

How Membership Survives the Pandemic

Ten Membership Lessons From the Pandemic



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Foreword

To say the year 2020 was unprecedented is an understatement of epic proportions. The COVID-19 pandemic created global upheaval and unexpected change for all companies and organizations.

Especially impacted were membership-driven associations. These organizations were forced to transform their time-tested, tradition-steeped member operations and launch new content, education, and meetings with unprecedented speed.

And now, with the end of the COVID-19 pandemic in sight, associations are asking how member expectations have changed, what they can learn from the often painful lessons of the pandemic, and how they can integrate new-found entrepreneurial spirit into their culture and continue to innovate new member benefits and experiences.

We conducted research with top executives from leading organizations that navigated the pandemic experience successfully with lasting results. Here is what we learned.

If you would like to talk with us about the findings of our research and how your association can leverage pandemic learnings for long-term membership success, please reach out to us. We look forward to the conversation.

Chris Gloede



Chris Vaughan







"We launched a new and explosively popular program at eight in the morning a few times a week. During 'Coffee and Connect,' members share peer to peer advice, connecting with one another."

Margaret Mueller, PhD, CEO, Executives Club of Chicago

Do Digital First

Adopt a digital-first mentality with visionary leaders who can deliver great member experience.



The pandemic delivered the long-sought digital membership but when the digital revolution came, all the new digital engagement came at a high cost. Since the dawn of the Internet, associations have worked to improve digital engagement, striving for more web traffic, more email clicks, more video views, and more online forum discussions. With digital meetings and online education, members lost in-person interactions and a sense of community that had previously defined their experience.

Those who continue to treat digital experience as a nice-to-have have already been left behind.

Membership organizations are sorting themselves into two classes: Leaders that are going all in on the digital experience with new systems and content, and laggards unable to overcome their system limitations and staff skill deficits.

Leaders recognize that their digital experience must be a strategic now and prioritize the necessary, and often painful, changes. Real vision and strategic leadership is necessary to position an association to meet the escalating expectations of digital membership. Modern systems, updated staff skills, and agile processes are necessary to deliver the vision. Inevitably, leaders will need to re-evaluate their organizational design to meet the unique demands of a digital-first reality.

Crank Up the Content

Build an online publishing engine that can deliver high-speed high-quality, high-volume, content to members.



Many organizations that prided themselves on peer-reviewed, committee-driven, printed publications with impeccable accuracy and prestige discovered that their content was ill-suited to member needs for relevant information in the moment. The past year ushered in a new velocity of content production and member value many organizations previously considered impossible, and it was accomplished by abandoning time-honored traditions and demolishing inefficient processes that added little value.

The best Associations did more than simply digitize their printed magazines and move committee meetings online, they made important changes to content development workflows and experiment with gate and paywall strategies. Many organizations leaned into their missions and opened valuable COVID information to the public. Some completely eliminated fee gates to valuable content such as annual meetings or journals. These efforts vastly increased awareness and engagement with an ultimate hope of membership growth.

Now, associations must continue to deliver increased content volume and variety to meet their needs. Member expectations have been reset. They will have to rethink long-established paywall approaches, and re-engineer their digital platforms and processes to operate in a whole new way.



"Standalone in-person meetings are a thing of the past. You're going to need an online offering and then an in-person offering, and they are going to be differentiated in some way."

Ian King, Chief Strategy Officer, American Psychological Association

Embrace Your Scrappy Side

Create a culture of rapid deployment and experimentation through simple solutions that spark member engagement.



Driven by the unprecedented pace of current events and a need to respond to unforeseen member demands, organizations turned to small-business commercial tools like Zoom or Eventbrite to deliver immediate member value. The COVID crisis pushed organizations to break the shackles of their long planning cycles, technology system limits, and bureaucratic management styles.

These technology solutions offer speed over structure with a low cost and learning curve for those associations with adaptable infrastructure. Organizations used these software solutions to deliver immediate and good-enough information in a good-enough format, "throwing things out there" and doubling down on the things that worked. This way of working was unthinkable before, but has opened many Associations' eyes to what's possible and sparked their imagination about what they could do next.

Understanding your members no longer requires extended surveying and analysis. Test-and-learn approaches using simple tools empower membership leaders to try new ideas with little financial or reputational risk. This has opened the door for rapid-cycle innovation and accelerated member value for organizations that have embraced it.

