

Failing to Consider Trends? Do So at Your Own Peril!

By Kip Sharpe



I recently conducted some research into the Canadian association sector, in an attempt to verify some trends. The research addressed the areas of membership, volunteerism, technology, and accountability. Chief Staff Officers as well as Chief Elected officers were interviewed, and each interview concluded with the question, “What keeps you awake at night in connection with your association”?

The research centered on National and International Associations. The goal was to determine the current state of affairs in Canadian associations, and to identify how associations can proactively respond to trends in order to remain relevant to their members well into the future. After all, if we learn from the past, we can avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

What did the future hold for us in 1991?

In 1991, Faith Popcorn wrote *The Popcorn Report*, citing ten trends – they are reality today.

1. Cocooning: staying home, home offices
2. Fantasy Adventure: escaping just once in awhile
3. Small Indulgences: indulging yourself once in a while, e.g. Haagen Dazs ice cream
4. EGOnomics: not mass market, personalized
5. Cashing Out: pulling out of the corporate world
6. Down-aging: older is younger now - being a kid again
7. Staying Alive: the quest for health
8. Vigilante Consumers: the elimination of companies that don't care
9. Ninety-Nine Lives: cutting back, slowing down
10. S.O.S.: Save Our Society

Be honest. Have any of the above trends had an impact on your association? If you had recognized and taken action on those trends, would your association be in a better position today?

What's Being Forecasted Today?

Seven of the eight Super Trends identified in a 2005 Environmental Scan conducted by the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) are relative to the Canadian association sector:

EnvironmentSuper Trend Sector

Customer

Demassification
(breakup of the mass market)

Challenge to Associations

- The mass market is breaking into smaller pieces, as differences in lifestyles, preferences, and priorities

		further segment the population.
Competitor	Unbundling (One-Size-Fits-All no longer appeals)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased competition is pressuring associations to offer their products and services a la carte rather than as an organized package.
Economic	Scrimping (greater return on dues investment)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economically, members and their employers are looking for a greater return on their investment in association membership.
Technological	Wave 3.1 (knowledge, not information, is the competitive advantage)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information is becoming a profitless commodity. The competitive advantage lies in enriching connectivity, learning, and life itself through knowledge.
Social	Virtualization (virtual and personal relationships)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A highly mobile society is leading to the disintegration of traditional neighbourhoods and communities, putting a strain on personal relationships and enhancing the appeal of web-based “virtual” experiences as a form of fellowship.
Political	Cyber-Mobbing (web-based communities are organizing for advocacy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The channel of political influence is broadening to include digital broadcast media that offer specialized forums for political discussion and web-based communities that practice “swarm advocacy” and “smart mobbing”.
Legal	Scrutiny (oversight demands greater transparency)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both special-interest legislation and litigation are on the rise and federal and provincial laws are introducing more aggressive oversight of association activities.

What follows is a summary of our research results.

Is member retention a problem?

Two-thirds of those associations interviewed are either growing or stable. The one-third that is not cited the following reasons:

1. Competition from other associations
2. Financial challenges
3. Changing demographics
4. Membership database not well maintained (i.e. could not identify who was not renewing)
5. There is some consolidation which reflects in the numbers

What are the growing associations doing differently?

- Added a membership piece to the strategic plan
- Working with colleges to recruit people for the profession
- Creating more value in services that the members need
- Review the mission to ensure it has not eroded due to sociopolitical change
- Keeping demographics top of mind (e.g. baby boomer exodus)
- Reinforcing their mission to ensure it makes a better Canada for their profession or special interest

The last point can be put into context by reading the three-page report, *A Not-For-Profit Sector Primer: How Associations Can Make a Better Canada* at www.csae.com.

Are you experiencing less time and commitment from your volunteers?

42% of those interviewed agreed that volunteerism is a challenge. The reasons cited for the decline include:

- Baby boomers are used up
- Lack of clarity in mission
- Same volunteers called on repeatedly causing burnout
- Volunteers are too busy

What can an association do differently in response to the above?

- In a technological age, encourage personal contact with and appreciation of volunteers regularly
- Use technology to reduce the amount of time volunteers spend away from their work and family
- Create volunteer activities that have a beginning and an end, and specify the time commitment required for the activity

Is your association using the Internet more to do business?

80% of those in our study indicated they use technology and the Internet to their advantage. Some of the applications noted were:

- Online membership renewals
- Communication
- Online members services
- Online event registration
- Chat rooms
- Customer service
- Member surveys

This trend is being addressed by the majority, and is being driven by the needs of associations (who are under pressure to deliver more at the same cost). This will only increase and become more prevalent. However, the “high touch, high tech” posture of associations will need to be strategically embraced to ensure it remains healthy.

Is your association being run more like a business?

All interviewed were in agreement that this is being done, and many pointed out that the relationship between the Board and the Chief Staff Executive is critical to the health of the association. Associations are creating reserves ranging from 50% to 200% of their annual revenue for exceptional or special expenditures or for equipment replacement. This need is driven by legislation and other changes affecting the mission of the association.

What keeps association leaders awake at night?

In response to the above question, the following issues were identified:

- The need for sustainable funding
- Association office (e.g. human resources)
- Micro-management by the Board
- Serving members effectively
- Oversight (too much or too little)
- A lack of input from members
- Politics
- How to sustain growth
- Main revenue source from government grants
- Constant federal/provincial struggles (i.e. who does what)
- Where to focus
- Minority undermining change

Summary

One has to wonder if some of the issues keeping association leaders awake at night would exist at all if associations paid more attention to what the trends experts were saying many years ago. Need more sleep? Focus your energy on the Super Trends noted above and you’ll get it, as well as the satisfaction that comes from helping your association contribute to a better Canada well into the future.