research by Marketing General found that successful public social networks (eg: an active Facebook page) had no effect on member retention. However retention rates were positively affected if an association had a successful private social network (a member-only community).

This demonstrates that the use of social media by associations is still very much in the early stages, with much more to be learned about how to leverage the medium to achieve association goals.

For many associations, the biggest barrier to social media is the requirement to give up some control over your communications. Many Baby Boomer leaders fear getting involved because "someone might say something bad about us on our Facebook page".

It is important to understand that this should be seen as a benefit. If someone feels strongly enough to post a negative comment then it is highly likely that comment would have been posted elsewhere online had you not provided a forum. The fact they have used your forum gives you (or better yet a member) the opportunity to address the issue directly.

Getting involved in social media makes you part of the conversation. It is an opportunity to communicate with members, prospective members and the rest of your stakeholders in a way that conveys your personality and lets people build a relationship with your organisation.

Executed well, it can provide you with a massive positive boost to your profile – and some great opportunities to leverage membership, event registrations and more.

If your association is to thrive in the future, you need to embrace social media to achieve your association goals, using a clear strategy that is integrated with your other communication channels and backed up with adequate staff and financial resources.

Younger members like innovative, interesting and fun events

Younger people love to learn. They love to connect in person with others. So you would think association events would be booming. But for many associations this isn't the case.

There are still some associations who have a compulsory weekly meeting made up of the same small group of Silent Generation and Baby Boomer members held in a musty old venue that starts with a rendition of God Save the Queen. Those are not the kind of events that will excite and attract younger generations.

Younger generations need events and learning formats that are tailored to their needs and learning preferences. They like the opportunity to get together in smaller groups to learn from each other. They like an interesting, convenient and practical venue. They like learning to be fun.

There are many new, innovative learning formats that are proving popular. From ideas as simple as scattering chairs and tables (instead of putting them in rows) to entire conferences being run without a program. The possibilities are limited only by your imagination.

Younger people are also trying to balance work and lifestyle so you may find they are multi-tasking – your association event may also be where your member will meet their life partner, next employer, tennis buddies, etc. Depending on your organisation there may be some opportunities for you to subtly facilitate these interactions.

No matter how much effort you make it is still unlikely that younger members will attend your events as regularly as Baby Boomers due to their work-life balance priorities.

If your association is to thrive, your organisation needs to review venues, format, frequency, duration, content and engagement mechanisms of your events, and establish whether they are relevant and engaging for younger members.

Gen X and Y attitudes to associations are influenced by ongoing negative media

During the formative years of Generation X there were a large number of highly publicised political scandals that contributed to their distrust of authority. These included the Watergate scandal in the United States, the sacking of the Australian Prime Minister by the Governor-General and the rampant police corruption during the Sir Joh Bjelke-Peterson years (and subsequent Fitzgerald Inquiry) in Queensland to name just a few.

More recently in Australia, the proliferation of media, the highly connected nature of the younger generations and the need of media to generate a constant flow of scandal and intrigue is rapidly creating distrust of associations (particularly unions and political parties) by the young on a larger scale. In Australia, political parties, unions, associations and charities are all major media targets and all are likely to be affected in some way.

There has been a constant stream of news coverage throughout the lives of the younger generation including politicians rorting travel expenses, industry association and union

leaders acting in unethical and morally questionable ways, charities being defrauded, sportsmen abusing women, and more.

The media is not entirely to blame for the ongoing coverage of scandals. It is the individuals who behave in immoral, unethical and illegal ways – and the boards and staff leaders who do not create and enforce procedures to stop this kind of behaviour – that are bringing associations into disrepute and affecting the attitudes of the younger generation.

Through providing fodder for the media and failing to address unacceptable behaviour, individuals and the organisations they are members of sow distrust towards associations, and also contribute to a strong decline in support for member based organisations in general.

This is further exacerbated by the tendency for associations to rely on the good work they have done in the past to drive membership into the future.

For example, unions were once regarded as, unquestionably, the champions of the average worker. Their efforts achieved phenomenal changes such as fair pay, better work conditions, and increased job security. However, the bulk of these wins occurred before Generation Y was even born. Today, you are more likely to hear of a union leader's unethical behaviour than of any positive changes he or she has wrought. The failure of the union movement to recognise and react to this shift in perception by the average person is currently devastating employee unions in Australia.

If your association is to thrive, everyone connected to your organisation needs to behave in a morally, ethically, socially responsible and ethical manner. And if they don't policies and procedures need to be rigorously enforced. You need to understand and proactively manage the public perceptions of your association.

Baby Boomers are resistant to the changes associations need

Despite wanting to change the world, now they have reached a situation where they are comfortable, Baby Boomers are resistant to change. They are especially resistant to change when it requires them to give up some of the control they have spent their entire careers trying to attain.

This is one of the biggest factors restricting associations from making the changes required to successfully attract and retain younger members.

Many Baby Boomers feel uncomfortable with the fast, ad-hoc, largely unregulated communication media that the younger generations see as integral to their daily lives. Many association leaders are reluctant to adopt more innovative initiatives because those initiatives don't appeal to them personally.

It is this kind of self-centred thinking that will lead some associations to fall dangerously behind in the race to adapt to the new landscape the perfect storm is creating.

It is vital that decisions on new initiatives are based on sound research into the target generation rather than the opinions of board members and staff leaders.

If your association is to thrive, your leadership needs to consider new ideas. Leaders also need to allow themselves to be guided by good research to understand what will appeal to the younger market.

Where to from here?

This article covers just some of the many factors coming together to create the new membership environment. To adapt will require fundamental change that cannot happen overnight. Your association needs to start acting ... now. Without immediate, urgent action there is a very real risk that associations, as we know them, will disappear not with a bang, but with the tiniest of whimpers.