What is an Event Anyway?

Reinvent events without concern for traditions in order to grow membership through uniquely valuable digital experiences.



COVID quickly eliminated most organization's ability to hold large conferences. As the conferences were canceled, lost registration and sponsorship revenues compounded the Associations' financial woes related to work-from-home expenses and softening membership renewals. For many organizations, the reliable annual financial life ring of a big conference disappeared nearly overnight.

While some organizations create lackluster digital replicas of their traditional conferences, others looked to gather through technology in wholly new ways. The American Medical Association recognized they could secure top-tier event speakers, freed from the need to travel commitments and reach a bigger audience, and create more memorable experiences. The AMA hosted a nation-wide medical school graduation ceremony online, with Dr. Anthony Fauci, past Surgeons General, and recognizable actors known for medical roles. More than a million people tuned in to watch.

More than any other association function, meetings will never be the same. Creating new digital events requires a creative mind and fluency with technology unhindered by the history of in-person conferences. Meeting planners traditionally lacked the digital expertise or project management skills necessary to produce a large virtual event with a remote team and many meetings failed with many more nearly failing. Associations would be wise to engage non-event experts to conceptualize new ideas and create unique and fun experiences.



"We believe that the membership value proposition derives from the brand strategy. Establish your overall strategy and then tell the proposition story colored with successes and facts."

Todd Unger, CXO, American Medical Association

Help Old Dogs Do New Tricks

Break down physical and departmental collaboration barriers for new membership ideas.



Unprepared and inexperienced with a remote and distributed workforce to serve their members, associations stumbled into a new culture of employee trust and digital collaboration. Prior to COVID, many organizations had policies that prohibited or drastically limited remote work opportunities for employees. At the same time, as the power of digital tools to create things quickly and interact with members directly became clear, a new world of opportunities opened up for organizations willing to try.

Often, unexpected cross-departmental collaborations that produced surprising results. Inevitably, many associations tried to retain the top-down hierarchy, rigid silos, and long-standing ways of doing things of pre-pandemic life. Others seized the moment, adapted, and embraced the new way of decision-making. Leadership changed its management style to focus on outcomes instead of process and encouraged employees to work in ad-hoc teams across the enterprise to get things done.

New organization models and incentives that support risk-taking and reward creativity will be necessary to cement these new behaviors into the long term life of the organization. As association workforces return to the office and the chaos of COVID subsides, leaders must carefully consider how to instill a culture that continues to encourage unique collaborations and creative ideas.

Come Together, Right Now

Enhance digital experiences with structured and informal member-to-member networking.



The pandemic locked Americans in their homes and isolated them from friends and family, creating desperate need for human contact and connection. Many Associations were well-practiced in creating in-person networking opportunities, but had little experience connecting members online and few tools and platforms to allow members to find each other themselves.

Lagging organizations lamented the lost networking opportunities of in-person meetings and attempted to recreate it through Zoom-powered cocktail hours. Others realized that they were in a unique position as a nexus of like-minded professionals eager for opportunities to talk to each other by hosting online education rich with group discussion. They scheduled drive time dial-in "Coffee and Connect" discussions. They reimagined their online discussion forums and added ways to personally connect around their web content.

Associations need to take a broad and unconventional view of member networking and understand the unique opportunities they can create in their forums, webinars, website, and e-commerce offerings. Growing opportunities to comment and contribute to live or static digital content will allow members to become recognizable and find other like-minded members. Members will create communities around the passions they find in association digital content. The association's role is to facilitate connection... and get out of the way.



"A good analogy is an old can of paint that is all congealed over. Give it a good shake and it is good to go."

Ian King, Chief Strategy Officer, American Psychological Association

Everyone Has a Strategy Until They Get Punched

Strategic planning is important, but serving members in a crisis requires disaster preparation.



COVID was not part of any association five-year plans. Year after year, association boards engaged in strategic planning that carefully considered the competitive landscape, member needs, organization capabilities, and financial constraints, all leading up to detailed strategic plans. All organizations were forced to pivot and adapt, planning on the fly and replanning when the next thing hit.

