
The Future of Membership:

A Transformation?



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White Paper, March 2017

Kenes Group

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1 | Introduction

Professional associations have long been successful in delivering great benefits to their members and stakeholders and in many cases substantially contributing to their cause – but many working with associations are asking if this can continue given the challenges associations are facing today? All organisations nowadays, are being reshaped by powerful socio-economic trends and those which are not able to adapt to these trends may not be able to survive.

This White Paper aims to outline the key trends facing professional associations today, in particular in regard to research, industry experience of Kenes (KAW), which is based on membership for 15 societies. The White Paper does not intend to provide solutions, instead it provides information to aid discussion and decision making to ensure societies can successfully adapt to this ever changing environment.

Can current membership schemes continue given the challenges associations are facing today?

membership. It draws on insight, and the Associations Worldwide on the management of medical and scientific Paper does not intend to

2| Is Traditional Membership Really in Decline?

Can we continue using membership as “health check”?

The answer is not straightforward. Membership has long been used as the “health check” for professional associations, with an increase in enrolments and a strong renewal rate hailed as the vital signs of a healthy society. Somewhat disturbingly, recent surveys indicate that over 50% of associations report they are not experiencing any growth in membership, with 24% indicating they are seeing a decrease¹. These findings are consistent across all types of societies and size².

This lack of growth is being driven by a lower acquisition of new members, as many associations report a consistent rate of member renewal but a challenge acquiring new members. In particular many associations recognise they have difficulty in attracting younger members to their society.

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Thankfully, there are many associations who have adapted and developed new approaches to membership and are prospering. Evidence of this adaptation and survival of the fittest is indicated by the 46% of membership associations reporting a growth in overall membership volume in 2015. Interestingly, those associations with increases in overall membership were also more likely to have in place strategic initiatives for increasing engagement — demonstrating that those associations which are proactively planning are experiencing the most success.

¹ Membership Marketing Benchmark Report (2015), Marketing General Incorporated

² Associations Survey (2016), Advanced Solutions International



3| What are the Trends Impacting Membership?

And are these trends also hinting solutions?

KAW agrees with the theory put forward by Sarah Sladek in her book “*The End of Membership As We Know It*”³ that there are 3 major trends impacting membership. Whilst each of these trends is just that, a trend, they have left a mark on membership and the impact is considered below.

³ Sarah Sladek, *The End of Membership As We Know It: Building the Fortune-Flipping, Must-Have Association of the Next Century* (2011)

3.1. Financial Instability and the Economic Recession

The decision to become a member of a professional association has always been a factor of perceived value, that is, what is the cost of membership and what benefits are obtained in return. The changes to the economic climate have meant that individuals place greater emphasis on the perceived value of any membership and examine in more detail if membership of an association provides value to them. In short, this value is a function of the benefits offered and those societies which have focused on giving members what they want have succeeded.

3.2. Demographic Shifts

All organisations are struggling to appeal to the younger generation of professionals. As mentioned in a recent article by *Your Membership*⁴, the issue is that the people in Generation Y are less likely to join an associations. This generation has a different mind-set regarding their involvement with associations. Where the previous generation were members, on committees, were actively involved in the society, this newer generation has different requirements, they still want leadership roles but have less time to commit, they want hands on involvement but in a less formal way and in more manageable portions of time. They want instant communication and for decisions to be made more quickly. Members want less formal networks, no longer the “old boys club” and more of a community.

3.3. Rapidly Changing Technology

By far one of the most obvious changes but with far reaching implications. Not only has technology changed the way in which we communicate it has also changed the way in which we search, review, and absorb information. Members still have a desire for education and information but the ways in which they receive this has changed, mainly as the ways in which this can be achieved have increased. Traditional forums such as meetings and workshops are still relevant, but they are now supplemented with online forums, networks, webcasts, e-libraries, etc. In their everyday lives, members are now used to finding information faster, and on their terms and they expect the relationship with associations to function in the same way.

Despite these trends impacting the membership landscape, there are some **behaviours** which remain and which associations should be exploiting:

A Sense of Belonging

Our sense to be part of something remains, and if anything is increasing given the rise of online networks for both social and professional use, what is changing is our expectation

⁴ Shelly Alcorn, CAE Mary Byers, CAE; Elizabeth Weaver Engel, M.A., CAE; Peggy M. Hoffman, CAE (2013), Ten Things Every Association Executive Should Stop Doing in the New Year, *Your Membership*

of how we join and what we give and receive as part of belonging. Take Facebook as an example, it may not be regarded as an association, but it has relationships with over a billion “members” and anyone can start up a group of likeminded individuals with a common aim — for free. This model is becoming the norm, and we are less prepared to stump up the cash for the privilege of belonging.

Information, Education, Resources

Access to privileged information in return for membership dues was once the core proposition for most associations. Now, this information is available, for free, to anyone who has the patience to search for it. However, even the elusive Generation Y has a need for continuing education and useful information and professional organisations are the obvious choice, however, associations need to do more than just provide information which is available elsewhere, they need to add value by aggregating, assembling, reviewing, etc.

