


Association Executives of North Carolina

Success *Live*

BY ASSOCIATION

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A photograph of the Pinehurst Resort building, a large white structure with a red roof and a central tower. In the foreground, there is a green lawn with the word "PINEHURST" spelled out in large, green, bush-like letters. Above the building, the Pinehurst logo is visible, featuring a golfer and the text "PINEHURST 1895".

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Educational Article

Association Membership is Not a Transactional Exchange

Barb Dimauro

August 17, 2022

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Association Membership is Not a Transactional Exchange

By: Barb Dimauro

Some time ago, I received a registration for an event that my firm was running for one of our association clients. The registration was from a non-member of the association, registering as a member. Members attend this event for free, while non-members pay a small fee. I immediately reached out to suggest that the registrant join the organization or, as a last resort, that he pay the small fee for the event.

This is a situation many associations deal with on a regular basis, typically resulting in a new membership and relationship or at the least, a non-member registration. In this situation, the individual had other plans. He told me that he had been a member of this organization for a very short time several years ago and had only attended one association event as a member. He wasn't sure he had "gotten his money's worth." He felt that I should allow him to attend the event for free as way of possibly "winning him back." I disagreed but offered to take the cost of the non-member event ticket off his membership if he decided to join later.

During this email exchange, the following kept going through my head: "Association membership is not a transactional exchange." Yes – there is a fee to belong to an association and there are some things that the organization will list as member benefits. But belonging to an association is more of a relationship than a simple purchase. When an association is run well – and most are – your membership dollars work for you day in and day out without you even realizing it. Fellow members see you as a part of their inner circle and will seek you out if they need products and services you can provide. The association manager or executive director is always on the lookout for connections for you – ways for you to interact with other members, to be presented as a thought leader in your area of expertise, or to become more deeply involved with the group. And the influence of the association often goes beyond the simple number of members listed in the directory.

Vendor members benefit from association membership in many ways and can increase their return on investment substantially by putting in a little effort. Here are five ways you can grow your visibility, relationships, and ROI through your affiliation with associations:

#1. Volunteer. Association committees are always looking for new members and being a part of one of these volunteer groups provides you with visibility and access to other members in a setting unlike any other. The commitment is usually very manageable, and you'll be working toward a common goal (recruitment, recognition, programming, etc) with like-minded colleagues and your prospective clients. Being on a committee can also pave the way for a board seat down the road.

#2. Be Responsive. This sounds simple, but taking a moment to respond to requests, event invitations, surveys and questions goes a long way in building a relationship with association staff. Association executive directors and staff members can be your closest allies – and showing them that you are an active, interested member keeps your name top of mind. When they know they can count on you, they are more likely to think of you for speaking, referral and other opportunities.

#3. Provide Content. Associations are uniquely positioned to be perceived as thought leaders. They have built an audience and by their very nature typically have a focused, growing following that can be reached by email, website, newsletters, print products and social media platforms. What they don't always have is the staff to create and curate the content to provide a consistent flow of industry news, updates, and insights. Most will welcome your ideas for blog posts and even your company news. Associations want to bring value to members and are happy to have contributed content – just steer clear of anything too “salesy.”

#4. Invest. Your financial investment in your association shouldn't end with your membership dues check. Don't get me wrong, everyone appreciates your contribution and associations understand financial constraints. But showing your support with a sponsorship, donation or ancillary purchase boosts your visibility and allows the association to bring more value to everyone. If you don't see an opportunity that fits in your budget, reach out to association staff and have a conversation. Can you host a training event at your office? Do you have a connection with an industry leader who would be willing to speak at an association event? Think creatively about how you can show your support.

#5. Show Up – and Bring Guests. Everyone is busy, but getting together for networking, educational, philanthropic, and other meetings is key to a successful association. No one expects every member to attend every event, but you should show up when you can. To make it easier, look at the association's event calendar and enter meetings into your own calendar. Consider inviting prospective members to each event you plan to attend and don't forget about junior staff people – bring them into the fold early to help them develop their own connections and uncover growth opportunities. Seek out association staff and board members and introduce yourself.

The gentleman in question did not attend the event and hinted that he wouldn't be joining the association because I didn't comp his ticket. Professional associations have a lot to offer, but if you go into a new membership with a tit-for-tat mentality, you will be disappointed. Instead, join committed to the idea that you are at the start of a long-term relationship that can pay off with increased sales, exposure, access to talent or new opportunities, word-of-mouth advertising, friendships, mentors, ideas, and knowledge.

Show your support. Volunteer for a committee. Sponsor an event. Invest in your association and you will receive far more than you put into it in return. It may be impossible to quantify your return on investment – but it will be worth it if you make the most of it.

Barb Dimauro is the principal of Audience Development Strategies, LLC, a boutique association management firm. Barb has worked with associations across many sectors including finance, marketing, law, medical and construction. Barb can be reached at bdimauro@adstratllc.com.

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