



"Practical Problem-Solving Advice for Publishers"

How Association Leaders Think and What That Means to Your Publishing Program

By

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How Associations Make Decisions

Our intent is to share insights into association decision-making practices that affect the publishing business—even down to the level of whether publishing is seen as a business at all. You will get an insider's view of how management is structured within most associations and who makes key decisions that shape your program. You will learn how to navigate the system—to get top executives and volunteer leaders to “Yes.”

Although every association has its organizational quirks, most are staffed along the same general lines—and behave at least somewhat similarly. Almost without exception, for example, most major publishing decisions require at least some level of approval, buy-in, or simply tacit understanding on the part of a large cast of players.

Of course, you will want to chart the most independent course possible for your business—but will nevertheless need and want support on fundamental matters both large and small: overall spending limits and revenue targets, for example, plus staff size and compensation, branding conventions, even the content and tone of your marketing campaigns.

For the accomplished publishing professional in a high-functioning organization, much of this can be achieved almost frictionlessly. More often, though (and, *most* often, even in the early days of that dream scenario), getting the organizational buy-in and support you need requires a

solid understanding of how your association colleagues think *plus* a skillful marshalling of facts likely to shape that thinking in ways helpful to your program.

For some executives, the term “office politics” is almost a slur. Don’t buy into such misguided thinking—strong political skills (understanding others’ concerns, making sure that your activities also generate benefits for your colleagues) can directly translate into success for your publishing program.

Typical Association Decision-Makers

Let’s identify the likely major participants in the association decision-making process—which is nearly always a joint effort by staff executives and volunteer leaders, usually elected officers. As you think about the decisions that will affect your program, keep these people in mind:

- *Executive Director* (ED)—responsible for the overall operation of the association and reports, at least nominally, to the elected President and Board.
- *Chief Financial Officer* (CFO)—heads budgeting, accounting, and other finance functions.
- *Finance and/or Administration Director*—supervises Accounting; in the case of a Chief Operations Officer (COO), might also manage Human Resources, IT, and other Operations staff.
- *Human Resources* (HR) *Manager*—directs HR staff and indirectly supports the association in recruiting, management of benefits, and conformance with state and federal laws.
- *IT*—whether internal or external.
- *Communications Director*—responsible for communicating the activities of the association to members, non-members working and researching in the field, and the general public. The Communications Director may also oversee (or at least have a voice in) the association’s broader content efforts; e.g., newsletters, magazines and journals, websites, even books.
- *Webmaster*—maintains the organization’s pages and site(s).
- *Marketing Director*—identifies potential markets and promotes association programs and products.
- *Conference and/or Professional Learning staff*—charged with informing the membership about best practices and raising the bar for professional performance.
- *Sales representatives*—if you’re robust and lucky enough to have them.
- *Publications professionals*—staff and free-lance resources, from editors to designers to printing and production staff.
- *Association Governance*—normally the Board of Directors, which is generally made up of elected volunteers who are often well-recognized members of the professional community.
- *Publishing Committees*—volunteer members of the association providing oversight to publishing activities and often functioning as subject-area experts; e.g., authors and reviewers.

Admittedly this is a long list of people to keep in mind. Especially since most top-level association executives (who are generally trained in a technical, professional, or administrative field) often find publishing a total mystery. Further, you should not be surprised if your volunteer leaders also know little about the actual business of publishing.

Therefore, it is important to take time to educate top staff and volunteer leaders about publishing as a business. Remember, you are the publishing professional. That said, you must always consider your colleagues' perspectives when you are lobbying for your program.

General Guidelines About What You Need to Share

Despite the exhaustive (perhaps *exhausting*) length of the list above, we propose a “three-tiered” approach to different groups. That is, association staff and volunteer leaders can generally be appealed to on the basis of three fundamental motivations:

- *Association executive perspective*—For these managers (from Executive Director, in the list above, all the way down through IT), you basically need to be clear that your efforts will not bankrupt the organization or cripple it by breaking systems or misusing tools. As already stated, all of these otherwise accomplished professionals are likely inexperienced in publishing and, therefore, prone to view ambitious projects with a high level of fear—as potentially mortal threats to the organization's bottom line or its costly infrastructure. Hence, with this crowd, your emphasis has to begin with reassurance but also carry the promise of success, even profit. That is, you begin by emphasizing responsible stewardship of association funds. Ultimately, though, you have to tempt this group with the revenue and profits that successful publications generate. The mindset you're trying to counter goes much like this: Publishing is merely a member service, not a business asset that can generate profits to fund other association initiatives. Only by sharing industry statistics and individual case histories of other associations' publishing successes—all while citing any previous track record of your own in generating income—will you reassure this cadre of leaders that a well-run publishing enterprise can increase—not endanger—the organization's bottom line.
- *The evangelists' viewpoint*—Almost every person on the part of the list above that begins with the Communications Director and extends through the publications professionals shares (unlike the previous group of top leaders) an outward-facing perspective. That is, their jobs depend less on internal considerations and much more on broadening the organization's appeal and widening its audience. To some extent, nearly all of these individuals are involved in creating and disseminating content—in short, in some form of publishing. So the challenge here is not overcoming fear of the unknown, or even of taking risks. Instead, it's convincing this group that your publishing projects can enhance and reinforce their own efforts—in short, that you are both creative and collaborative.
- *Volunteer and governance perspective*—These are your members who are professionals in the industry represented by the association and who often serve as chairs of one or more committees that have an advisory or oversight function for the association's publications. They sometimes control or influence budget allocations. Even so, volunteers often tend to look at publications through the prism of the association's mission and image, much less so through a financial lens. Persuading this group that publications extend the organization's brand and impact is vital; convincing them that standout publications enhance the value of membership is fundamental. If you are successful in communicating these messages, volunteer leaders often become your program's most influential and effective advocates.

