Apply technology

Collect and segment information

Filter and interpret

Share information in both directions

High touch component

FEEDBACK

COMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY

"… the exponential advancement of technology has reached a critical point where not even governments can project the direction humanity is headed … as companies design the tools to capture and implement findings from traditional constituencies, they also have an opportunity to build robust feedback loops with other stakeholders who will play an important role in shaping the business landscape in 2020. In the face of oncoming regulation and activism, companies have an incentive to bring more partners into the conversation."

The passage above summarizes the conclusions of the U.S. Air Force "Blue Horizons" project, which seeks to project likely technology advancements across all sectors. The report succinctly stated the challenge that chamber leaders face today. As new technologies rapidly evolve, communications will be made increasingly easier, but in other ways more difficult. It will be both individualized and broader reaching at the same time.

McKinsey and Company recently released a report from its blue ribbon Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy that hits even closer to home for chambers: "How well we use these new lines of communication and technology tools to capture information, seek input from others, utilize the collective response to frame decisions and then implement them to shape our economic future will determine our effectiveness in growing healthy, sustainable communities."

How Much?

Frequently, when the subject of rapidly changing technology is raised in chamber circles, shoulders slump when we're warned of the need for costly, staff-intensive new tools and toys that "you absolutely can't do without."

It would be tempting to look at the constant introduction of new technology and conclude that a chamber has no choice but to become one of the entities that rolls out new ones. Some analysts assert that associa-

tions like chambers will have to out-google Google, build enterprise products more compelling than Groupon, network better than Facebook and otherwise compete with a stream of 2.0+ solutions for their organizations and members. Contributors to this paper don't think so.

Certainly chambers of the future will have to do a better job utilizing all technology opportunities. They may often choose to be early adopters and models of some technology innovations, as they have done since the first word processors hit the market. But the answer to "how will technology influence chambers?" is more complex and subtle than the simple answers: "MORE . . . NEW." Because of unending innovations in communications technology, and the insatiable business appetite for better-faster, chambers must address four major factors in contemporary communications:

- **Customization:** It will become untenable to communicate in broad, generic messaging. In the 2025 information environment, such blast messaging will simply get lost in the noise. Within a few years, there will be an expectation of individualized communication of most messages so you can be seen as a viable, trusted resource. New technology and communica-

tion platforms will allow us to segment messaging in ways that are not now possible.

- **Robust feedback loops:** Soon, if not already, it won't be enough to tell members what the chamber thinks, or invite people to a program that a handful of committee members conjure up. All organizations will need to harness new technology to share, in both directions, enlightening information and to receive real-time responses from members and communities. This is what the web 2.0 approach to social media marketing is all about, but within 10 years we'll be at 5.0. Tech simply can't be the only answer! Merely hoping that a message is received and understood will be an increasingly risky proposition, whether you're advocating membership, a program, or a cause. Chambers already get this and rely heavily on *informal* feedback. More intentional two-way conversation will be both possible and necessary.

- **Shared Frame and Lexicon:** Future news dissemination will involve mass customization for specific audiences. Even so-called "viral" images, and messages will reach small percentages of the population as the noise increases and media preferences multiply. Meanwhile, chamber missions depend on creating a shared vision of a place and its future. That consensus won't naturally occur in the splintered communications of the future. Aligning a shared vision with a disassociated, tech-centered world will only be possible through the effective use of new tools and strategies. Organizations like the FrameWorks Institute can help.

- **Speed:** The speed and capacity of microprocessors double, while price is cut in half, about every 18 months. E-commerce is still in its infancy. Future web-based transactions will be consummated with voice-signature or finger-print confirmations. Credit card readers and Apple Pay systems will seem quaint in a few years. Therefore, automation of billing and collections, and point of sale options will likely make annualized dues invoicing a hopeless anachronism long before 2025. The speed-to-market of programs, timeliness of policy decisions and nimble adaptation to changing landscapes will be critical to survival for all businesses, including yours. Chambers must also find ways to increase the pace of decision-making. Under current cumbersome governance models, chambers risk becoming marginalized in framing important business community issues, and behind the curve on every new offering they take to market.

