The Nature of Belonging and Gathering

Will business decision-makers continue to invest in communities by joining chambers and allowing their employees to engage? Yes, if . . .

Marketing guru Seth Godin devoted an entire book to what he calls "tribes." In it, he describes centuries of successful tribal models: a group of people connected to one another with a shared idea and a leader—a "great convener." Chambers could indeed embody such a powerful concept in 10 years, but this opportunity is far from assured. A typical chamber today hardly qualifies as a tribe, but it easily could in the future.

Speaking at ACCE's 2014 convention, Godin said that chambers offer unique opportunities to forge what he calls "multi-dimensional communications paths." In fact, the inability of many other groups to do so in the future could dramatically *increase* the power and resource opportunities for chambers.

Sarah Sladek, author of *The End of Membership as We Know It*, puts it this way: "Economic swings, rapidly changing technology, and demographic shifts have challenged most associations (some more than others) because all these changes have redefined the meaning of membership. What members—and clients, employees, and consumers—want now is vastly different than what they wanted three years ago." Sladek's conclusion focuses on the "as we know it" part of her title, i.e., membership won't end, but belonging out of tradition or habit might.

The ASAE research project *The Decision to Join* found that the option to enroll is based on a need to engage in greater-good initiatives, as well as direct benefit appeals. Chambers have the potential to excel in both, but must do so.

Civic Rent

Alexis de Tocqueville's 180-year-old theories about Americans' craving for associations still have validity today, but perhaps less so than in the past. Yes, Americans still want to belong, but they are less likely to join for joining's sake. Baseline loyalty to an institution (described as "civic rent" in the chamber world) will continue to decline in the future.

Transactional and "civic rent" chamber membership counts have already been declining because of demographic changes affecting associations of all types. Those trends lines will be steeper by 2025.

Resuscitation blips may occur in what ASAE labeled "obligation" memberships following leadership changes, or natural/economic disasters. The overall trend line for memberships motivated by a desire to be "on board" will almost certainly be negative.

A chamber in a smaller mature market, especially a town at some distance from major metropolitan centers, might have an edge in sustaining membership based on a sense of belonging. Personal friendships and acquaintances don't end at the door of the chamber board room, but there will be fewer and fewer automatic renewals.

Next Gen Thinking

There is significant hand-wringing in chamber offices regarding the potential impact the millennial generation will have on membership. "Millennials want to have a great impact on their community and their world, work with a team, get things done," said John Zogby, founder of the Zogby Poll "But don't expect them to show up anywhere on Tuesday night. Engage them in issues, let them choose the issue, and watch them work." *Wait a minute. Isn't that what members of every generation are looking for?*

More important than an understanding of specific demographic clusters is the need to structure your organization to be out front of the needs of *every* incoming or elevating demographic subset. Group involvement and participation is hardwired, regardless of the generational angst we feel in any given decade. We have an innate need to belong. Maslow insists in his *Hierarchy of Needs* that humans crave a sense of belonging and acceptance among their social groups, including organizations related to their work lives (tribes).

One of the criticisms of the oft-quoted *Bowling Alone*, by Harvard social scientist Robert Putnam, was that his powerful data about slumping association memberships and weaker collective activities was focused on old entities, such as the VFW and Boy Scouts. He was right that Lions Club membership declined, but failed to account for the brisk enrollments in young adult kickball leagues. Neighborhood associations have flourished, even as bowling leagues have languished. In your world, direct involvement in traditional chamber committee meetings declined during the last decade, but young professional groups blossomed.

An Inclusive Future

The jury is out on whether business people 10 years from now will pay dues to affiliate via a heterogeneous, economy-centric membership entity. We may all hope so, but some forward-looking chambers have anticipated that the answer may be "not so much." They are responding with creative, inclusive models. For instance, some chambers appear to be a collection of smaller business groups under one tent. They nurture homogeneous micro groups that are formed around sector, community, or even cultural priorities, which then find occasions to interact as a unified chamber when it is convenient or necessary.

To paraphrase the head of a successful Hispanic chamber, "There are many churches and religions that can lead us to salvation, not just one. It's the same for economic salvation." Continuing to expect universal loyalty to one economic-civic "denomination" will be even more difficult in 2025.

Practically Speaking

The chamber in 2025 may not identify members the way most chambers do today. They will have customers, clients, investors and partners, some of which will indeed be called "member." ROI for the investors and satisfaction for the customers or clients will drive the success of chambers rather than the act of joining, and especially of attending. Chambers will have many, perhaps more, engaged stakeholders in issues and causes, but those individuals may or may not be members. People and organizations will indeed look to the chamber to address their niche and collective needs, whether they relate to policies, business growth, or community. Monetization of "belonging and gathering" will offer revenue sources, but not in traditional ways.

