Reluctant to Abandon a Member Service? How to Know When to Let It Go!

The planning session is going extremely well - dynamics and teamwork are resulting in a large number of new and creative ideas. The innovative juices are flowing and potential opportunities for new services are being discussed. There seems to be no shortage of ideas. If the Board has its way, several new services would be put in place next week.

But hold on! We just moved into dangerous territory. Why? There is a good chance that the association does not have a new services approval policy or a services abandonment approval policy, and a decision is going to be made to add new services without a solid feasibility review. In addition, an exercise to examine what services could be abandoned to free up time and funds isn't likely to occur.

The fact is that associations have limited resources to devote to an unlimited number of challenges. As such, it is imperative that association managers know when to discontinue a particular service in the face of waning member interest or support. I refer to this as service abandonment. Associations that do not abandon services at the appropriate time run the risk of using their limited resources in a less than efficient manner. The challenge, of course, is to determine when the time has come to stop offering a service that perhaps some members have perhaps come to expect.

Associations, like businesses, operate in highly competitive environments that change quickly. This demands that an association's products and services receive constant attention to ensure member value. Failure to deliver high-quality, timely and value-added products and services will lead to member dissatisfaction, non-renewals of membership, and perhaps a loss of the association's reputation, its most valuable asset.

There are a number of tools the association manager can employ to help them make informed decisions about whether or not to abandon certain products or services. These include:

Member Surveys. Member satisfaction surveys help define member service needs and priorities. When properly designed, undertaken and analyzed, member surveys serve as a critical tool for identifying areas where services have become less important and may be targets for abandonment.

Analyze Member Participation Ratesand Costs. Association managers should monitor and critically evaluate member participation rates and service net costs. Declining member involvement in an association service over a period of time must be considered in the overall balancing and weighing of priorities. Doing so will allow association managers to make service abandonment decisions in a timely fashion.

Watch the Competition. In many cases associations compete with their services. Competition could be from another association, a company, or even a government department or agency. Understanding what the competition is doing and how well they are doing it will contribute to the decision-making process in terms of service enhancements or abandonment.

Alternatives to Abandonment. While product and service abandonment is a reality in the association environment, there may be other alternatives to consider in any given situation. While it may no longer make sense to offer a particular program or service under the same funding or delivery arrangements, members receiving the service might be inclined to assume a greater share of the costs or receive a reduced level of service as an alternative to outright abandonment. Another approach may be to develop a strategic alliance for delivery of the service. The bottom line is that alternatives should be explored.

Evaluation

Many associations do a poor job of evaluating the effectiveness of their services. If they do it at all in any formal way, it is often an opinion-based process rather than one based on performance indicators and outcomes. There are numerous ways to conduct an effective evaluation, a key component of any strategic planning process, on which to base your decision-making. The key is to build sufficient financial resources into your annual budget to fund your evaluation initiatives.

Evaluation occurs on different levels. The feasibility of introducing a new service must be evaluated. The feasibility needs to examine factors such as support of strategic intent, meeting needs, resource capacity, degree of competition, price, service design, quality, cost and method of promotion and distribution. A solid evaluation process for a new service may reduce the risk of having to abandon a service in the near future.

Abandonment of a service is often difficult. Nobody wants to admit to failure, however, failing to abandon a poor performer means valuable and often scarce resources are being used inefficiently. Association managers have to make sound judgements on what to abandon and when. This is done using information on performance indicators and outcomes gathered through the evaluation processes. Evaluation of services can occur by answering questions such as the following:

- Does the product or service continue to support the association's mission and strategies? How or why not?
- Is the product or service currently meeting the needs of the membership? What evidence do we have to support this?
- Is the product or service being used by a significant portion of the membership? What evidence do we have to support this? What has been the rate of decline or achievement of performance indicators?
- What is the competition doing with similar services?
- What is it costing annually and how much per member? Can we continue to efficiently and effectively deliver this service with our current resource capacity?

- If so, should it be fixed or should another service be developed instead?
- If one of our products and services has to be dropped, would this be the first choice?
- Can another organization or a strategic alliance offer this service more effectively?

Association executives need to be aware of influences, beyond those in their own association, that can help or hinder delivery of their services. Engaging in regular external environmental scans will help you keep on top of trends or issues that could impact on services delivery. In recent years, technology trends and improvements have resulted in some associations abandoning some services and methods of service delivery. A key question to address external influences is:

- What external trends or issues from a political, social, economic, technology, or sector perspective will impact on our services?

How is the decision made to abandon or approve a new product or service in your organization?

The above question is part of course CAE 200 - Association Membership and Services, in the Certified Association Executive Program. Based on a review of responses to this question over a number of course sessions, following are observations made:

- Only one or two organizations out of hundreds have a product or service abandonment policy in place.
- Many association mangers have never seen a product or service abandoned. This includes individuals who have been with their organization for more than 15 years.
- Some abandonment occurs, but not without challenges.
- The decision to abandon is made primarily by the Board, based on staff recommendations. In a few situations, this decision is made solely by staff. The type of governance model and strategic management model used influence the approval process. In some cases, committees, chapters and other groups are involved in the decision.
- Some recommendations for abandonment get turned down because, "It would be a shame as some people like this program", or, "We have always done this so why stop now?"
- Having documentation in order is critical. A survey of members, financial reports and analyses play a key role in identifying what products or services are not valued by the many and are costing too much, and will provide hard evidence of what is not working or contributing to strategy.
- Services are not reviewed on a regular basis to determine if they are still effective and relevant, and often the membership has not been consulted to determine if services are meeting their needs.
- A member segmentation strategy and delivery of services will often result in services used only by a few, but in most of these cases they are not a financial burden.
- There is a poor link with strategic planning and performance measurement.

- Communications to support abandonment are critical, especially if users are a vocal and active group of members. If the situation has 1,700 members subsidizing 100 individuals at a significant cost for one event, these facts must be shared, along with what better use could be made of the resources.
- Abandoned services have been mainly affinity type programs.
- Technology has resulted in some hardcopy publications moving online, but special attention is needed to support members that should be in the technology loop.
- In tight times staff positions are often cut, and there is a limited number of staff to effectively run a program. Some staff wonder why the program is not cut as well.

In order improve your decisions regarding service issues it is good practice to have written policies and procedures in place regarding development, implementation, management and abandonment of services. This information will provide continuity, support orientation and training, and call for due diligence and feasibility reviews, as required. Successful application of good policies and procedures can help associations remain relevant and make the best use of their limited resources.

This column features innovation and practical solutions applied to challenges, trends, issue 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.