

## The Changing Face of Member Value Programs

Volunteer associations are facing many challenging issues around member retention and growth in today's marketplace. Some associations will face the issues head on and others will recognize the problems and procrastinate until the bottom line speaks to loss revenue from membership.

Why? Scan of the environment of volunteer associations indicates that many associations are preoccupied with *stuff*. Some to a degree have lost their focus and direction based on the attributes of the history of the association and not looking at the present or future aspects that reflect change. Others simply are ignoring the impact of baby boomers and the vulnerability it will have on member attrition based on the acceleration of the baby boomers reaching 65 by 2011.

The standard questions that need to be asked should be

1. Is creating membership value difficult?
2. Are there insurmountable barriers to delivering value to members?
3. Are members being unreasonable for expecting value for their investment?

The answer to all three questions is the same. YES.

When member erosion hits the awareness scale, the typical standard Customer Satisfaction Survey 101 is put into action. The meaning of which is to look for validation on what they are doing right. The 101 survey focuses on what the association delivers more than on what members needs are. The questions that hardly every appear on surveys are:

1. What are we doing wrong?
2. What don't you like about us?
3. Is the association progressive enough?
4. What is lacking?

Forward thinking is to put a survey out there to members strictly geared to your weaknesses not your strengths.

Associations need to fess up to the fact that results matter. While surveys are done annual in nature, associations need to be accountable for a plan to achieve meaningful results that **impact value**.

There are volunteer associations that don't support research results based on the reluctance to commit funds. Other volunteer associations are hesitant to divert funds from activities that do not deliver value because that is the way it has always been.



Another factor common to some associations is the fact that boards and to some degree executive management do not listen to management staff who are front line, have solutions or possible options to explore but when moved to a board level decision, there is no champion at the executive or board level who embrace the recommendations but usually acknowledge a report and then put aside for next year's pool of wish list items.

And finally a very vital fact requires top priority - **all members are not identical with identical needs and that value is specific to the member's viewpoint not the associations.**

There is a self association assessment tool that you can acquire from The Drucker Foundation Association Self Assessment tool at [www.leadertoleader.org](http://www.leadertoleader.org)

The assessment identifies five key questions that associations need to ask.

- What is our mission?
- Who is our customer?
- What does the customer value?
- What are our results?
- What is our plan?

The first two questions are usually answered easily, and then the struggle begins moving down to the third, fourth and finally the fifth question.

The American Society of Association Executive magazine 'Association Management' ran an article in their December 2001 issue written by Jim Moody, Executive Director of the Georgia Society of Association Executives. Mr. Moody's quote really spoke to the word complacency in the association community.

"Like many associations, we are doing a great job being the association that people needed 10 years ago. People will tell you that you are doing a wonderful job, and members will tell you that your organization is great. Believing that can lead you and your association down the yellow brick road to complacency."

