Associations Adapt for Relevance  
Bob Harris, CAE

One of the most compelling books for association change is, “Race for Relevance: 5 Radical Changes for Associations.” Though everyday adaptations are not always “radical,” boards might focus less on their past and more on the future.

Association vital signs may be membership market share and retention rate. More important indicators are impact and outcomes.

In a meeting of association executives they shared how they are adapting.

**Neighboring Associations** – Providing services to neighboring associations to broaden the footprint and increase streams of income.

**Membership Journey** – Characterizing the relationship with members as a “journey” rather than the annual dues bill.

**For Profit Subsidiary** – Developing a for-profit subsidiary to create innovative programs. Establishing the for-profit to have enough value to eventually sell it.

**Diversity and Inclusion** – Providing platforms to embrace diversity and the spectrum of member interests. The alternative is subgroups breaking away from the association because they don’t feel included.

**Reviews and Recommendations** – Fill a niche similar to YELP by providing credible reviews and recommendations of member products and services.

**Extreme Networking** – Increasing opportunities for connections unique to the association through improved networking and technology platforms.

**Mergers and Acquisitions** – Company mergers are impacting associations. Position the association to consider its own mergers and acquisitions with other entities or build more collaborative, lasting partnerships.

**Entrepreneurial Spirit** – Developing products and services with an entrepreneurial outlook. Is it uniquely valuable and potentially licensed to other associations?
Golden Handcuffs – Exploring the creation of a benefit accessible to members-only that has high value and retains them.

Technology Investment – Increasing the investment in digital platforms, technology and internet presence to maintain relevance and attract new stakeholders. Identify the appropriate ratio of budget to tech costs.

Copyright – Protecting the association’s original works with copyrights and other means.

Paperless – Making the association a paperless environment.

Publishing – Trying a new model. Pay to publish instead of pay to read or advertise; “open access publishing.”

Mentoring – Connecting association experts with members hungry for information. Use technology to facilitate new methods of mentoring.

New Partners – Finding new partners with which to collaborate, for example a program between the association and a prison to develop or deliver new services.

Return on Investment – Demonstrating ROI to members by using a value-statement or an online ROI calculator.

Savings Reserve – Savings are a strength of the association. Leaving large amounts in reserve may not be the best use of funds. Be leery of the statement, “Those are rainy funds so we cannot spend them.”

Innovative Dues Models – Changing from standard dues to tiers, investors, upgrades and entry levels as new models for membership. A few organizations have eliminated dues, evolving to a reliance on income from programs accessible to 100 percent of their community --- not just members-only.

Leadership Development – Providing training and a platform to engage and position emerging leaders essential to the sustainability of the association.

Global Expansion – Expanding the association globally for new partners and opportunities.

Social Cause – Has golfing run its course? Offer activities that engage more people. Trying skeet, virtual golf, and fishing tournaments to broaden participation. Use causes to unite the membership, such as stuffing school backpacks or a Habitat for Humanity
Visionary Leadership – Longer range thinking by the board of directors --- beyond their terms of office. Transforming directors from focusing on current year to being visionaries for the next decade.

Umbrella Organization – Uniting organizations with similar visions under one umbrella to increase efficiencies and impact; trying to avoid dues and convention fatigue” from too many associations.

Governance – Right sizing the board. Has the board become so large that meaningful conversations and outcomes are impossible? Conducting a governance and efficiency review.

Rethink Committees – Standing committees are identified in the bylaws to serve a year-long term. Use shorter volunteer assignments with task forces, quick action teams and assigned micro-tasks.

Association Image – Does the word “association” conjure up an image of “good old boys” and a lifelong commitment to paying dues? Would the word partnership, alliance or council help change the image?

Stay relevant by analyzing the current position of the association and adapting to change.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.