

Association Planning and Communication in Europe 2006

Key Points

- 1 Most people join associations for networking, experience and education. A few highlighted the importance of professional recognition and certification.
- 2 Association staff and volunteers are keen to gain access to more education and training to give them access to established 'best practices'.
- 3 Members want their associations to invest in technology to provide more interactive web sites that allow member-to-member communication and filtered information to meet specific needs. Leaders should have business and financial plans in place to make this a reality, especially where funding is an issue.
- 4 Volunteer committees need to improve their communications to members.
- 5 There were strong indicators that association events meet members' needs and that the majority of those attending gain from learning and sharing.
- 6 Respondents emphasized the need for association events to be worthwhile which includes more specific and topical, rather than broad, topics; opportunities to share information between members; and increased time for audience debate.
- 7 With an increased need to demonstrate learning and business impact from attending events, respondents requested more practical, hands-on workshops from quality trainers, with follow-up activities post-event to enhance the experience.

Perception versus Reality

This report provides a summary of the views of European professionals about association planning and communication. Copies are available for download from the Association Gateway, www.associationgateway.org, - an independent information resource for association leaders.

Over the past three years, this annual association survey has looked at members' views on membership recruitment and retention and has highlighted the key points for associations to look after their members. The results from the last survey indicated a difference between the perception of members and the reality of an association's success. In this survey, we have asked questions to identify how professional and trade associations are utilizing best practice for future planning and communicating this message to members.

This online survey was distributed to a diverse range of European professionals between September 2005 and February 2006. The survey was completed by 147 people from Europe which included respondents from Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Lithuania and Slovakia for the first time.

Demographics

The majority of respondents are current members of a professional or trade association (86%) with the mean length of membership of 13 years. Over 81% represent either Baby Boomers (born 1943 - 1959 and described as consensus-orientated following a period of youthful rebellion) or Generation X (born 1960 - 1979 and described as adaptable, feedback-orientated and pragmatic) - which is similar to the age range of those responding over the past three years. Over 88% consider themselves to be 'established' or 'well-established' in their professions, whilst over 50% work alone or in small groups of less than three people, perhaps highlighting the importance of associations to people who may be more isolated from their peer groups.

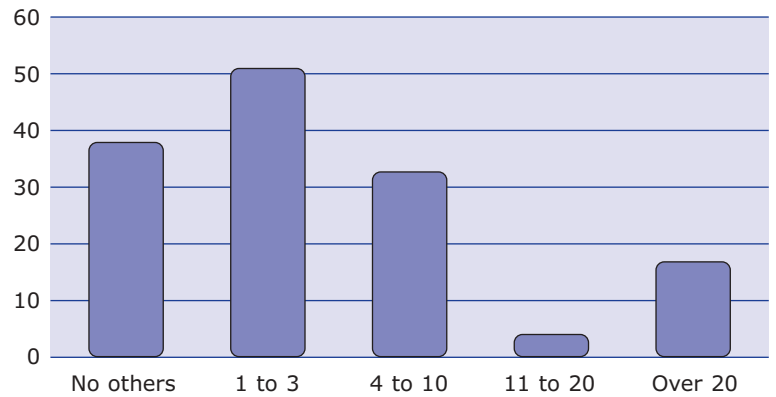
Membership Benefits

The survey asked respondents what they hoped to gain from their membership. The results show that the majority of people who responded would join to: network for business or social reasons (86% - an increase to the top of the chart from 49% in 2004); experience (60% - similar to gaining access to best practice in 2004); and to benefit from educational activities (58% - slight increase from 51% in 2004). Of these members, nearly 50% were keen to become more involved in the leadership of their association. Although the reasons that members join an association have not changed, there is a significant increase in members joining to be able to network with other members. This is supported by the requests for more opportunities for member-to-member communications online and at face-to-face events.

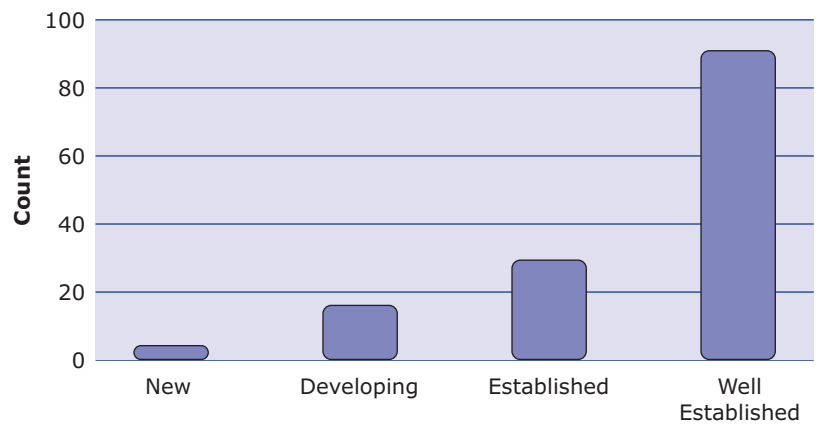
Leadership

Respondents were asked about their views on the leadership and management of their associations. A positive response from many showed that they felt their associations were either fully (38%) or partly (53%) managing themselves to maintain a healthy future. The future looks good for European associations, with over 60% of association leaders perceived to be focused on planning for the future; 66% recognizing and planning for changes in their specific industry sector; and 57% being described as proactive. However, this leaves 40% of respondents feeling that their association is not delivering in these areas.