Customisation

We have long lived in a world where customisation was valued, however it is now expected as people have become used to being able to customise and personalise everything from their social media accounts and online experiences, to their air travel experience and coffee. Very few professional associations have adopted this approach and this puts off many potential members, why pay for benefits which don't fit their particular needs.



4| Survival of the Fittest - Membership Evolution

Participation, engagement, involvement?

So how is membership adapting to the environment it now exists in, what is it becoming? Participation, engagement, involvement — all are the terms to describe the relationships associations have with individuals. The challenge is to think in a broader sense about all the touch points the society has with individuals throughout its many activities.

For example, a traditional professional society may have only 1,000 members, but there are another 1,000 who attend an annual meeting, 500 more who are involved in a working group, another 2,000 who visit the website and access information, 5,000 more through the relationships with partner societies and on and on. When we begin to consider everyone who has actively made a decision to have an interaction with the society our “group” extends way beyond the traditional definition of membership. The challenge is for societies to find ways to build the relationship with all of these individuals and encourage them to have a deeper engagement with the society.



5| What Actions Should Associations Take?

Research, research, research

Adopting a new way of thinking can be difficult, so where should associations start?

5.1 A Clear Position and Purpose

Without doubt, the first step should be to review the organisations purpose. No organisation or association can be all things to all people and every association needs a clear purpose, understood by all those who interact with it and one which drives decisions. It is vital to identify the association's core benefits and who is the society aimed at, i.e., who is the target market.

5.2 Understand Your Members Audience

Identify all of the individuals and potential individuals who could have some interaction with your society, helping you towards achieving your mission. Then ask them what they are looking for in return for engaging with you. Don't just survey members, reach out to the wider audience.

5.3 Revisit Engagement Models

Paying dues at the start of the year for a set list of benefits is no longer the only solution, new operational models and revenue streams are emerging, for example:

a) **Tiered Membership**

A tiered approach allows members to choose the offer which best suits their needs, i.e., choose whether they want to receive the journal via print or online or a membership category which allows access to all content on the website compared to a less expensive category which allows access to only 50% of the content. This is not an A La Carte approach, it is bundling offers to provide different packages. This approach can lead to higher revenues, but also increases the perceived value of members as they themselves have chosen the products they feel are of value.

b) **Build the Relationship**

Often called the Freemium approach, this works on the principle of offering a free basic introductory "membership", then working to engage these individuals to pay for other services. This approach gives individuals a chance to sample the society and hopefully become interested enough to move to the next level of engagement. At the same

time it quickly builds the base of individuals participating in the association, allowing it to raise its profile, build a contact base, and have a larger audience to communicate about key activities with. This approach is most successful when the base product has to be little or no cost, there is a large potential audience and there is a premium offer or products to upgrade people too.

c) **Group or Institutional Partnerships**

This type of “membership” is becoming more common and is perfect for societies with close ties to groups or institutions especially federations. The advantages of this approach are that it strengthens relationships with partners and given that acquiring and keeping members incurs costs, doing it in bulk can reduce these costs. The downsides are it can be difficult to manage as someone needs to maintain relationships and partnerships and partners expect the relationship to be reciprocal and thus expect something in return.

4.3 Embrace a New Approach to Building Communities

As stated, individuals want to be part of something. Traditionally, communities sprung from a meeting, or a group of researchers or clinicians who felt the need to formalise and grow the community. The principle still holds true, it is just the way in which we build communities which has changed. Technology means we can network with anyone in the world at any time and people now expect to be able to do this as standard, as a result communities are often less formal and more transient.



6| What the Future Holds?

Change is not new, these trends will be replaced by further trends and societies will need to adapt again. The important thing is that societies have a clear position and purpose and are open to regularly reviewing their relationships with individuals in light of this and the changing environment to ensure they are structured in the most effective way.

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Credentials and Bibliography

About Kenes Group

Fifty years of knowledge, experience and market expertise have led Kenes Group to the forefront of global conference management and to becoming one of the world's leading Professional Conference Organisers (PCOs). Founded in Tel Aviv in 1965, and headquartered in Geneva and Tel Aviv, Kenes has hosted over 3,000 conferences in more than 100 cities around the globe, with over 120,000 participants per year. Recognised as the world leader in meeting planning, Kenes is the only global PCO dedicated to medical and scientific events. The company boasts a team of over 300 professionals, in 29 offices on four continents, and more than 100 long term clients.

Kenes Associations Worldwide (KAW) provides management services to over 20 medical and scientific societies including membership management for 15 different societies, varying in scope from National societies i.e. focused in a specific country; to Regional i.e. focused in a geographic region such as Europe or Latin America and; Global. KAW also manages both Federations i.e. an association comprising society members, and Individual Member Societies i.e. an association comprising individual professionals. Managing such a multitude of associations with such a varying range of structures results in a unique knowledge and insight about how membership can be shaped and structured to achieve the goals of an association.

Louise Gorringe has worked at Kenes Associations Worldwide for over 5 years and has been involved in developing membership services and strategies for many clients. She has over 15 years of experience in loyalty and customer retention schemes and marketing communications.

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