In looking a member values there are three things that come to play

1. The Core Values of an Association
2. Added Value Member Programs
3. Member Loyalty

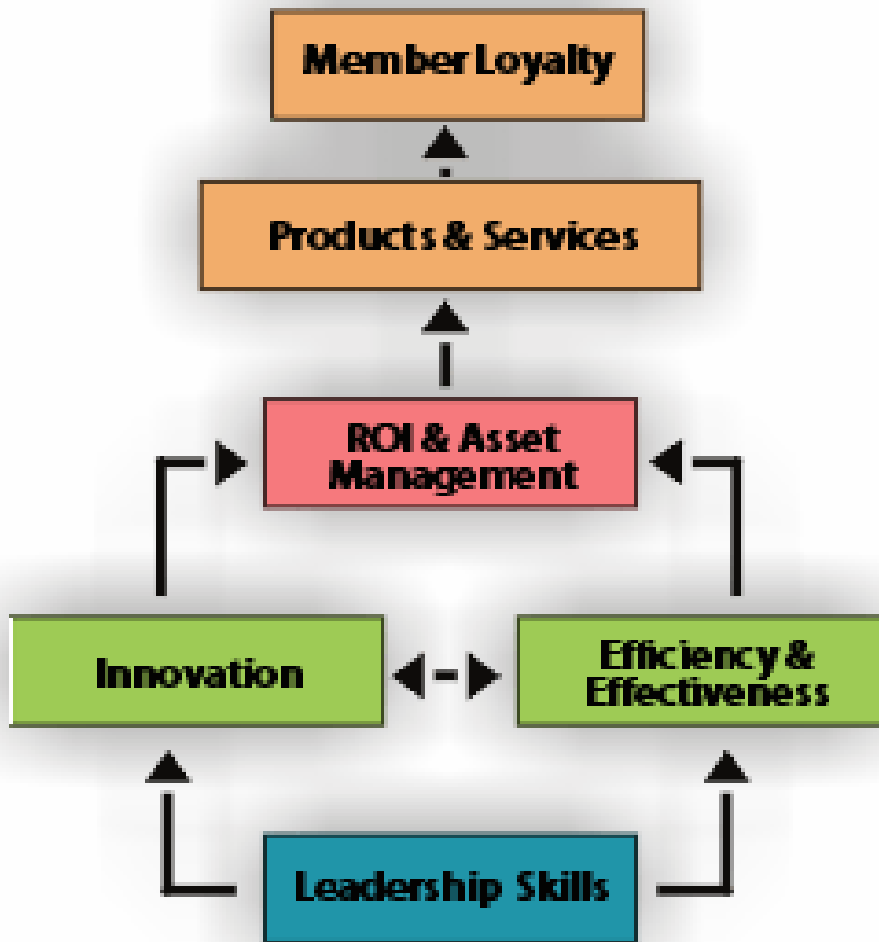


In looking at what a balance scorecard would look like for volunteer associations around member loyalty it could look something like this.

Balance Score Card here.

## The Balanced Scorecard™

Originally developed by Kaplan & Norton



The Changing face of member values starts with leading the charge for change. Don't wait for the attack based on what findings you have reached. Be proactive not reactive and that is the first major attribute for change.

Look at posturing your position in the marketplace. Does your association have brand awareness outside of your sector? Does your association have brand awareness inside your sector? How are you positioned in the marketplace as to core values is important.

Risks need to be taken and perhaps you may be competing with a like minded association so look at building stronger values by perhaps aligning with an association that competitive in nature but you both have synergy in a partnership.

Benchmarking and keeping the balance scorecard in measuring successes and failures is extremely important.

### **Forensic Audit of member Value Program:**

If you did a forensic audit on your core value and added value programs what would the audit look like?

In a recent workshop I conducted for the Canadian Society of Association Executive Trillium Chapter last March, the responses from the attendees on this subject were interesting.

- Successful involvement of the program(s)
- Poor penetration of the program
- Identify values through focus groups and surveys
- Continual assessment and evaluation
- Creative formula to measure member participation, growth plus cost
- SWOT analysis at year end
- Performance indicators
- Benchmarking – talking to other associations

As a presenter an observation that I made after this session to the attendees was that only 25% of the group conducted a more extensive audit of their programs. 5% of the group had de-listed value programs not meeting expectations. For the balance of the group it was determined that there definitely is a need for forensic audit tools to enable associations to effectively approach this task.



It was also noted that an audit of value programs will take four to five months to complete.

In talking with volunteer associations in the past six months, it is clear that the struggle to grow members is a challenge. Some are maintaining their membership but don't seem able to move growth. There are numerous reasons for this beyond what I have mentioned here.

Something to think about in your core value programs is the question are they stale? Have you kept up with the technology supporting these core values, if they have even been identified?

If you may be cutting back on some of the offerings based on financial issues, have the programs been truly evaluated as to why they are not working? It could be simply messaging issues, easy access to information be the issue, etc.

**Example:** An association produced a wallet size pocketguide outlining all the member benefits for ease of review and use. The association decided that this was an extra expense and not really needed by the members. A suggestion from the Manager of that department was to at least ask the question first to the members. The results were astonishing. It was a major value added service that the association offered.

Another association cut back on their web service when it was upgraded. One of the best features of the web was discontinued resulting in members having to use a paper directory for the services they wanted. As their members are very technology base individuals and this was a top rated program amongst their members, it disconnects them from the service of one stop shopping. Yes they can go direct to the supplier but the service was valuable. The question to ask is did they ask their members to rate this service before a cost reduction decision was made. Did they tell their members that this service was no longer accessible on their website.

Did they look at the fact that value is specific to the members' viewpoint not to the associations?



There is no question that member loyalty is the biggest challenge association's face today within the new demographic groups amongst other threats. Competition is increasing in all marketplaces and it is harder and harder to capture the audience.

The changing face of member values continues to be on the radar and associations need to address growth just as strongly as retention of members. But it is a known factor that it costs more to generate new members than to keep them.

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