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Chapters and Networks: Is It Time to Reorganize to Support Regional Programming Needs?

Associations often require regional programming to meet member needs. Regional programming is defined as a plan of service delivery to meet the needs of a local group of members and the association. Regional programming generally provides activities that support networking, learning, and image and awareness. Regional programming provides many benefits and challenges. A key challenge is determining how to support regional programming needs using resources that reflect the level of participation and promote the association's strategic intent.

Image and awareness activity to strategically position an association is deemed important. This type of activity supports membership recruitment and retention. It not only attracts new members but also supports a sense of belonging as members appreciate public recognition of the association to which they belong. Regional programming can provide a means to increase the image and awareness of associations and their purposes.

Regional programming supports increased member participation in the use of programs and services. It also provides a structure for the development of future volunteer leaders. In effect, regional programming as a member service is usually consistent with the strategic direction of an association.

Approaches

Regional programming can be accomplished through the establishment of local Chapters and/or Networks. Chapters involve a more formal structure whereas networks are more informal. Chapters normally exist where there is a high concentration of members willing to participate in locally delivered events. Networks exist where there are fewer members or where members are not likely to participate in locally delivered events. Both Chapters and Networks provide the link necessary to identify and support delivery of member services.

National associations with Chapters often establish board composition with representatives from Chapters. National associations who employ Networks have flexibility in how they appoint or elect representatives to the board.

Associations with Chapters often find that some Chapters are unable to meet the expectations outlined in by-laws, regulations and plans. Chapters are usually dependant on volunteers. Individuals who volunteer may have limited related expertise or cannot provide the necessary time. As a result, the quality of service varies from Chapter to Chapter. The services are not always focused enough to promote the association's cause, designation, and product and service participation, or to generate new membership.

Not all regions in the country have active Chapters or regional programming activities. As a result, membership growth and the awareness level of the association and its cause and/or professional designation can be reported as low.

Many associations with Chapters allow the Chapters to tack an extra membership charge to annual dues, or the National organization increases fees to support Chapters and provides a per capita rebate. Another variation of support occurs when the National organization provides Chapter coordinators who help with events, newsletters and local image and awareness activities.

In addition to dues, Chapter activity is often funded by revenue received from user fees. User fees often do not cover all the direct costs. The balance of financial support comes from member dues.

Networking is Changing

Networking is a great concept. Networking between professionals is usually for career opportunities and mentoring, business opportunities, information/knowledge sharing (such as better practices), and for social activities.

Why do we not have more Chapters or greater participation? Networking is changing. In fact, some surveys reveal that less than 10 percent of members have a real interest in local networking. Members are networking with databases more than they are with peers, they are too busy, or the location/availability/timing is not convenient. As a result, a smaller number of members are participating in locally delivered activities. In some associations Chapters are shutting down or should be, but pride and emotion get in the way.

The Network

Given the changing methods and expectations of networking, new methods and structures are being established. The Network is the latest vehicle to support regional programming or specific member communities of interest.

It appears technology and other factors would suggest the new strategy would be to expand regional programming activity through Networks.

Networks can support delivery of regional programming activity as required. Most by-laws allow boards to provide for the establishment and operations of Networks through approved policy and processes. The policy ensures a level of consistency and compliance with the association's strategy and fairness in appointments, and deals with boundaries, member assignment, the role of the Network Representatives, event administration, program identification, staff relationships, and accountability.

About Networks

Networks can be used to serve the needs of a group of members in regional or beyond regional boundaries, and in practice or interest areas. Networks could be established where membership is greater than 20 and generally less than 250. Networks will not require a formal board structure, but can be led by two board-appointed Network representatives. In the case of a professional association, one representative could be assigned to education and another to advocacy or to other key purposes of the association. Network representatives will serve as ambassadors and provide a link in terms of local needs and do not need to serve as board members.

Chapters can be used to serve the needs of a group of members in regional areas where membership is greater than 250 or where participation is in excess of ten percent.

If a Chapter is closing and a Network is being established, adjustments in how elections or appointments to the board take place may be required if Chapters historically had an official director on the board.

Networks could be required to have at least one annual event/activity per year. Network representatives would receive training and information and may have an annual information-sharing session in conjunction with the annual meeting or through some other method.

Advantages

- A large number of members will benefit in a short period of time.
- A strong foundation of Networks can be established without waiting for members to organize themselves.
- Developing a Network where there appears to be demand will increase the chance of success.
- Networks will require fewer human and financial resources, minimize risk and ensure appropriate focus.
- Networks will develop volunteers and future leaders.
- It is possible to quickly create a presence and benefit from the establishment of Networks.

Disadvantages

- The demand and availability of volunteer representatives is unknown.
- Effort and resources is required to establish the Networks.
- Networks may not be a tested structure in the association.
- There is a higher risk of failure without a pilot test.
- Risk of developing Networks where demand is low and risk failure.

Networks will provide ambassadors, occasional local service and a member face and contact. As a result, Networks provide a value added member service and create a sense of belonging among some members.

In general, revenues will increase from the use of Networks. Some of the benefits cannot be translated into revenues. Intangible benefits which will positively impact the association include:

- An increase in association awareness;
- A "sense of belonging" or sense of association "ownership" by interested volunteers;
- The ability to provide value to members who are unable to get actively involved for reasons such as geographic proximity;
- Added value to student membership (i.e. opportunity to network/mentoring with membership);
- A strategic presence in a number of communities across Canada;
- The creation of "pipelines" to the Board for proven and tested volunteers;
- It answers member demand for "more" events; and
- Provides a platform for professional designation recognition or the cause.

Online Networks for specific areas of interest can ignore geographical concerns and have even more flexibility to develop communities of interest as required. This type of activity is increasing in some associations where the members are comfortable with computer networking. Network representatives for the online version are usually moderators for the dedicated website area. As the number of Online Networks and their activities increase the level of participation in Chapters will continue to decline - perhaps a Chapter will need to be converted to a Network.

With Networks an opportunity exists to positively turn an association's goals and strategies into positive results. Online Networks use fewer resources to operate than a Chapter. A Network will require more resources to operate than the Online Networks, but less than a Chapter.

How do we operate and pay for Networks? If a Chapter has been in place and collecting dues, these funds can be allocated to the Network replacing a Chapter. If a Network is being set up in a geographic area, uniform local service delivery dues can be used to fund the Network. The association would use the dues from the Network area to deliver local events and related services. It is possible to place the dues in reserves for each Network to ensure balanced allocation and service delivery.

Notwithstanding the potential of Networks, the Chapter approach where viable can provide great value in supporting regional programming activity. In fact some organizations could benefit from establishing Chapters.

If your association needs to strengthen its regional programming to support members throughout the country, look at the feasibility of Chapters and Networks with a view to changing technology, member access and service delivery needs.

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