

Association Chapter Mergers – 5 Steps To A Successful New Chapter



According to the 2021 Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report, 47 percent of associations reported declines in total membership in 2021, and a 45 percent decrease in renewals; the decrease in renewals was almost double that of the previous year. Many chapters that are losing members and can't replace them are finding themselves making tough decisions. What association chapter services and programming do they need to put on hold or eliminate? What committees do they need to shutter? And there's an even bigger question many chapters are dealing with – are they at a point where their best option is to dissolve and close their doors?



Closing would solve many of a chapter's problems but doing so would leave members searching for a new association chapter organization to call home. To avoid closing, some chapters are choosing to merge, connecting with another chapter in the parent organization and forming a new chapter that meets the mission of both organizations and effectively support all members.

With the ups and downs the COVID-19 pandemic brought to chapters, several StarChapter clients have decided to merge with another chapter. We've been supporting them on this journey as it relates to their StarChapter Association Management System (AMS) and offering guidance as we can to make their mergers easier and the new chapter as strong and effective as it can be.

Once chapters decide to merge, and they've completed all the legal activities that go into a merger, there are several other things that they'll want to do.

The Top 5 association chapter merger activities

- 1. Choose a new name.** A merged chapter should have a name that truly represents the new organization. Consider talking to your National organization, to see if they have any recommendations or guidelines for naming new chapters and apply that to a merged chapter. One of our clients, the Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS), merged two chapters approximately 30 miles apart —SMPS Dallas and SMPS Ft. Worth — and created a new chapter they named SMPS North Texas.
- 2. Set up a new domain and create a web site.** Rather than updating the website of one of the chapters, start fresh and choose a URL and create a website that embodies the new organization. The new SMPS website has a new URL, and the site is clean, uncluttered and easy to navigate. The site also explains, on the front page, the merging of the two chapters and the new name.
- 3. Understand what each chapter will bring with them.** This includes strengths and weaknesses. Does one chapter have a highly effective board, while the other has lost many board members? Maybe one of the chapters has strong education programming. A SWOT analysis – exploring the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the chapters – can bring clarity to what each chapter brings with them – good, bad and ugly. The new merged board can use that information to create a strong association chapter structure that takes all that into consideration and finds ways to improve areas of weakness, like board dysfunctions, and eliminate threats and risks, like single points of failure. It can be extremely useful to have a committee that includes members from both chapters complete the SWOT analysis.
- 4. Structure the new programming.** With the outcomes of the SWOT analysis and from meetings and surveys of members of both organizations, the new chapter will be ready to choose the services and programming they will provide. Are there things one chapter offers – like online event registration, online education or a job board – that the other does not? Since one of the goals of a merger is increased member engagement and retention, this is where merged chapters will need to provide what all members want and need.



5. **Get sponsors on board with the new chapter.** It's hard work to bring on association chapter sponsors, so merged chapters need to do the extra work to keep them. Make your sponsors aware of a merger early and share the benefits they will get from sponsoring the new chapter, like access to more of the people they want and need in their network. A Q&A session for sponsors could be very helpful to answer their questions and eliminate any doubt sponsors might have.

The importance of sharing information with members

Perhaps the most important piece of merging association chapters is the need to communicate with members of all chapters – early and often. Tell them in meetings and regular communications:

- why the merger is happening
- what merging will accomplish
- the status of the merger
- where members can help

It's also important to share the mission of the new association chapter with the entire membership, so they're clear on the value they'll get from being members of this larger, stronger chapter.

