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Where is YOUR Association? The Next Steps for Advancing the Value Your Members Want

The South attacked from the north. And the North attacked from the south. What insights from the battle of Gettysburg are there for associations? Consider some basic principles.

Transactions grow up into Transformation

As business matures, and competition increases, most products and services become more transactional. Specialized offerings get more competition, which forces everyone to sharpen their pricing, or get some sort of edge. Eventually products become so generic that the market evolves into a "big box store" or morphs into high value offerings. Consider the overrun of Sears by Wal-Mart (transaction) and Nordstrom (transformation). When you want a makeover you do not go to Wal-Mart. You go to Nordstrom's.

Think ice cream cones.

The grandkids still think soft serve ice cream is great. Not the teenagers. To them, there is something a lot better. They want ice cream, but they also want thousands of choices. The chocolate sprinkles, cherries, Oreo cookie bits and a whole cadre of other options, all mixed together on a large marble slab that transforms simple ice cream into the Cold Stone Creamery experience.

Transformations are the building blocks for Experiences

The single serve ice cream cone may cost you a buck. But the Cold Stone Creamery product doubles, triples, or increases the price paid by a factor of 5 or more. It should. It's a real experience. The single serve is a transaction. It is a generic product that can be purchased at many locations. But that transformation of marble and ice cream is where you take your date for an experience.

Today the consumer is pursuing ever more the experience. Consider the following examples:

Transaction	Transformational (the experience)
Single Serve Ice Cream Cone	Cold Stone Creamery
Roller Coaster	Space Mountain in the Magic Kingdom
Starbucks Coffee	Sidewalk Café in Paris
Association Education Event	Gettysburg Staff Ride

Staff Ride? What the heck is a Staff Ride?

Today a common occurrence is for a group of executives from XYZ Corporation to travel to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. There they find themselves on a bus with an expert in the Civil War. For the next several days, these executives are transported to the various Gettysburg locations where history is narrated by this

expert. Woven through the lessons of the good and bad leadership of this battle, the group is taken through their own leadership challenges in their modern day environment. Discussions occur, similarities debated, plans made while leadership and management are improved.

This is a long way from an association breakout on leadership. It is a major revolution in traditional education from the convention fee transaction and the purchased general sessions or breakouts.

When Associations Go Experiential

People want experiences. They pay big bucks for them because they transform lives quickly and are memorable for a lifetime. The wedding ceremony, graduation, birth of a child and so on. They are anticipated for long periods. Consider the Blue Man Group Concert, those season tickets for your sports team, or a trip to New Orleans or Vegas.

They reek of participation. You can watch Guy Fieri on his TV show: Diner, Drive-ins and Dives, or you can make the pilgrimages to the various featured eating locations and relive the magic.

Experiences are so powerful we want to share them with others. The wedding invite, the double date, taking the kids, "now that they are older," back to Disney World.

When your association goes from facilitating the transactions of the next event, to creating member experiences...the businesses of your members will transform; as will your own organization.

Making your efforts more experiential will make membership go up, cost of marketing will decrease, word of mouth buzz will skyrocket, volunteerism will increase, retention improves, and succession in leadership will grow solid.

How do YOU Create an Association Experience?

There are hundreds of elements that go into creating an experience like using authority figures, calories, illumination, and eclectic pursuits with smell, taste and touch. A few to consider:

Raiment

Great experiences require a change of raiment, or clothing. It is the wedding dress, the graduation gown, the sports jersey for the big game. What special clothing is involved with your

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next Association event? Logo'd shirts? One association has their version of the PGA Green Jacket for their board members, although theirs are red. Are you having a golf tournament? Might you have a prize for best attire, worst attire, most creative, etc.?

Sound

When one Chamber of Commerce started focusing on outcomes for their members, helping them increase business revenues, they decided to have a theme song. Each of their meetings has the Taking Care of Business rock music playing (Bachman Turner Overdrive to the rescue) in the background as attendees arrive.

Liquid

Most experiences have some sort of liquid as part of the... ah... experience. It is the champagne at the wedding, the beer at the graduation. You are going to cruise across the liquid, drink it, surf it, skate across it, partake of it as a sacrament... but there will be liquid. Some of the finer conference properties know this and serve up water at special stations where the liquid is visibly chilled with slices of fresh lime floating amid the ice. Of course if you drink too much of some of the conference liquids, then THAT will create a whole different experience (grin).

Are Association Experiences a must?

Generals are always best at fighting the last war. They equip for it. They train for it. But fresh horizons require new tactics. Sears fought against Montgomery Ward. Did they even see Wal-Mart on their radar screen before it was too late? Often we look backward because it is easier than the unknown future.

The future is here and customers/members are voting with their dollars. They chase down the experience and inhale it to the fullest, like the Super Bowl, a 3D movie or even a Staff Ride. The experience is the demand of the younger generation and a pleasant surprise for your current membership. So are you going to attack from the south, or from the north? ■

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