The organizations that weathered the storm best kept their long-term goals firmly in view, while shifting to a highly fluid planning style to drive business decisions on the ground. Is this the end of traditional strategic planning? Not necessarily. Some of the most successful strategies shifted to scenario plans: "If this thing happens, we will do that and if another thing happens, we do something else." Empowered with the ability to react rapidly and scale financial decisions, organizations learned the flexibility to survive and react quickly to changing market conditions.

This style of leadership calls for changes in culture and organization. Volunteer Boards and other leaders must step back from tactical operations and refocus on outcomes. Organizations should implement and operationalize new strategic planning paradigms based on lessons learned from COVID, which allow for quick reaction time and rapid innovation while keeping the long-term goals front and center. In doing so, they will be more successful in good times, and more prepared for the next disaster.

Keep Your Promise

During confusing times with member needs changing, following your purpose may be all the strategy you need.



The pandemic presented organizations with myriad decisions that had to be made in the moment, surrounded by chaos and uncertainty. Forced to abandon their drawn-out deliberative decision processes successful associations doubled down on doubled down on their purpose.

Your purpose is not the mission statement. It is who you are for and how you serve them. In business parlance, it is your Brand Strategy. It is the promise you make to your audience about who you will be for them. Every association has a mission and vision. Very few think seriously about their brand promise. Crucially, the successful leaders we spoke to had invested deeply in their brand strategies before COVID hit, and that made all the difference. Their promise became their lens for decisions as the crisis unfolded and the stake in the ground around which the organization could rally.

Associations need to define and embrace their brand promise in the new landscape and align all their efforts to it. A saving grace in bad times, it is their competitive advantage in good times.



"The organizations that complete successful technology transitions focus on building capabilities and not investing to solve narrow business problems."

Todd Unger, CXO, American Medical Association

Let No Good Crisis Go to Waste

Drive membership changes under the protection of chaos with reduced opposition and lower cost of failure.



The COVID crisis led to many wrong turns and failed projects--and all was forgiven. New ways of doing nearly everything were absolutely necessary, and organizations found themselves working in ways and delivering things they never thought possible before. Decisions got made faster. Innovation happened. Mistakes were forgiven. Pent up demand for change was unleashed. Crisis flings open a window for change. A brief burst of energy and possibility which soon closes and reverts back to old ways. The best organizations know this, and have moved quickly not only to push change through but to build structures that will keep the changes in place long-term.

Organizations that would never consider virtual events, or God forbid virtual Board meetings now do them routinely. Events that took years to organize now come together in weeks. Business units that worked happily in silos for decades collaborate with one another daily. Offerings for members that would have never seen daylight because they might fail launch almost overnight, they work or they don't, and the failures count as learnings.

Now is the time to experiment when the window is still open and move quickly to protect your successes. Try new communication channels, new content, new formats. Pilot the ideas that have been rejected year-after-year. Find inspiration from other industries and adapt them to your association. You may never have this chance again.

Build Capabilities and Outcomes Will Follow

Meeting the new expectations of your members will require a bevy of new capabilities requiring investment and nurture.



COVID exposed shortcomings in most associations. From meetings to content publishing to strategic planning, organizations found themselves ill-equipped and well-behind the commercial curve. While many associations have discovered new ways to temporarily make do, they lack the advanced digital skills and capabilities for permanent pivots that this moment requires.

The associations that fared the best in the crisis were those that had already invested in the right skills, technologies, capabilities, and strategies and only had to turn up the volume. Content creation, digital publishing, virtual events, e-commerce, and brand strategy all proved to be crucial capabilities. They remain so today. One of the most important lessons of the COVID crisis is that we cannot predict events or outcomes. What we can do is build the organizational brains and muscles to position ourselves to succeed, come what may.

The pandemic creates a short window to make broad changes with fewer organizational resisters. Organizations should unflinchingly evaluate their capabilities in light of the new reality they live in, and make the necessary investments to fill their gaps and build on their strengths. Clear-eyed assessment and smart bets in the right places will allow you to seize this rare moment and win the next one.

Thank You

While the road ahead remains unpredictable, associations have a special opportunity to redefine member experiences through technology during this time of substantial societal change. Thank you to the technology executives and association staff that supported this initiative and provided valuable observations and perspectives to our research.