Long before 2025, access to affordable, highly functioning, multi-party video conferencing—even virtual reality—will change the ways people choose to meet, but may also increase the desire for high-touch human connectivity. The differentiator for chambers may be in more compelling in-person connections rather than competing on tech savvy. Direct connectivity opportunities won't look much like those of today, but if they are facilitated and managed by chambers, they will provide real value. Meetings aimed at delivering programs or experts will matter less than finding ways to get the right five or 10 people in a room or coffee shop who can figure out what to talk about.

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Bored Boards

For years (if not centuries), chamber board meetings have largely consisted of a monthly get-together where the community's leaders drink coffee, skip the pastries, check emails and plan their post-meeting parking lot ambush (the real meeting). According to Harrison Coerver, author of *Race for Relevance*, dramatic overhaul in governance will be one of the most profound changes in association life. Few people in the chamber world are ready to adopt Coerver's recommended board size (fewer than 7 directors), but the *quality* discussion is worth having.

In the future, given time starvation and competition for attention, the kinds of people you want on your board won't par- ▷

ticipate in death-by-report meetings focused on golfer attendance and tracking lost $300 memberships.

Limitation of frequency and duration does not equate to diminished accomplishment if a board is managed effectively by an executive and chairman. More progressive chambers are already limiting board meetings (quarterly in Des Moines, 45 minutes long in Grapevine, Texas). Meetings at these chambers are goal-driven, with powerful communications before and after. These boards rely on focused teams, not standing committees.

According to Coerver and other association advisors, changes must also be imposed on directionless committee meetings. Chambers must find other ways to handle governance and in-person member interaction, or they will indeed lose the business leadership composed of top millennials and subsequent generations. This does not mean the death of meetings. It means the death of low-value meetings.

Team Talent

Chambers will always be conveners. The skills required to run a monthly membership luncheon, however, are different than the talents required to reach out on a personal level to drag to the table five business people who should be talking to one another about mutual opportunities. It is likely that mission-focused programming, rather than how-to and orientation-style sessions, will play a bigger role in your chamber's annual event calendar.

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A greater capacity to grasp and articulate intangible value will be required of sales professionals. The strongest chambers in the country have already recognized that the team of the future must not only sell transactional memberships ($2 in direct value for every $1 in dues), but also nurture commitments at the high end of the rate card that are intended to support community advancement and advocacy.

Showing Up

Belonging and gathering are not the same thing, but throughout the history of chambers of commerce, the two have been difficult to separate. People in the news business who collect, report and create enough stories to fill their pages refer to their work as, "feeding the monster." Regarding events, a similar mentality currently permeates many chambers.

To demonstrate value to various membership constituencies, chambers run scores or even hundreds of events each year. One large western chamber admitted to having more events than there are business days in a year, and "that doesn't count committee meetings." A new exec in a mid-size chamber in the Midwest underwent a startling inventory upon taking the job. He had to "eliminate a dozen events" in order to drop below 200.

Meanwhile, the most progressive chambers recognize that they may have to follow Sting's advice: "If you love someone, set them free." At the Fox Cities Chamber in Wisconsin, staff provides minimal behind-the-scenes coaxing of self-initiated, self-led peer clusters, which resembles a "meet-up" app connection (with few in-person elements). This free-wheeling model, tied loosely to the chamber, could hold more value in the future than a series of lunch-n-learns.

In his book, *Remembership*, Kyle Sexton notes; "Eighty percent of your members don't show up for anything, yet you still tout participation as the best way to get value from membership." Too many chambers equate attendance with value. They measure success based on butts-in-seats. These equations are questionable today and likely to be even less reliable in the years to come. Why?

- **Technology**. The ways people learn and acquire information have changed, for good. When someone needs to know something, they go and get it from an infinite supply of online resources, or from their private network of trusted sources (the chamber being only one). Even today they seldom wait for any institution to get around to offering a seminar, and they certainly won't in 10 years. In addition, affordable, high-quality, two-way video and virtual meeting technology will be ubiquitous by 2025. It's not a fantasy!

  Fantasy baseball grew in the 1980s to a level sometimes deemed detrimental to worker productivity. Fantasy football, built around a combination of personal connectivity (draft day parties, team rivalries) and technology (web site injury reports, tracking software) surged in participation ▷

throughout the 2000s. To expand membership investment and engagement, chambers will want to embody something resembling the next fantasy sports league, providing a constantly refreshed alignment of tech and touch, featuring lots of "teams."

- **Competition.** The chamber is neither the only nor the best provider for many of the programs it currently offers (see Hedgehog Theory in Jim Collins' *Good to Great*). The required investment to differentiate and elevate one program above those offered by a host of others will make it more important to connect in small groups rather than in banquet halls. (NOTE: one or two signature events will always work in a chamber's calendar if they are regularly refreshed.) When it comes to networking, chambers will find it increasingly difficult to string a velvet rope of exclusivity around their networks. Most connections between business people in this new era will be temporary, but that immediacy of connection will create great opportunities for chambers. Won't it be nice not to have to market networks to the same 50 chamber activists every week?

