

Success Through Sustainability: 15 Top Association Trends

ASSOCIATIONS NOW, April 2010

By: *Kristin Clarke, CAE*

Associations are finding new value in social responsibility efforts—from energy-efficient computing and expanded ethics policies to industry surveys and awards. We take a look at 15 top trends making a difference in associations and nonprofits today.

Two years ago, almost 900 associations, business partners, and nonprofits launched a sustainability movement to use their resources and expertise to address social, environmental, and economic problems—as well as their own business challenges.

But shortly after the spring 2008 Global Summit for Social Responsibility, the declining economy plunged faster. Observers feared that the pre-crisis growth of sustainability initiatives, particularly those less than three years old, would be abandoned in favor of hunker-down strategies.

That was true in some corporate cases, but recent business studies from McKinsey Global, Siemens Building Technologies, and others show that pullbacks can be mistakes, both financially and otherwise. The genie doesn't appear to want to return to the bottle—at least not in the corporate world, and certainly not among government and academic entities.

The association community, however, has no sector wide studies comparing return on investment for each sustainability tactic before, during, and after the worst of this economic crisis passes, although ASAE & The Center is developing a member survey this year to track sustainability progress more specifically.

But plentiful anecdotal evidence—coupled with case studies of individual associations, conversations with outside experts, and internal research—show that the poor economy actually may have accelerated certain sustainability efforts within the association and nonprofit sectors, especially in the environmental realm. Following are 15 trends identifiable within those efforts.

Trend 1: Green Teams

One of the most popular trends is the rise of internal, cross-department green teams charged with lightening the organization's environmental impacts, identifying potential cost savings, and meeting member expectations around environmental conservation. Green team members have varying levels of sustainability expertise and may have steep learning curves as they seek to audit the association, create pilot projects, establish metrics, and recommend actions to senior staff.

These teams can pay off, however, through increased efficiency, cost savings, innovation, and staff enthusiasm. A February 2010 study by the National Environmental Education Foundation reports that educating and engaging employees in sustainability efforts helps corporations improve their bottom line, attract and retain staff, and accomplish other business goals. Groups such as the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons also have launched green-team-sponsored internal newsletters and intranet tools to share knowledge and progress.

Trend 2: Green Meetings

From tote bags made of banana leaves to sustainably certified menus, meeting planners are conducting some extreme eco-makeovers of their events. At press time, many are awaiting the final version of measurable standards for environmental performance by the Green Meeting Industry Council, U.S.

Environmental Protection Agency, and APEX (Accepted Practices Exchange). Also pending at the International Standards Organization at press time is a revised British Standard Sustainable Events Certification 2009 (BS 8901:2009), which aims to ensure the “highest degree of expertise in producing sustainable meetings and events.”

On the expo side, CTIA—The Wireless Association and others have added eco-friendly product and service areas to their tradeshows that are bringing in new revenue and traffic.

Trend 3: Membership Sustainability Surveys

Many organizations already have or are currently polling members about social responsibility to identify their top needs. Such surveys are often the foundation for short- and long-term strategies.

Member polls have been critical to planning at the Institute for Supply Management, which has a long involvement in ethical sourcing. The association has used results to set aggressive sustainability goals, and in 2009, it held its first sustainability conference to warm accolades from members.

Another group, Manufacturing Enterprise Solutions Association, has announced a global survey called *Eco-efficiency in Manufacturing* to determine sustainability approaches used by manufacturers. The American Hotel and Lodging Association has used its annual survey of 10,000 hotels to track greening trends, such as the percentage of respondents incorporating LEED standards into their properties now (20 percent) or in the next year (21 percent).

Trend 4: Sustainability Self-Audits

Another early step in any sustainability strategy is to assess what socially responsible actions the association is already taking—and often not leveraging. Self-auditing has become much more common, in part because organizations are moving to ensure their philanthropic and volunteer programs align with their goals and mission.

Oddly, associations rarely share these findings with the larger membership, although CEOs say that boards are very interested in the results. Instead, self-audits are used as a foundation for a comprehensive strategy that is then more widely communicated. Sometimes a single department spearheads the move to a full audit by sharing ROI from its own efforts, such as cost savings or positive member feedback.

