

Managing Editor's Desk

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On the Demise of Associations ...

From the more alarmist wings of the association management community comes some interesting literature about the future of associations (like NEHA and our many affiliates) and the likelihood of our survival. One of my responsibilities involves looking out for any danger that might threaten NEHA, so I tend to pay attention to what the alarmists have to say. Although I often find their dire predictions to be a bit exaggerated, they nonetheless keep me on my toes and make me face up to issues that would otherwise probably pass me by. Besides, I've always preferred the philosophy "To be forewarned is to be forearmed" over "Got caught by surprise"!

In any event—and since NEHA is really *your* association—I thought you might be interested in what some of the alarmists are saying about organizations like ours, especially since many of these writings and predictions take as their basis the ways that modern trends are influencing *you and your perceptions of us*.

In my monitoring of the literature, I've seen serious discussions having to do with the extinction of associations surface twice within the last six years or so. I noticed the first instance about six years ago, when I was reading articles with headlines like "Associations, the Next Road Kill of the Internet."

The argument behind this prediction began with the observation that for the last 200 years, associations have functioned as repositories of specialized information. Possession of this information gave the holder a competitive advantage over others. To get one's hands on the information, one had to become a member of the association. It was membership, you see, that provided the key to the door that, once opened, gave one access to a wealth of relevant information.

Unlike social networking products, associations have a conscience.

According to the alarmists, the Internet threatened to break up this nice little arrangement. Thanks to the Internet, virtually anyone could now pretty much access whatever information they wished. Moreover, much of the information was available at little or no cost. As a result, the monopoly that associations held on specialized information was coming to a screeching end. Little wonder that some thoughtful observers were speculating that associations were destined to become the new roadkill of the Internet. The Internet was cutting out the very heart of what had made associations unique.

Although this argument originally surfaced with some fanfare, it hasn't had a lot of staying power. The Internet has increasingly become a daily staple of life, but droves of associations have *not* been toppling over. To the contrary, it appears as if associations have adapted rather well to the Internet. In fact, many have found ways to use the Internet to actually enhance their value. Many more have been forced to discover—thanks to the threat of the Internet—new ways to be of value with the information that they possess.

For example, while the Internet has opened up vast troves of fascinating data and informa-

tion, it is also true that more and more people have become frustrated with how long it now takes to find what they want. In response, many associations have taken on the task of combing through this vast volume of information to make available specifically what they know their members need. After all, we have the still unique responsibility of understanding our members and especially their needs. Accordingly, we've stepped up our efforts to provide that essential information to you, and in the process we've (we hope) saved you some measure of precious time that you can now use in other, more fruitful ways. Efforts like these help us to reclaim our mantle as an important source of information to you—even in this Internet era of cheap and plentiful information.

Although such adaptations have helped us to hold onto our relevance, we've had something else going for us that has helped us even more to survive the threat posed by the Internet. Associations are about much more than just information. Virtually by definition, *associations are communities*. We help a community of professionals define excellence, the body of knowledge that it practices, and its position on issues. Associations open up networks and networking opportunities. We provide the soil from which future leaders sprout. Through shared stories, meetings, symbols, and rituals, we provide affirmation for the communities that we represent and nurture. People derive personal meaning and identity from the kind of context that only a community can create. Associations help communities to construct such a context. The result is that all the members of an association community gain a precious opportunity to find deeper meaning in what they do.

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It seems to me that combining a new role of distilling information with our longstanding role of providing community gives us a compelling explanation for why, on the one hand, the alarmists of six years ago missed the mark with their predictions of our doom. On the other hand, we have the alarmists to thank for pushing us into our new information role and for enabling us to see more clearly the vitally important community role that we do in fact play.

Just when it seemed as if the waters had stilled, about six months ago, the alarmists erupted again with warnings of a new and even more dangerous threat. As I worked to process what they were saying this time, I have to say that I felt the sensation of being stopped dead in my tracks. This time around, they were targeting that unique community function of ours that until now, seemed beyond the reach of any threat. Let's look closely at what they are saying because if in fact our core value of providing community is indeed vulnerable to attack, we may very well be in the last stages of our life cycle as a viable form of institution.

The threat that I am referring to this time comes from the meteoric rise in the popularity of social-networking sites—and the “communities” that they are giving rise to.

It is indeed mind-boggling how quickly sites like MySpace.com and Facebook.com (to name only two such sites) have burst on the scene and changed people's lives, to say nothing of their communities. In fact, social critics are hailing such sites as nothing less than the new medium for social relationships. To give you some sense for the spectacular growth of these communities: MySpace boasts of over 200 million users worldwide and is projecting ad revenue for this year at \$1 billion. *This site was founded only four years ago!*

In a column that I wrote several months ago, I talked about trends. One trend that is reshaping America, and even the world, involves the amount of time we are all now spending in virtual worlds. Whether building a romantic relationship through e-mails in cyberspace or slaying dragons in some of the computer video games now available, the average person, according to some estimates, now spends 50 percent of his or her days in virtual worlds—and this percentage is growing. Social networking sites play nicely into this trend and at the same time seem to be fulfilling the very real human need that people have for community.

