

Is It Time for New Technology?

By Bryan Robertson

When you're running a small-staff association, you can often feel like you're always one step behind the larger ones, especially when it comes to technology. But it's important to remember that with some creativity, a small technology budget can go a long way. As a matter of fact, used properly, technology may even serve as an additional revenue source for your association and potentially reduce costs.

With new technology being introduced faster and faster today, it is easy to be intimidated. Much of the latest technology is moving faster than your members' adoption of it. You don't necessarily need the latest, but you do need the technology that will be used by your members and benefits them in the best way possible.

With the limited budget and time that many small associations have, it's important to base your technology decisions on the fundamentals of your association: Ask yourself how the technology will help you to accomplish the mission of your association. Does technology allow you to more efficiently and effectively communicate with your members while lowering your costs? What role should technology play in accomplishing your association's goals? In other words, it's really about touch points. So the most important questions you should be asking are these: Is there anything I can do with technology that can improve or enrich my members' experience with my organization? Is there a compelling value add for members?

As a small-staff executive, you have to prioritize what needs to be done and match that with the technological components available to you. A good first step is to determine how the technology you currently have is being used by your members and how that technology is being leveraged by your staff. Who better to evaluate what technology to implement and how to use it than your members? I

recommend contacting a representative sampling of your members and asking them what they want and how they want it delivered to them. Ask them how you can improve your website, your emails, and your e-newsletters. For example, you could ask them which materials and media they access online, how often, and when. How do they prefer to connect with your association? How do they prefer your association to communicate with them? When and where would they like to access the media assets of your association? The answers to these questions will guide you as to which technology you need and how to use it to best serve your members.

For example, say that you are the state audubon society. You could send your members a photo of the bird of the month to use as wallpaper for their cell phones. You could allow them to download that bird's song as a ringtone. Better still, every Thursday, send them a message that highlights rare bird sightings in your state with a map showing where the sightings were made. They will have it on their phones, giving them the ability to access it at any time.

Sounds great, right? But is it actually easy to do and affordable? The answer is most certainly yes. In fact, you can do it yourself—and often for less than the cost

Determine how the technology you currently have is being used by your members.

One new, cost-effective, and growing method of communication to explore with your members is cell phone or mobile technology. In spite of a soft economy, 41 percent of consumers have no plans to stop or cut back on the purchase of cell phones, making it an increasingly viable communication channel for your association. Since there are more than 230 million cell phones in the United States alone, it is likely that most of your members have one.

After all, most of your members are out and about, moving around a lot. What better way to reach them or to allow them access than through this omnipresent communication device? A few words of caution: Your members have their cell phones with them 12 to 18 hours a day; they will only be receptive to messages that enrich their lives and that they perceive as adding value to their membership.

of a stamp, making it more affordable than direct mail. And if you are able to get a sponsor, you may actually be able to generate revenue for your organization.

As good as this—and other—technology sounds, I can't stress enough how important it is to make sure you are delivering what your members want and that you are facilitating your association's core mission at the same time.

Bryan Robertson is president and CEO of Archimedes One, Inc., Fall River, Massachusetts. Email: bbr@archimedes1.com