



## **"Practical Problem-Solving Advice for Publishers"**

# **Association Culture: Breaking Barriers to Organizational Progress**

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### **Content-Driven Association Programs**

Two persistent threats to nonprofit survival are (a) losing track of the organization's mission and (b) undervaluing the group's related institutional advantages. Confronted with a spot quiz, for example, many association executives would be hard-pressed to see their group's mission in its broadest, most fundamental terms and to understand and effectively communicate the innate advantages that unique mission confers. Having a "captive market," for instance, or natural pre-eminence in a given field—constitute considerable competitive advantages.

At its core, a major part of virtually any association's mission is to inform, improve, and motivate members of a particular field or interest group. In most cases, associations accomplish these goals primarily by producing content in myriad forms. Content-driven efforts in associations and societies include conferences, certification programs, and other aspects of professional development—including the creation of industry standards, and employing techniques as varied as remote learning and face-to-face symposia.

### **Commonalities Shared by Association Content Producers**

What do *all* content producers in an organization have in common with their more-narrowly-focused publishing colleagues? Let's be crystal clear: Associations and societies are *by definition* in the information and education business. This is true whether that information is delivered in print (books, magazines, and journals), in-person (educational seminars and conferences) or in one or another digital format. It is our view—given our history as advisors to both associations and to publishers—that in essence all content producers within associations and societies are more alike than different from one another.

Also, association-based content developers are directly analogous to another quite different group—commercial publishers.

Here are five things these two seemingly disparate groups have in common:

- All must develop a steady flow of new, content-based products.

- All deliver content by “any means necessary”—either print or electronic channels or both, whatever works best for the creators and the audience.
- The content developed represents unique intellectual property (which must be respected when it belongs to others and protected when it belongs to you).
- Customers must be cultivated, satisfied, and retained.
- In a well-functioning world, content developers in both the association space and in commercial publishing share a high regard for the bottom line.

In our experience, this last aspect is the one common bond rarely felt with sufficient strength in the association world.

This is widely true even though it is our frequent observation that the most successful associations overwhelmingly tend to be the ones that keep an attentive eye on the bottom line. And one of the best ways to do this is to recognize and capitalize on the interrelationships between internal content-development programs, their delivery channels, and the power of collaborative planning across varied association functions.

Therefore, keep in mind the potential relationships between your publishing staff and your organization’s other information-driven programs—such as certification, conferences, and symposia. At the same time, however, you must also be acutely aware of a phenomenon common to far too many associations—namely, *siloed thinking*.

The financial website Investopedia defines such thinking this way: “A *silo mentality* is a reluctance to share information with employees of different divisions in the same company. This attitude is seen as reducing the organization’s efficiency and, at worst, contributing to a damaged corporate culture.”

Which brings us to ask: Why is there so much of this sort of thinking inside so many associations? In fact, why does the siloed mentality seem even more characteristic of associations and other nonprofits than of the business world, including commercial publishing?

### **Siloed Thinking in Associations**

While we began this article by pointing out similarities between publishing staff and many of the other core activities of associations—and their collective similarities to commercial publishers—there are also several fundamental differences that help promote siloed thinking in nonprofits. One is that associations often include several distinct businesses (for example, conferences and membership) under one organizational umbrella—which is, obviously, far less common in the commercial world. Then, too, associations are often thinly staffed, sometimes including numerous “departments of one.” More worryingly, too many association managers fail to provide leadership by creating a sense of common purpose. And, of course, failure of that sort inevitably leads to the broken connection to the organization’s mission that we cited at the outset of this article.

All these hazards can be compounded within associations by the inescapable realities of normal human behavior. Some staff members hoard information for their own purposes, perhaps because they see themselves as competing for resources with other departments. For others, controlling information rather than sharing it confers a sense of power and control. In addition, some staff members have been known to come down with the “Not Invented Here Syndrome,” while others are simply burdened with tunnel vision and disinclined to think much beyond their

short-term deadlines or departmental boundaries. These behaviors are to an extent at work in all organizations and all contribute mightily to siloed thinking.

