

Knowledge-Based Decision-Making for Association Events

As associations fine tune their purpose and develop tools and practices to move closer to becoming high performance organizations, they encounter the need to enhance knowledge management activities. Why the focus on knowledge management? Organizations want to reduce risk and increase their chances for success. This means improving their decision-making capacity. To reduce risk in decision-making, decision makers require credible knowledge specific to the decisions they need to make. This approach is called knowledge-based decision-making.

An example: An association was interested in establishing online courses for their members. They visited websites and found that most similar associations were offering online courses. They then crunched numbers in terms of the required investment and found they could afford to set up online courses. This information was used to support decision-making on whether or not to proceed. The association did proceed, basing this decision only on limited information and knowledge. The focus was on one-time rather than ongoing activity, and performance indicators measuring success were lacking.

A business case feasibility review would have dug deeper for more information. It would have converted some of the data and information to actionable knowledge. It may have revealed that some of the similar associations were experiencing problems with enrolments, withdrawals, static material and updating, technology and staff capacity. They may also have benefited from learning that expensive customized learning platforms are not always user-friendly or fully utilized.

For many associations, the second largest revenue generator after membership dues is fees from events. Associations are involved in events on a regular basis – at minimum, most have an Annual General Meeting and Conference. Some larger associations have 10 to 20 annual events occurring at multiple locations. The events serve primarily as networking, learning and decision forums.

The number of potential risks involved in holding events seems to be increasing. This suggests that having critical information to help with decision-making for this important revenue generator is a must. It is too risky to plan and do what was done last year. It is necessary to become strategic and flexible and understand potential financial impacts. Making assumptions to support decisions where actionable knowledge can be obtained and used is pure folly.

Politics

In the not-for-profit environment, whether or not to hold an event and where to hold it often becomes politicised rather than made on good business sense. Boards involved in location decisions must understand the full financial impact of those decisions. For example, a Board wanting to go to a location because they have never been there before or have heard there is a great golf course at that location, must be aware of the potential cost to the association, trade show exhibitors and members. Some national trade show events, for example, experience reduced revenues when they move away from three or four key cities in Canada. Perhaps if a Board knew the location would result in a \$40,000 reduction in revenue, \$20,000 increase in costs for the association and an extra \$400 for each member to attend, it may consider the decision more thoroughly.

While it is not always possible to take politics out of decision-making, it is important to understand the cost of decisions. It is also important to know the real cost of an event, and how much is subsidized by member dues, or how much of the event surplus is used to cover other services.

Evaluation

Decision-making for events often relies on evaluations from members who attended the previous event. Perhaps it is time to ask:

- Who fills out evaluation forms?
- Are the evaluations from people who are dedicated and come out for the same event each time?
- Are respondents quickly filling in a form for the participation prize available to only those who complete an evaluation?
- What do those who don't fill out the form really think?
- How can we determine the views of those who didn't fill out a form? Perhaps spot checking and approaching those who don't leave an evaluation form would gain some insight.

Having an evaluation form for your events is sound practice but it should not be the only source of information relied upon for future event decisions. Why? Many questions on the evaluation form are historical in nature. Yes, the food was good. Or, you may find the speaker had great content but was not dynamic.

This type of information will have little impact on your decisions for future events. Much more valuable would be the identification of the five key issues your members will be dealing with in the next year. Asking questions about the member's environment and issues will provide greater insight and identify areas to explore further in terms of meeting member needs and planning an event. Event evaluation forms should move from a past focus to more of a future focus, and should identify the various segments who are participating.

In one association I am aware of, the Executive Director does not collect historical information. The association's evaluations focus strictly on future needs. If an association event has an outstanding speaker or a poor speaker, the Board and staff will know about it by the end of the day.

An excellent way of getting future information is to use a chart that requires a check mark for areas in need of future attention based on competencies, issues or other learning priorities.

Research

Event decision-making can be enhanced by seeking information from those who rarely attend but should be attending – those whose demographics are similar to those who are attending your function/s. Show them a draft of an upcoming event program and ask them the following questions:

- Is the program compelling enough for you to attend?
- If not, what would we need to change in the program to earn your support and attendance?
- What can the association do to help you be more successful?

Research may identify segments that want more specific rather than general information, or indicate that the program you are offering is being offered too late. In hindsight, spending \$1,000 to get better information that may prevent an event loss of \$30,000 is a worthwhile investment.

Segments

Understanding the different types of member segments is as important as learning their needs, approaches to learning, and capacities to pay and participate. Perhaps the experts just want a room in which to exchange information and plot to change the future environment of the sector, whereas the newby (new person) wants an introduction to the expert. The in-between group may be looking for best practices or competitive intelligence. Segments of an association's market usually vary by size, age, stage of career and other factors. It can be difficult and perhaps not feasible to cater to all groups, but selecting the important ones is necessary to ensure the event meets identified needs.

Timing

Cycle times for decision-making have crunched and so has the need to gather information on new tools, practices or environment information that address trends and issues. The crunch in learning to action time means that some events may be too late to address an issue or the style or combination of events may need to be integrated. Learning has to be "just-in-time".

Some events planned in 60 days get better attendance than those planned six months in advance. Why? The program of the latter was out of date - member needs have been met and they have gone on to new issues.

It may be possible that an event in its current format and timing is no longer required. Performance measures will determine the action that occurs. If your performance measures are geared to providing members with knowledge, and success is measured by the percentage of access or participation or by having 75% or more say we have done an above average job of meeting their needs, then the focus will be on how best can we provide knowledge. What are members' needs and what delivery mix is appropriate?

Technology

Enhancements in technology have increased the options for transferring knowledge to members. It also supports improved decision-making, as it is now easier to engage in scenario planning, model building, measurement, and the use of surveys for research.

Benchmarking

Some students in the Association Management Program have completed benchmarking projects for their events. Benchmarking projects have helped them identify better practices in terms of mechanics and great ideas are being shared. In reviewing the projects, it is evident there is greater focus on improvements to implementation and delivery - little time is spent on development and strategy for overall member knowledge transfer. This will change by the time they complete the program.

Some associations may be polishing an event that should instead be changed, eliminated or blended into a series of integrated activities.

Next Year

The opportunity and the challenge is for associations to shift from a political and intuitive model of decision-making to a knowledge-based approach for events and other operational activities. This approach will help associations remain relevant, meet member needs and make the best use of their resources. Regardless of who makes event decisions, the focus must be on the quality of the information upon which the decision is based and by how performance is measured. This common sense approach will ultimately reduce your risk.

This column features innovation and practical solutions applied to challenges, trends, issues, and opportunities for the association community. Column editor Jim Pealow, MBA, CMA, CAE is a consultant and the Association Management Education Program Lead Instructor/Coach for CSAE. He can be reached at jim@amces.com.