  The chamber's role as the "anchor tenant" in community leadership has faced a steady stream of competitors for decades. Such challenges come and go. The coming decade could be a period with more regional competitors, but these groups will face the same difficulties with gathering, belonging, funding and sustainability as chambers.

- **Staffing Allocation.** In the majority of chambers today, a large percentage of staff time is spent on events: meeting planning, volunteer management, speaker acquisition, scripting, registration/billing, sponsor attraction, marketing, execution and follow-up. They all require major shares of staff and management time. The sad reality, based on ACCE's Dynamic Chamber Benchmarking research, is that chamber programming barely pays for itself when staff time is included on the expense line. If, in the future, staff will be expected to focus on other elements of their value proposition, they simply won't have time to run 100 gigs.

- **Opportunity.** Nearly every study on preferences and future behaviors of millennials concludes that they will be *more*, not less, likely to seek in-person connections. They will, however, be less likely to derive that contact in traditional ways, i.e., membership. The secret to solving this perceived contradiction for chambers? A chamber that has the capacity to look at these elements (membership, audience, programs, connections) separately could have more success in the "gathering" arena. The Greater Philadelphia Chamber and others are already moving in this direction. Their programs are branded with the chamber name only if it helps to attract an audience. Otherwise, the name of the gig is expected to carry its own weight.

Dues

There is a growing awareness of the different motivations for chamber membership. There is also greater acknowledgment that attempts to articulate membership value have not addressed the diverse reasons for belonging. A comprehensive study by the Greater Kitchener-Waterloo Chamber in Ontario found two prime chamber membership motivations and two participation styles. (see "Quadrants" graph) One primary motivation is the desire to ***get something from*** the chamber; the other involves the craving to ***get something done through*** the chamber. Researchers then found that some members would ***invest*** to realize their motivation, while others would personally ***engage***. Chambers that cling to the notion that "a member is a member," or that size is the prime differentiator among members, will miss opportunities for growth over the next 10 years.

And then there is the issue of *who you will be for whom* in the future? You should expect an increasing fuzziness about what constitutes an employee and an employer. The move to a "gig culture," in which workers don't have a single traditional employer and businesses contract more work to consultants and ▷

service providers, doesn't mesh well with the business model of any chamber of commerce

For instance, if a plant manager farms out safety compliance to two consultants, will they get the member rate at a seminar? Will they get the chamber's Safety Newsletter? In addition, service providers like Uber and Airbnb will become ubiquitous for all kinds of freelance work, resulting in surrogates for employees who provide as-needed support for companies.

One chamber in a Northeastern mid-size market has determined that its small business focus should be dedicated to helping those who serve small business (accountants, marketing firms, lawyers, insurers) rather than the businesses themselves. This gives the chamber the capacity to impact more small businesses than they ever could under a fee-for-service or dues model. And, the mid-size dues and sponsorship investments from b2b firms more than make up for the relatively low dues revenue they previously received from tiny companies.

A huge new market for membership can be envisioned when chambers become boosters and facilitators of such non-traditional arrangements.

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The Limits

Competition for cause-based contributions from major corporations will be fierce in the future. For the growing number of chambers that depend on high-end dues (chairman's circle, top tier packages, etc.) and non-dues financial support from such firms, it will be necessary to bolster the execution, delivery and perceived value of community enhancement work. Major players will be willing to pay for a seat at the table, but only if every issue brought to the table isn't tabled.

For centuries, business leaders have demonstrated that they will pay for the privilege of interacting with people they view as peers. That is unlikely to change, but the tolerance for participating directly in groups composed of non-peers may diminish.

One last point about membership investment limits. Over the next decade, large and small employers, as well as would-be investors and even governments, will have less tolerance for what Mac Holladay of the highly respected Market Street Services firm describes as "civic insanity." Unfettered proliferation of civic entities with the words "economic development" in their name, or "business advocacy" in their mission, will not be acceptable to those who are asked to pay carrying costs. Petty competition and staff paranoia are already having a negative, though unmeasured, impact on dues.

The corporate environment may embrace limitless competition, but not so the non-profit world. Finding members, sponsors and investors willing to support continued regional dysfunction will be problematic. Working on civic-economic development alignment in your region will be part of a chamber's long-term membership and sustainability plan. CE

Action Steps: Belonging and Gathering

No matter what your size or market, stop assuming that a member is a member is a member. Evaluate individual and business motives for chamber involvement. Evaluate your membership management software and processes to ensure you can differentiate member motivations. Adjustments in programming, services and network options for millennials must become part of a chamber's core, not an appendage. If possible, identify your value in terms that rely less upon attendance and participation. Recognize and monetize your tribal qualities. Create quasi-independent special interest subgroups and "hug" those that already exist in the community. Join ACCE's Membership Development Division to ensure you are aware of coming trends.