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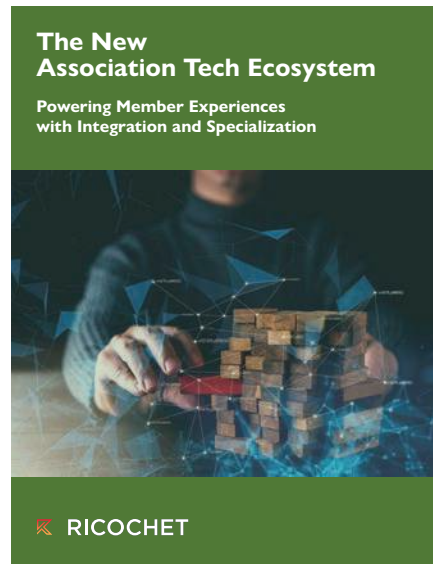
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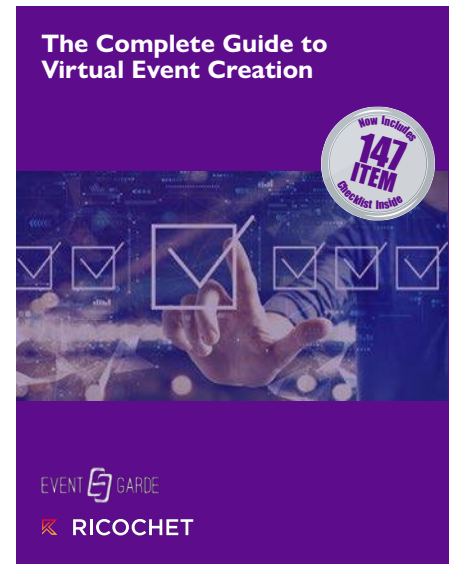
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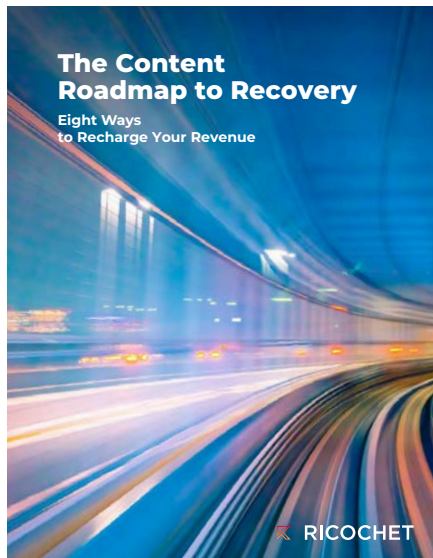
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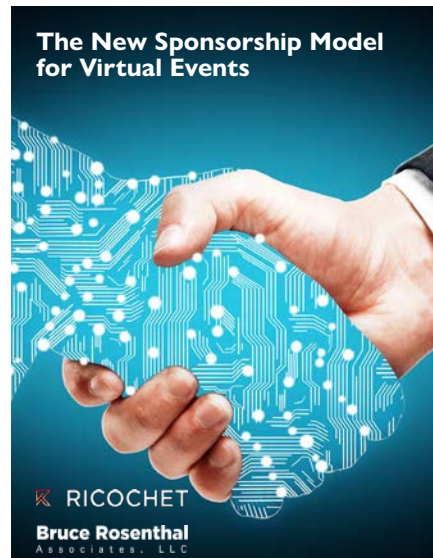
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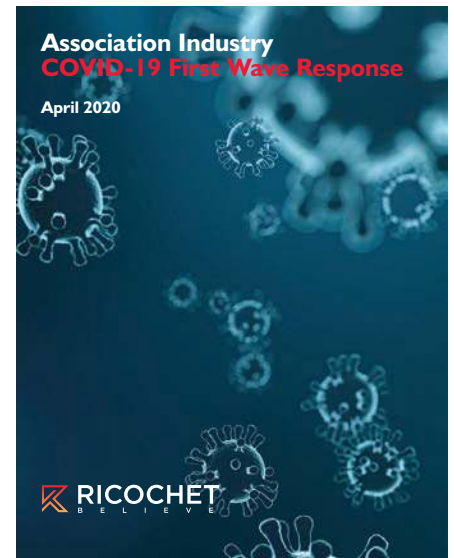
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