To add to the misery (or should I say the intellectual stimulation of it all!), on the

heels of the success of such generalist sites as MySpace and Facebook, we are already and not surprisingly seeing new and far more specialized social-networking sites springing up. Sites now exist for 5-year-olds and 55-year-olds. There are social networking sites for musicians, for mountain climbers, and for particular political persuasions. And with each site, a new community emerges that presumably satisfies the community needs that the members of such a site are looking for.

Whew! This sounds pretty serious, doesn't it? Our modern world is moving faster and faster. Maybe these new kinds of virtual and instantaneous communities represent the ticket to what people in today's and tomorrow's fast-paced worlds need—at least in terms of that desire for community.

In response, I would on the one hand note that this trend represents a much more serious threat to associations than what we saw with the Internet threat of six years ago. I take this threat to heart. On the other hand, I don't necessarily see that some environmental health version of MySpace is going to someday run NEHA out of business.

I base this assessment on several factors. To begin with, if associations are anything, they are dynamic. Already I am seeing, both within NEHA and in other associations, the beginnings of an adaptive response that holds the promise of co-opting this threat even if it means that we end up changing ourselves in the process. As part of our adaptation, I anticipate that you will soon see associations (like NEHA) offering some form of social-networking mechanism, especially through their Web sites.

In addition, I would note that the Internet threat (and our survival of it) helped us to see even more clearly how important our community function is. With this new threat, associations are even more urgently realizing that the very centerpiece of who and what they are is the community role they perform. As a result, you are seeing greater evidence of our community functions in most everything we do.

Here at NEHA, for instance, we are paying more attention to the community functions we play than ever before. If anything, our aim is to accentuate these functions so that we can get even better at honoring our obligation to provide you with that community network you seek. Even as I write, the effort to transform especially our AEC into much more of a community event is among our highest priorities. The same could be said of how we are moving to upgrade our Web site and even the *Journal*.

Accordingly, in much the same way that the Internet pushed us to change the way we develop and present information, these social-networking products are pushing us to take our role as providers of community much further.

Beyond our heightened awareness of the importance of community, it also appears (as with the Internet threat) that there is simply more to the story than what the alarmists are noting. I will end with some observations along these lines.

Facebook and MySpace are virtual experiences. People are free to be someone they aren't. Peer review doesn't exist. You don't literally touch anyone—not even by a smile, to say nothing of a handshake. No one is accountable to anyone else. And so forth.

By contrast, NEHA is real. We function with accountability, peer review, real issues, and real people. When our people interact at our annual conference, a committee meeting, a workshop, or the like, they interact with the full richness that the many dynamics of human interaction give rise to. The virtual world will never replace the richness of real people interacting with real people in person.

Of even greater significance is the fact that with virtual social networks, you have at best self-directing systems of people interacting. In an association, you have a backbone that serves to anchor and take care of the network. This backbone is also dedicated to making the network function in such a way that it directly benefits its members. There is a purpose to it all, a cause and an array of ways for community members to participate in advancing that cause. You don't find this kind of intrinsic value embedded in social-networking sites.

Unlike social-networking products, associations have a conscience. Our elected board, our paid professional staff, our inspiring committee volunteers and members—all the people involved in an association—work together as a team to promote the good both of the community and of every person who is a member of it.

Associations also provide specific programs that are crafted around your needs. Whether it is some particular education you need, a credential that you aspire to earn, or even a “tip” that we can provide, systems and people are daily working within an association community with the single purpose of helping you, the member.

Yes, the rise of social networks has put an extra thrill into our days. And yes, we realize that we need to stay ahead of the curve and, to the extent practical, take advantage of contemporary social-networking tools that can help us to better serve our community. But will social networks with their narrow focus

on relationships and single issues really replace the institution of associations? I doubt it—as long as associations continue to enshrine the member, provide community, and give conscience to the networks they support.

I know association managers who dismiss the alarmists and who don't make the time to listen to what they are saying. As for me, I am grateful for the alarmists. They keep us on edge, make us think, and push us to always get better at what we do.

NEHA is now 70 years old. We're also very healthy as an organization. To get to where we now are, we've had to respond and adapt to many threats over the years. (Remember when the world was coming to an end when droves of environmental health professionals moved into environmental protection work?!) So long as we continue to listen and stay in tune with the way the world is changing, my bet is that we are all in for a fantastic 100th birthday celebration a few short years from now! Demises are for those organizations that fail to adapt and respond—and that's not NEHA. 🐛

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