Typical Questions that Association Leaders Ask About Publications

As outlined above, understanding your colleagues' perspectives and concerns helps you craft your internal messaging about publications. However, don't overdo it. Association leaders generally desire only minimal details about how publishing works. They are typically more interested in knowing only the broadest *business implications*. Which means that you can pretty much expect questions like the following:

- Big picture: What are the risks and potential benefits of the program you are proposing?
- How much will it cost to get your program up and running?
- Will publishing on that scale require additional staff and add fixed costs?
- What will be the likely return on this investment?
- What is the underlying *mission* of your publishing program?
- How do we control the editorial quality of the product? How will editorial decisions be made? Who has the final word?
- If the goal is to publish books, how many do you need to release each year? How many copies of each book are you hoping to sell? How are such decisions informed?
- How will the books be marketed and distributed?
- What metrics will you use to measure customer (both member and non-member) satisfaction?
- In what formats will the books be available? If digital formats are needed (and they usually are), what additional technical challenges and costs do you anticipate?
- Can you name another association that has succeeded at what you are proposing? Do you have access to their actual numbers? Could I/we meet with representatives from that group?

For many association executives and volunteers, publishing is far, far down the list of their organizational goals and concerns. In their eyes, the organization's main thrust boils down to membership, certification, and education (including conferences and other events). Publishing is viewed as exotic, a bit mysterious, perhaps even a mere adjunct to these "core" programs. To some, publishing means something as vaguely defined as "editing or writing." To others, publishing is a term synonymous with "printing"—a purely mechanical process, possibly outdated. As outlined above, your job is to gradually shift this thinking toward seeing publishing as a central activity of any successful association.

More often than not, association executives pay attention only to a publishing operation's costs and its revenue potential. The resident expert in this matter is the CFO and, in most instances, will be a key decision-maker for any major financial move.

CFOs in most associations have enormous power. So pay attention to your CFO's initial inclinations and assumptions regarding book publishing—and do your best to substitute real-world examples as a foundation of that person's understanding of your goals.

The Appeal of Publishing for Associations

Association financial experts understand that relying too heavily on member dues as a source of revenue is dangerous. In the event of any big shift in membership, other sources of revenue—e.g., publications—can bridge the budgetary gap and add value to member services.

And the other basket into which associations tend to put far too many of their eggs? Conferences. That is a business that can disappear literally overnight—as the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated all too clearly in 2020, just as September 11 did two decades ago.

Therefore, it is a smart business strategy for associations to diversify their portfolio by growing their publications effort into a strong and independent source of non-dues revenue.

To illustrate this point, a client of ours who is an association membership manager, shared this all-too-familiar story.

I attended an ASAE meeting and was amazed to hear how profitable some association publications divisions are. I came back to our executive director and urged that we take a serious look at how we could grow our own publishing program. Right now, we have only one major source of revenue, and that's membership dues. We're simply too dues-intensive. We need to build up our publications unit—it needs to be a larger piece of revenues and to generate profits for the wider organization. Otherwise, we've got practically no new products.

Whatever you do, don't let this quite-typical story become your own. The key characteristic of an association-sponsored publishing program is that it can become a dependable, high-margin income producer. And the beauty of it is that publishing achieves this aim while simultaneously advancing the mission of your organization *and* elevating the profession. A trifecta, as it were. So get to work on making publications an essential part of your organization.

Reviewer Acknowledgment

We wish to thank *Victor V. Van Beuren*, Director, Book Editorial Operations, ADA Books at American Diabetes Association, for his technical review of this paper. Vic made numerous suggestions that improved this paper.

Also of Interest

- A-8, *Twenty Best Practices in Nonprofit Publishing*. Revised with co-author David Beacom, 2018, 2 pages
- A-9, *Don't Miss Out: Re-tool Your Publishing Program to Extend Your Mission and Build Profits*. Revised with co-author David Beacom, 2018, 5 pages
- A-11, *Maximizing Volunteer Input in Association Publishing*. Revised with co-author David Beacom, © 2018, 3 pages
- A-14 *Political Success in Associations: Making the Volunteer- Staff Relationship Work*, 2017, 6 pages
- A-31, *An Interview with David Beacom on Association Publishing*, 2018, 5 pages

All available at http://johnbmchugh.com/free_pub_guides.htm

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