The Power of Humanity

Chambers must invest in technology tools and platforms to facilitate communication in the electronic information age. Chambers are small business enterprises and, as such, must try to keep up with members and the world at large. Yet at the same time, they are unlikely to differentiate or raise themselves above the competition for hearts, minds and dollars primarily through advanced technology. It may be low-tech communication methods that elevate chambers in both value and effectiveness.

Interpersonal connectivity and human relationships, especially if enhanced and maintained through electronic channels, will have more impact than ever. Chambers are positioned for this adaptation better than most other enterprises. As others gravitate toward electronic solutions for all communications needs, the chamber culture of personal client connection will shine through more brightly than ever—if it can stay fresh.

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Analysis and Usefulness

In its *Shaping the Future* report, McKinsey said: "In an increasingly technologically connected world, businesses have unprecedented direct lines of communication with their customers and employees. However, collecting information and putting it to use are two very different pieces of the same puzzle."

In his books about the *Long Tail* theory of contemporary market forces, Chris Anderson explains how hard it is for any entity to have a locked-in market. With the ever-expanding menu of web information about every subject, it is also impossible for a chamber to be the exclusive repository of knowledge on any subject. Chambers justified a "you-can-only-get-it-here" value to members and community in the past, but they barely cling to ▷

elements of exclusive knowledge today. You may not have any in 10 years.

Patrick Lencione's new best seller, *The Advantage*, summarizes the problem this way: "In this world of ubiquitous information and nanosecond technology exchange, it's harder than it has ever been in history to maintain a competitive advantage based on intelligence or knowledge." That's okay! Instead, the key role for information-centric organizations will be that of analyst. You will make sense out of it all, while appending your own preferences about what is important and true. Anderson referred to this powerful function for intermediaries (chambers) as the "filter" role.

> To add value, the chamber must be a filter and an analyst to help determine the value of information.

Filter Function

A chamber executive need only look at the site selection consultant—the commercial/industrial real estate advisor—to understand how powerful and lucrative the filter function has become. The formal appraisers of *project-place-fit* can affect the futures of regions. They are courted and nearly revered by developers and chamber leaders. And what is their job?

First, these corporate real estate consultants listen to the client and establish a relationship to ensure their complete understanding of the goals and culture. Then, they scan, filter and analyze widely available data about a city or region and its real estate inventory. Next they apply their personal connections and considerable analytical skills to the data they're looking at, triaging as they go. After vetting processes (feedback loops), they turn their selected comparison figures into a short recommendation list, which will be placed in front of a person or committee that could bring hundreds of jobs to a community—or not.

Analytical work for chambers will also elevate in esoteric ways. Editorial decisions for your newsletter today already filter business, economic and community news flow into need-to know information for your members. Now imagine that role multiplied 10-fold. For instance, chamber PACs are already helping economic growth-focused candidates filter data about donors,

employers and voters. A chamber in Arkansas is providing a customer prospecting database to its members that want to personalize electronic marketing, using a megadata partner.

That is the power and value of the analyst, the filter in today's world. In 2025, the challenges faced by business will be multiplied and complicated many times over because the task of plowing through piles of seemingly contradictory data will be even more daunting. To add value, the chamber must be a *filter and an analyst* to help determine the value of information.

Analysis Goes Both Ways

The ever-increasing capacity to evaluate metrics, and a growing concern for accountability in all non-profit entities, may also result in your board using 2025 methods to analyze you. Even the larger community and media might take advantage of greater transparency opportunities to evaluate your work, methods, compensation and effectiveness. It won't take much work to figure you out! Most chambers will thrive under such scrutiny because they already operate in a glass terrarium. Still, it may be wise over the next 10 years to itemize and articulate the value of things you might previously have counted among your "intangible" strengths. CE

Action Steps: Communications and Technology

Information dissemination is losing its value as web sources multiply. Instead of maintaining a "push" information style, adopt an "analyze and filter" culture to rise above the. Resist the temptation to try to do more than keep up with technology. Instead, use whatever tech tools you can afford to establish and maintain personal relationships and personalized services. Two-way communication—feedback loops—will be needed and expected in the future, even if they are maintained via the video phone on your wrist. The tech-com challenge requires that you work ON the business instead of IN the business. Spend as much time examining your communications model to keep it fresh, as you do to meet monthly newsletter deadlines. Use ACCE's Award for Communication Excellence finalists as models—they're constantly updated and archived on our website.