

# It's the Experience That Counts

By Mark Levin, CAE, CSP

If there is one thing I've learned in more than 35 years of work in volunteer organization management, it's the fact that you never know where your next good idea is coming from. I was at a trade show recently, staffing the information booth and sharing some "down time" with one of my members who was in the booth with me. While I was eating (my usual down time activity) he was reading an article. I noticed the smile on his face, then I saw him take out a pen and start highlighting something in the article.

"Find something worth using?" I asked.

"Sure did" he replied. "It's this article about buying a fence that I'm taking to our national sales meeting. I want to show it to all of our sales managers."

Knowing that he was in the fence business, I certainly wasn't surprised by the topic of the article. Thinking I could catch up on some industry information, I asked to read the article when he was finished. It started off as an article about a fence, but it was a lot more than that.

The article was entitled "A Tale of a Fence, or the Death of Commodities." It was written by Oren Harari, and was published by the American Management Association. The article started off talking about how the author purchased a fence to keep his young son from being able to get into the family swimming pool. He later thought that the fence didn't do the job adequately and he asked the fence contractor to make some changes. The contractor said that he had installed the original fence to the customer's specifications, and that he'd gladly make any changes if the customer would tell him exactly what he wanted and pay for the changes. That's where the article got interesting. Harari wrote that

"In the old order of things this was simply a matter of the customer and the vendor seeing things differently. In the new order, things are different. I thought what I wanted was a fence because I could envision it, but what I really wanted was a solution to my problem. Nowadays, customers are more demanding and fickle than ever before, and they have more and more choices. Hence, they will gravitate toward vendors who understand that business is no longer about buying and selling products and services. It's about addressing people's motives and desires. Most businesses today are run with absolutely no understanding of this point."

He might have added that virtually every not-for-profit organization operates with no understanding of this point, either. People contact our organizations and say they want a publication, but what they really want is information to solve a problem. They say they want a schedule of educational programs, but what they really want is someone to give them ideas on how to better attract a client. They say they'd like to serve on a committee, but what they desire is a place where they can feel comfortable and use their talents in a productive way. Harari hits on this point further in the article when he says

"In the new order what will count with customers is the total experience they have with the vendor. Simply listening to the customer will no longer be sufficient because the customer may not be able to articulate what he or she really wants. The successful vendor will act as a consultant to solve problems creatively."

Part of our problem in getting and keeping members these days is that we ask the wrong questions. We keep asking what they want our organization to do for them, and they don't know. So they ask what their choices are, and we give them a list of current programs and services. They pick one or two, and we think we've learned what the member wants. As Harari says, the customer (member/prospect) may not be able to articulate what he/she wants or needs. We have to ask questions like:

"How would you describe your biggest personal or professional challenge?"

"What do you see as your biggest problem making a profit this year?"

"If there was one thing you'd like to accomplish this year, what would it be?"

We don't want to ask these questions because the answers don't fall neatly into the categories on our member surveys or brochures. It's too much work to go outside of the lines, so we ask questions that make the customer keep within our comfort zone.

Here's the important point of all of this. If we reduce our organizations to providers of products and services -- commodities -- eventually we lose our competitive advantage and our customers (members). If all we offer are publications, documents, online programs, websites, discount programs, and "networking," someone is going to come along and offer them cheaper, faster, and more accurately. It's already happening in dozens of organizations all over the world. Our competitors used to be other organizations, now our competitors can come in many, many forms.

When private sector "competitors" offer online services, up-to-the-minute information, social and business networks, accreditation, and discount services that mirror ours, we're at a big disadvantage. You see, these competitors don't ask people to "join" anything, they don't ask them to "uphold a standard of ethical conduct," they don't ask them to proudly wear their organization's logo, and they don't ask them to serve on any stupid committees. It's a transaction -- a commodity. Do you want to buy it, or not, is the only question they ask. Most of us can't compete with these companies and people because they have greater resources than we do and they don't ask buyers to "commit" to anything except paying for the product.

This entire concept was reinforced at a recent ASAE Annual Meeting in Los Angeles. Innovation speaker, author, and consultant Robert Tucker spoke to the attendees at the Annual CAE Breakfast. "Don't commoditize your 'product'," he said. "Associations have to identify value, differentiate their product, and truly be open to any new idea. Everyone on your staff is should be considered part of your innovation team."

So what do we do to make ourselves stand out in this age of white noise and unlimited options?

We use what's left of our competitive advantage, we market the *experience* of membership. We still have plenty going for us and we need to highlight that when trying to attract and keep members and supporters. Here are some ideas:

### ~ ***The Human Touch***

It's not trite. People still want to interact with other people. But don't sell "networking" as a benefit. Sell the opportunity to get unique perspectives and experiences that can help people better use the information they gather. Social networking and online communities meet some members' needs, not **all** members' needs

### ~ **Access**

Why do even the biggest companies and most successful people still join membership organizations? One reason is because these organizations can help them gain access to people, institutions, government agencies, customers, job opportunities, etc., that they won't get on their own. For some people, being an officer/leader in your organization (in some cases just being a member of your organization) gives them status in their industry or profession. Use this "access" benefit to your organization's advantage. Identify it and quantify it for your members and prospects.

### ~ **Empathy**

Commodity providers can sell products but they don't *need* to know any more about their customers than what is needed to complete the transaction. They may *want* that information, and they frequently do ask customers to provide a "profile" for their future marketing efforts, but many people still don't like being forced to give all that information in order to make a purchase (why do you have to give the cashier your zip code in order to pay cash for small items?). Your organization needs to let your members know *that the information you gather from them is designed to help you better solve their unique problems*, and then you need to use that information to create a real sense of empathy to your members and supporters in every way possible. Get the message across that "we know what you face when you wake up in the morning, and we can help." Let people know that membership is an *experience* that enables them to cope with their challenges and be successful.

### ~ **The Gift of Leadership**©

One thing our competitors *can't* give people is the "Gift of Leadership." We need to market leadership in our organizations as one of the unique values of being a member. Then we have to get them involved and prove it.

There are other things we can do, but first we have to change our focus. It's not what we do that matters, *it's what we do for the member/customer* that counts. We need to customize and personalize membership for every member and potential member. We need to remember it's not the commodities we provide that determine member satisfaction.

It's the experience.

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