Trend 5: Expanded Volunteer Opportunities

Associations are involved in more volunteer work than ever, in part because, as confirmed by the ASAE & The Center’s 2008 *Decision to Volunteer* study, association professionals are significantly more apt to volunteer than the national average.

One shift is the transformation of short-term volunteer projects, such as an annual pro-bono service day, into long-term commitments, such as a year-round volunteer program with public recognition and continuing education elements, like the American Dental Association’s Give Kids a Smile program. Other associations develop an ongoing relationship with one nonprofit, such as KaBoom!, to hold legacy projects whenever the association gathers.

Traditional international study tours are also changing to include volunteer elements in which members not only learn new skills but also donate them to the needy or train professionals in developing countries.

The popular Look Good, Feel Better program for women with cancer, sponsored jointly by the Personal Care Products Council Foundation, American Cancer Society, and National Cosmetologists Association,

was designed as a long-term program and has taught 700,000 patients how to improve their appearance during its 20-year history. It now has 14,000 trained volunteers who donate 224,000 hours of service. The industry donates \$10 million worth of products and raises an additional \$1.5 million each year to support the program, which grows 10 to 15 percent annually, according to Executive Director Louanne Roark.

“What the industry saw in this program and the opportunity it brought to us is a chance to come together as an industry [in a way] that has a very strong sense of social responsibility and interest in serving those people who have made their brands and companies successful,” Roark explains.

Trend 6: Sustainability Education

Members and staff are being offered a range of sustainability education via webinars, meeting tracks, keynote addresses, publications, websites, brown-bag staff lunches, and even entire conferences. Examples include the National Association of Home Builders’ (NAHB) National Green Building Conference, a major revenue generator that trains 1,000-plus attendees about the group’s National Green Building Standard and related skills. Seventy-five percent of members report that the conference helps increase their knowledge and provides them with a competitive advantage.

The National Restaurant Association themed its conference around sustainability in 2008. To supplement its in-person education, NRA offers extensive online guidance and a cool “virtual green restaurant” at its “Conserve—Go Green, See Green” website, www.conserve.restaurant.org/conservenow.

Trend 7: Awards

The addition of new awards is usually popular with members, so it’s not surprising so many sustainability awards programs have been popping up. A typical example is the ASA Care Award, created by the American Staffing Association as a way to “recognize corporate social responsibility initiatives among ASA member companies and affiliated chapters.”

More than a few groups have developed recognition programs around competitions that engage members and sponsors and boost the impact of social responsibility initiatives. The National Association of Letter Carriers organizes the largest one-day national food drive in the United States each May and tracks and honors chapters that gather the most donated food.

The American Bankers Association Foundation launched a successful contest in 2009 to reward one bank with \$1,000 to donate to a local school if its employee volunteers educated the one millionth child participating in ABA’s annual Teach Children to Save campaign. The program has reached 3.4 million youth since 1997 with 80,000 bank volunteers teaching the importance of lifelong saving, but the contest has added extra zing.

Trend 8: Certifications, Seals, and Designations

Good certification programs provide steady revenue to associations and help ensure a high standard of excellence within a trade or industry. Sustainability-related certifications—although still young in many fields—are providing welcome new revenue and engagement.

Among the latest are the Direct Marketing Association’s (DMA) Environmentally Responsible Marketer, the National Association of Realtors’ Green Resource Council designation, and NAHB’s multilevel Green Professional. The Green Restaurant Association, International Association of Conference Centres, and state-level Green Lodging programs also offer a Code of Sustainability certification or eco-seal option.

Trend 9: Aggressive Green Computing Strategies

Technology innovations, lower prices, standardized certifications of green electronics by EPEAT and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star program, and often significant savings in energy usage and costs have made green IT one of the easier sustainability efforts to embrace.

Electronic waste programs also are allowing associations to recycle, donate, or properly dispose of everything from broken cell phones to large data-storage equipment, all of which can contain hazardous chemicals and metals.

Trend 10: Partnerships with Business Vendors and Nonprofits

Associations with the strongest sustainability strategies often are working closely with business partners to track down budget-appropriate eco-friendly products, identify practices that could be improved, establish reasonable metrics, and leverage corporate social responsibility efforts already underway.

Increasingly, vendors are mentoring organization leaders about potential business opportunities related to sustainability.

