

Be committed to member service. This is more than a philosophy. You need to develop specific member service policies and procedures. For example, when members call, it's never a bad time; you always have time to talk to them. Your staff creates your member service culture and should want to help members be successful in the profession or industry.

Get buy-in from the board. Providing better service to members may cost money. When you present your board with a plan to increase member service, provide a budget and stress member retention as your objective, or board members will wonder why you haven't been providing that level of service all along.

Provide regular and consistent customer service training. All staff members need to participate in customer service training

quarterly. When employees understand the association's standards for working with members, they are empowered to solve problems and be proactive about following up with members. Consider asking staff to write down all their interactions with members for 30 days and then review them. You learn so much from this exercise. If you understand people's problems and how to handle them, they will do business with you.

Measure and monitor your success in serving members. Evaluate what level of member service your association offers by hosting focus groups with members and making service calls to find out how satisfied they are with your service. Get input from members about what's important to them. Find out what makes good customer service.

Associations need to conduct shorter,

more frequent member surveys and then report back to the membership: Here's the information that you provided, and here's how we're going to use it.

Implementing a change

Even if your association has the key components of a membership culture in place, Levin acknowledges that in some instances, you may need to adjust your membership model because of industry changes or other external factors. He cites the consolidation of companies in the manufacturing industry and the privatization of the health care industry as examples. According to Levin, if you're planning to change any component of your membership model, you need to take a number of steps:

1. Get member input. Through surveys and focus groups, determine how mem-

Communicating a Change in Dues Structure

BY STEPHEN C. CAREY, CAE

When associations consider revising their dues structures, which may impact the benefits they offer, both staff and volunteers must be prepared to communicate the new structure in such a way that the members have complete buy-in for the change and understand the reasons for its implementation.

Many associations fall down when communicating a change in their dues structures to stakeholders. Usually when Association Management and Marketing Resources conducts dues studies for clients, we find that no direct link has been made to the association's value equation when the new structure is rolled out and that members

had little input in creating the new structure. To avoid these shortcomings, make sure you take these steps in introducing a new dues program:

Include representatives from all stakeholder segments in discussions about alternative dues structures. Communicate early and often during the discernment process, rather than springing the new program on the members at the annual meeting.

Discuss anticipated changes to the dues structure using a variety of communication vehicles, calling for input and discussion. Conduct a *town meeting* to discuss the issue at an upcoming conference or via conference call. This will ensure that the association has provided every opportunity for input and discussion prior to the board taking action or the issue being put to a vote by the membership.

Use a common denominator, or unit of measurement, as a base for dues. Members must easily understand the value proposition of their membership in your association. Some associations have been operating on an *unequal* dues proposition for a number of years and need to rethink the dues base to make it more equitable to the various constituencies. For example, for a trade association, this may mean basing dues on total company revenues rather than on numbers of facilities owned or operated. You have to ensure equity in the application of the dues structure.

Tie the dues levels (whether fixed, variable, or tiered) to quantitative and realistic products and services provided. Regardless of the dues base you select, segment each class of member and ask how this change affects each segment and what current value each sees in the association. It is always a good idea to conduct a member needs and value assessment to link value to product to price and examine each segment's response as you develop the new dues structure and stratify it to different classes of members.

When the association and its members understand the basis for the new dues structure and feel that it is equitable to all members based on the vision, mission, goals, and value proposition of the association, members feel they are getting fair value for their membership dollars.

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