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Six Questions to Ask If Your Association Is Facing a For-Profit Competitor

May 11, 2020 By: *Jonathan Boyd*

A growing number of for-profit organizations have mimicked the association model by offering online educational programs and membership or subscription-based access. So, how do associations compete and protect their brand recognition? Six questions to ask if your organization is facing for-profit competition.

Chances are that online education has become an increasing part of your association's value proposition or a means to expand non-dues revenues. And given the current global COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions in place, we can only expect this trend to continue to grow.

For-profit organizations have taken notice of the community and educational opportunities associations provide. Because of this, some associations—especially in the healthcare space—have noted competitors offering membership-based programs, online training programs, and hosting webinars mirroring the association model. The content is often well-developed, references practices and standards developed by the association, provides parallel content presented by the association, and even includes many of the same presenters.

In collaborative organizations, we commonly assume our members have the best of intentions, blurring the line of collaboration and competition. But, how can associations compete if members on our committees or councils set up rival for-profit companies with access to our internal information, which often highlights the most important trends and best speakers in the industry? Here are six questions for associations to ask to help them protect their brand recognition and to separate themselves from the competition.

Does your organization require noncompete agreements or disclosures? Competing speakers and content providers became such an issue for one organization that it approved a revised conflict-of-interest statement that not only required disclosure of outside engagements but also precluded volunteer leaders from being involved with competing organizations. If your association finds itself in this situation, you may want to consider something similar.

Does your organization develop industry standards? Trade and professional associations that develop standards, guidance, or industry requirements can create content in preparation for upcoming or pending changes. Education and standards (or)

regulatory staff should consider aligning the publication of guidance with accessible educational content. This provides a competitive advantage as the organization may be able to release programming for time-sensitive material well before external organizations.

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Does your organization provide credentialing and the approval of continuing-education credits? Educational credits are one of the primary reasons people participate in online educational programming. Many organizations that offer credentialing and certification also handle the review and evaluation of continuing-education credits, including organizational or preferred provider programs for outside intuitions. Establishing a policy that limits continuing-education credit preapproval to member organizations may provide an added value to membership, highlight the value of association-based education, and provide a competitive advantage.

Do membership and education work symbiotically? Has your organization considered including education as an individual or organizational member benefit? Doing so could bring in new members and improve member retention. While this would drastically reduce online education revenue, if done well, money lost in that area could be made up by new dues revenue that will be brought in, which could ultimately provide a more long-term, sustainable model.

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Can competing organizations become members? With some associations offering diverse membership types, some competing organizations may be able to become members as vendor or affiliate categories. In such situations, competing organizations may be permitted to use association branding on their webpages and marketing materials. Depending on the situation, consider establishing criteria requiring disclosure and preclusion of membership for organizations directly competing or rivaling association content or services.

Can your members differentiate your content from your competitors? Brand recognition is a priority for every organization and a key focus of communications and marketing professionals. If rival or competing content exists, work to differentiate your content and assure branding is consistent and recognizable throughout.

As education moves from physical spaces to the internet, so too has the increase in for-profit competition. To compete, associations need to better protect themselves against potential member conflicts of interest and focus on the competitive advantages that make our collaborative organizations unique.

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