My president-elect was excited when he accepted the position 12 months ago. Today he’s asking, “How do I lead in difficult economic times?”

Today’s economy is challenging associations. Members are scrutinizing dues, exhibitors cutting booths and sponsorships are slipping. Yet, through the decades associations have been resilient. Answer the president-elect earnestly, “The association needs your leadership to survive the year; your legacy may be reflected in our survival and eventual prosperity.”

Don’t make the big mistake of hiding the facts, exhausting the savings or canceling the conferences. Commit to being transparent, creative and good stewards of the association.

Membership
Dues income is often half the budget. Protect dues revenue by increasing interaction with members. Increase relevance and improve customer service. Replace last year’s standard dues renewal with a “Letter from the President” communicating the importance of membership. Call and visit members to be sure they’ve not lost interest in the association.

• Review the value proposition; do benefits and services impact members’ bottom line? Are benefits still relevant?
• Create a “member values statement” to accompany renewals describing “return on investment” compared to dues paid.
• Be flexible with members requesting delays in dues or alternate payment schedules.
• Increase interaction with members through concerted leadership and staff efforts.
• Beef up career services.
• Increase member interface through online communities and opportunities to access the association online.
• Promote history of association achievements to remind members of the organization’s historical importance.
• Align member services with their needs by conducting a satisfaction survey. Involve Board members and chapter leaders in focus groups to identify the pressing issues of members.

• Develop more relevant education. Transform topics from “how to prosper” to “how to survive.”
• Deliver cost-saving seminars through webinars and conference calls.
• Appoint a task force to evaluate the portfolio of benefits and services; dropping benefits with minimal value.
• Package (re-package) the intellectual property of the association. Update manuals and call on industry veterans to create educational programs.
• Meet with the largest members to be sure they intend to continue their support.
• Consider advertising or increasing efforts for free publicity. Position the association as a leader in difficult times.

Finances
Understanding and closely monitoring finances is critical. The board could easily drain years of savings. While the purpose of savings is to have access to funds — there must be a plan to replenish the account.

• Set a cap on savings that may be withdrawn from reserves and clearly state their purpose in a motion. Discuss how funds will be replenished. Does the current budget have an unrealistic line item requiring a deposit into savings that isn’t likely to occur in 2009?
• Review the budget line-by-line for ways to improve income and cut expenses.
• Package sponsor opportunities in a “menu” so suppliers can fit association requests into their budgets — relieving them from being badgered throughout the year.

Strategic Direction
Association direction is critical. Stakeholders will be watching. Review the strategic plan and focus on the basics: mission and goals. Prioritize what can be accomplished; make adjustments to the plan. Delegate initiatives to volunteers.

• Hold a SWOT discussion (even if it’s not at a planning retreat) to identify current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the association. Especially look for opportunities.
• Should the planning retreat be held earlier this year to make
adjustments because of economic conditions? If there is no budget for a planning retreat, plan an abbreviated meeting. Can the three-year plan be stretched to a fourth year without necessitating a full-blown retreat?

• Keep members informed by publishing the goals. If the plan indicates that the association is the “premier source of education,” do members know?

• Does the mission statement need adaptation? Use this time to ensure the purpose of the association is in line with changes in the industry.

• Appoint a Futures Committee to assemble a collection of forecasts for the industry and impact on the association

Governance
Effective leadership is essential during turbulent times. Ask each director to commit to attend meetings, interface with members, understand finances and solicit funds.

• Continue to develop leaders; when the economy improves the association will need new leaders. Plan a dynamic board training. Ask directors to mentor future leaders or invite young leaders to shadow the board.

• Re-align committees with association goals, eliminating ineffective committees and task forces.

• Request that committees generate income through projects and activities.

• Evaluate Board meetings costs. Can savings be realized without diminishing outcomes by holding fewer meetings or by adding some conference calls and online meetings?

• Is the Board the right size? This may be the year for a governance review to be sure the board is representative of the membership.

Management
With a slow down, focus inward to make improvements in the association while time allows. Update documents, review the organizational chart or revise the leadership manual to be model operating documents.

• Improve staff skills on computer software and association management by using the down time to attend management courses.

• Is this a good time to make floor plan changes to the association office? Could space be arranged to be more efficient?

• Is there an extra office or classroom that can generate rental revenue?

• If staff changes are expected, would telecommuting or reduced hours be an option to keep valued employee?

Association sustainability calls for a combination of creativity, new perspectives and open dialogs among Board and staff.

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