Trend 11: Disaster Relief Funds

Since 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the Asian tsunami, associations representing everyone from fire chiefs to actors have created disaster relief funds. Those dollars may be reserved strictly for members in crisis such as the unemployed or injured, or they can be general emergency-response funds for broader catastrophes. The Haiti earthquake in January 2010, in particular, prompted the donation of millions of dollars to association disaster funds within days.

Trend 12: Sustainability Involvement by Member Subgroups

Chapters are bringing social responsibility initiatives to the local level. Increasingly common are sustainability-oriented councils, task forces, sections, and member committees.

These teams—such as the American Library Association's (ALA) Social Responsibilities Round Table—usually keep staff and leadership informed of ideas, draft proposals, education session requests, and advance warnings of sustainability issues that could affect the full membership.

Trend 13: Selective Offsetting of Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Although the United Nations COP-15 conference on climate change in December 2009 did not lead to the types of regulatory outcomes once anticipated, organizations such as the National Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers and NAHB are aggressively innovating products and practices to diminish their industries' carbon emissions. Few associations appear to be figuring their own overall carbon footprint; instead, many are taking a piecemeal approach.

However, more groups are finding ways to enable meeting attendees to offset their greenhouse gas emissions through carbon programs at host hotels (Marriott's "Spirit to Preserve the Rainforest," for instance), self-calculating offset kiosks at conference booths (Professional Convention Management Association), and airline or train companies. Some associations, such as the League of American Bicyclists, generated new revenues by finding sponsors to offset attendee emissions, and some travel agencies are including the service as a differentiator in their bids to serve associations. Associations also are serving as facilitators between members and nonprofit off setters.

Trend 14: Updated and Expanded Ethics Policies

Heightened scrutiny has led loads of organizations to modernize their ethics programs. Focal areas include conduct guidelines, guidance to address ethical dilemmas raised by emerging technology, conflict of interest policies for board members, enforcement of member ethics requirements, and ethics pledge requirements for members.

At the Word of Mouth Marketing Association, members requested development of formal best practices around ethical social media marketing, as well as an assessment tool to help marketers preempt unethical word-of-mouth tactics.

Another example is the new icon announced in January 2010 by a coalition of DMA, Association of National Advertisers, Council for Better Business Bureaus, and others so companies can communicate their allegiance to the industry's 2009 Self-Regulatory Principles for Online Behavioral Advertising regarding data collection and use.

Trend 15: Formal Sustainability Statements and Policies

Potential partners and major donors, such as the Taproot Foundation, are asking for written statements of sustainability values as they explore allying with or donating to an organization. The Child Life Council is one of many groups stepping back to codify and extend ethical behavior and standards to partners and coalition members. And ALA has used its hefty list of environmental, social, and economic policy statements as the basis on which to create new programs, go after new grants and partners, and ensure alignment with its core mission.

“I’m proud that so many leaders in our sector are making an effort to learn how to best integrate sustainability throughout their organizations, but we need others to come on board,” says ASAE Chair Velma R. Hart, CAE, national finance director and chief financial officer for AMVETS. “Sustainability is a journey, and it’s time to go beyond just the front door. Let’s use social responsibility as a core value from which to take some real organizational leaps of faith—in ourselves, our colleagues, our partners, and others. That’s when true change will happen.”

Looking Ahead

The two-year anniversary of the Global Summit for Social Responsibility is a convenient chance to check in on whether and how sustainability strategies have begun to deliver results. According to Robin Lokerman, chief executive officer of the MCI Group’s Institutional Division and chair of the Center for Association Leadership, “The Global Summit two years ago opened a lot of people’s eyes about how tremendous an opportunity social responsibility strategies are for their organizations and for a world that needs our expertise and resources.”

“Two years is a short time for any international movement, but already we’re seeing impressive progress around sustainability within the association and nonprofit communities,” agrees John H. Graham IV, CAE, president and CEO of ASAE & The Center. “We’re hearing some terrific stories about the return on investment achieved by aligning and incorporating sustainability strategies wisely. Whether it’s simply by reducing waste at their meetings or more dramatically by responding to the tragic needs of Haiti after the earthquake, associations are making more of a difference than ever.”

*Kristin Clarke, CAE, is a writer, editor, and researcher for ASAE & The Center’s Knowledge Center.
Email: kclarke@asaecenter.org*