Diversify Chapter Association Membership To Give Members What They're Missing

The past few years have been tough on association chapter organizations. Dissolved chapters. Burned out chapter board members. Not only did chapters not grow, but many stayed stagnant or lost a significant number of members.

Chapter organizations exist to serve their members. What happens when you've tried everything you can think of -- adding services, reconnecting with members who've left, and/or reducing the cost of association chapter membership renewals or offering other renewal incentives -- and membership still isn't where you want it?

Some chapters are turning to diversifying their membership and expanding their definition of a member. What would opening your association chapter to new groups mean for your organization?

Let's say you're a chapter for interior design. Your membership has always just been interior designers. But interior designers interact with many professionals, like painters, furniture salespeople, and architects. Could it help your chapter and your members, to expand your membership to people in professions associated with interior design?

It can if you do it right.

Case Study: The Society for Human Resources Management, Hawaii

SHRM Hawaii is a chapter of the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM). SHRM has over 575 affiliate chapters; their membership requirements are determined by each chapter and approved by SHRM National. According to Bernard Nunies, SHRM-SCP, SPHR, SHRM Hawaii State Council Director, membership in their association chapter, and most SHRM chapters, is open to "anyone with a bona fide interest in human resources management and the mission of the State Chapter."

SHRM Hawaii has two levels of membership– professional and associate. Professional SHRM Hawaii members have three years or more of HR experience. In addition to the HR team -- HR manager, HR business partner, HR specialist/generalist, Training, Recruitment, Benefits/Payroll, HR directors, etc. – professional SHRM Hawaii membership can include faculty, attorneys, and consultants in the HR profession.

Associate SHRM Hawaii members have less than three years of HR experience or have an interest in the HR profession. These members include recent graduates, small business owners, office managers (with HR responsibilities), and other positions that might oversee the HR function like company presidents or CFOs. SHRM Hawaii members can't participate in chapter votes or hold office in the chapter.

Part of SHRM Hawaii's mission, according to their website, is to "advance the human resource profession to ensure that HR is recognized as an essential partner in developing and executing organizational strategy." Keeping membership broad as they do, helps them better serve their entire membership, and meet their mission by "building knowledge, expanding experiences, facilitating the development of innovative ideas, and exchanging best practices for success."

Nunies says keeping broad association chapter membership is important for their chapter's on-going success. "HR is not reserved to just HR practitioners," he explains. "It's something every leader in a company should focus on, as it includes culture, employee engagement, career pathways, and succession planning. The more people who understand that HR is for everyone in a company," he adds, "the better."

Expanded service offerings can help, too

While many chapters saw a decrease in membership during COVID, SHRM Hawaii experienced some growth, due in part to the services they offered members and their community. “During COVID,” Nunies says, “we positioned our organization as a resource to HR professionals where they could get the latest information of ever-changing federal and state regulations.”

This included free webinars sessions on COVID-related topics such as remote work, return to work, legal updates, and health and wellness, and virtual presentations with guest speakers including HR professionals, Learning & Development experts, a psychologist, attorneys, risk managers, and representatives from OSHA and the Department of Labor. They also provided testimony to local legislators on the challenges business and HR professionals were facing in managing through the pandemic.

“Hawaii, being a tourist destination,” says Nunies, “was heavily impacted by COVID. We wanted to serve our profession by allowing space for discussion, sharing of best practices, and inviting government officials to speak directly to business and HR leaders. Through these efforts, we were able to drive SHRM Hawaii’s reputation, and as a result we saw growth in our membership.”

Who do your members want to engage with?

Rather than expanding for the sake of expanding or burdening your chapter association board with the stress of making that decision, ask your members who they want to engage with. What are related professions and industries they’d benefit from connecting with?

But...before you open chapter membership, be clear on why your chapter exists. If you expand “just because” and try to be everything to everyone, your mission, and as a result, your chapter, will become even more diluted. You’ll continue to lose value and ultimately shrink your membership even further. If you’re diligent about what you do and who you support, your chapter can continue to be competitive, productive, and successful.