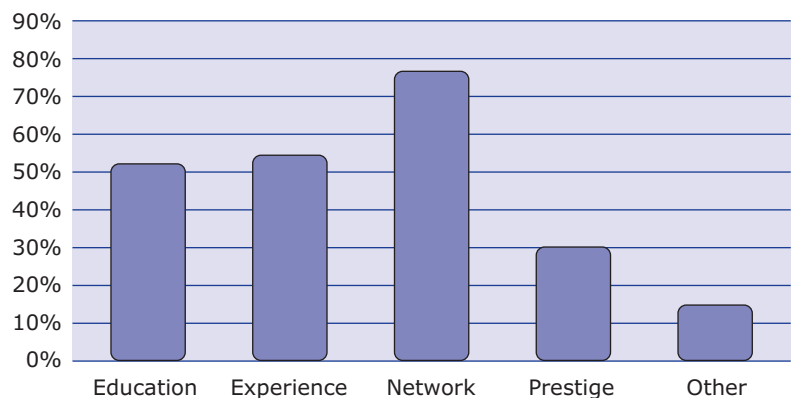
Interaction with others



Experience



Benefits of Association



40% of respondents felt that their association had an agreed development plan in place and this correlated well with the perception of a focused and proactive leadership. There was also a strong association between having staff in place and the use of best practice.

This suggests that there is a difference between perception and the reality in how associations are managed, with perhaps too many believing they are doing a good job but without the formal tools and best practices to support them. The apparent lack of training (27% felt no training was taking place) causes concern since it relates closely to the group not following best practice. A danger is that some association leaders are 'reinventing the wheel' rather than learning from their peers.

Communication about leadership issues and management of the association

Only 18% of respondents were not interested in the information distributed by their association, with 35% taking the time to consider the impact of the information sent out and 46% wanting to get involved as a result of this. Whilst communication from those associations with staff was high (not unexpected if staff are paid to communicate to members), it was noticeable that communication from volunteer committees was very poor with 25% of respondents saying they never received committee communications and only 34% saying they did receive such information. Whilst this may be a reflection of the time constraints on volunteers, there is clearly a need for committees to be more visible in the work they are doing - both to gain commitment for their activities and for future committee recruitment.

An effective internal and external communication strategy should be in place linked to the association's overall business and financial plan.

Respondents obtained information about their association from direct communications, web sites, meetings and general or trade media. When asked how communication could be improved, the main response was for more filtered information and better use of interactive web sites. With current technology, associations should be investing in web site redesign to provide member areas, member-to-member communication and filtered information depending on need/criteria.

Face-to-face communication

Over 80% of respondents stated that their association events were successful, in particular in helping individuals to develop within their profession or industry. This is encouraging news and reflects the increasing efforts of associations to identify their members' needs and to plan the timing and location of their events appropriately. Of our respondents, 75% are contributing in some way to the learning experience showing that the survey group is highly active within their associations. However, some key recommendations were made which should be addressed by those association leaders with responsibility for events:

- Agendas/programmes are too broad and not always topical
- Quality of speakers is not always good
- There is not enough time for audience debate
- Make it worthwhile - time is money
- Focus on learning and educational experiences

With the increasing need to demonstrate a return on investment for members attending events, it is

important to address these issues. Too many events are very broad in focus through trying to meet everyone's needs. In planning an association event or programme of events, the organizers need to provide opportunities for members to break into smaller groups for discussions and provide practical education relevant to their specific needs.

There were specific recommendations for associations to attract higher quality practical and educational 'trainers', rather than 'speakers', linked closely to improvements in content and, in particular, the method of delivery. Sessions and events should be focused, practical, interactive educational experiences that help people to gain new knowledge, learn new skills and develop new behaviours which will have an impact on their business.

Follow-up activities will help to reinforce key educational messages, provide an opportunity to obtain further feedback on the success of the event, and help to enhance each member's experience of the association.

Members want more practical and hands-on educational and training experiences with follow-up activities after each event.

Summary

The key points identified from this survey can be used by members and leaders to plan improvements in the management of their professional or trade association. The good news for associations is that professionals in today's business world understand and value the role of membership and volunteer work and that over half of the respondents felt their associations were proactive, focused, and planning for a healthy future.

Sponsors

This survey was made possible with the support of IMEX (www.imex-frankfurt.com), Resources for Associations (www.resourcesforassociations.co.uk) and The Association Gateway (www.associationgateway.org).



IMEX (17 - 19 April 07), which takes place annually in Frankfurt, is the benchmark worldwide exhibition of the meetings and incentive travel industry, bringing together 14,000 meetings and incentive travel industry professionals from over 140 countries. IMEX Association Day will combine themed sessions, round-table

discussions and networking opportunities to focus on the growing need for associations to spread the word on the value of their services. The day now attracts the largest gathering of association executives in Europe and will take place on Monday 16 April 2007. For more information please contact Carina Bloom: carina@imex-frankfurt.com, T: +44 1273 227311.



The Association Gateway (www.associationgateway.org) is an independent web site for association volunteers and staff. The aim of the site is to develop a community of association leaders who can exchange best practice, solutions and experience; utilize links to relevant industry associations and information

channels; attend relevant educational events; keep up-to-date with association news; and gain access to supplier, venue and destination resources.



Resources for Associations (www.resourcesforassociations.co.uk) is the association management company based in the UK responsible for the survey design, collation and analysis of the data and the final report. Carole McKellar

CMM, Managing Director, said that the company "wanted to explore the degree to which associations in Europe are planning for the future and communicating these plans with their members to help highlight their importance for the future growth and success of the association".