Further, we have concluded that there are three additional reasons that siloed thinking exists so widely within associations. First, staff members are rarely explicitly encouraged (incentivized) to take the time to share information with colleagues. Second, there is rarely any organized process or venue for working collaboratively in most associations even if isolated individuals may wish to.

The third reason has its roots in volunteer member committees and how those committees tend to be lined up with staff liaisons. One of our clients made this pertinent observation: “I think this silo mentality is the result of a volunteer structure that is itself silo-based. Volunteers, because they have limited time and are not involved in day-to-day management, view their functions as independent rather than interdependent. Because staff is organized to support the volunteer structure, the entire organization’s management style becomes silo-oriented.” We agree with this analysis.

#### **Four Suggestions to Enhance Collaboration (with Examples)**

- *Make it a cultural value to share information between departments.* Sure, this is easier said than done—but the doing itself isn’t actually that hard. Highlight the value, for example, of a dynamite conference presenter being encouraged to contribute to your journal or magazine. Use branded items from an association store as premiums connected to various member activities, such as, serving on a committee.
- *Purge the siloed thinking mentality by specifically calling it out.* Force yourself as a leader or colleague to “connect the dots”—to demonstrate that different groups in your organization can (at least occasionally) profitably work together.
- *Knock down interdepartmental walls that stifle collaboration and information sharing.* This can be achieved with quarterly cross-divisional meetings, with “collaboration” called out as a specific agenda item. Or people who are natural “connectors”—almost every organization has at least a couple—can be specifically charged with devising collaborative efforts that might prove to be win-win for all participants.
- *Encourage collaborative planning among content-producers.* Even after the pandemic ends, does conference attendance continue to slide? Do membership totals fail to revive? If so, be sure to ask what your journal and newsletter producers can do to help reverse those trends.

#### **Conclusion**

Never lose sight of your organization’s mission. Never under-value the unique advantages it brings you; namely, the marketplace that you essentially have all to yourselves, the leadership role you play. Never underestimate the importance of attending to the bottom line and don’t forget the vital role that your many varied content producers play in improving it. And, above all, do everything you can as a leader and colleague to encourage collaboration and mutual support. Both your staff and your elected leadership will be all the better—for every single effort you make in this direction.

#### **Free Articles of Interest**

- *A-9, Don't Miss Out: Re-tool Your Publishing Program, to Extend Your Mission and Build Profits*, Co-author David Beacom, 2018, 5 pages [fs/association\\_publishing/A-9\\_Assn\\_Pub\\_Income\\_Producing-11.14.18DB\\_JAV.pdf](https://fs/association_publishing/A-9_Assn_Pub_Income_Producing-11.14.18DB_JAV.pdf)
- *A-31, An Interview with David Beacom on Association Publishing*, 2018, 5 pages <https://tinyurl.com/y6jc2nm4>
- *PD-13, New Product Development in Nonprofits: Best Practices for Building a Brighter Future*, Revised with David Beacom, 2018, 4 pages <https://tinyurl.com/y68tcyn9>
- *PD-17, Improving Product Development in Associations through Collaboration and Information Sharing*, 2017, 4 pages <https://tinyurl.com/y4q4qlqd>

## David Beacom

David Beacom is a long-time publishing executive, primarily in the nonprofit sector. For more than 15 years, Beacom served the National Science Teachers Association ([NSTA](#)) as Chief Content Officer (formerly Publisher) and Associate Executive Director. Under his leadership, NSTA evolved from a distributor of other providers' resources into a leading publisher of books and other content in its marketplace. (Book revenue alone rose from \$1M to \$6M.) Previously, Beacom spent two decades with the National Geographic Society, where he was long the lead creative and editorial voice in education—and where he effected a bottom-line turnaround of its school publishing group.

Beacom has contacts and resources across the industry. A few years ago, he served as (elected) President of the Association of Educational Publishers (AEP) and, in that role, was part of the leadership team that negotiated AEP's merger with the then-AAP School Division. After the merger, he served on the AAP's Learning Group Executive Council, including one year as co-chair. LinkedIn™ <https://bit.ly/2J5Umfb> David is now collaborating on consulting assignments with John B. McHugh.

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