

Thinking Of Starting An Association? Become A National Affiliate Chapter Instead



You've been thinking about joining a local non-profit organization, but your search hasn't turned up any that offer exactly what you're looking for. Or maybe you found an association chapter but it's just too far to regularly attend in-person events.



Since you can't find what you want, you decide to start your own. But then you realize just how much work it will be to get a chapter running and keep it going for the long term.

Before your stress level goes up as you spend time, energy, and money starting a new organization from nothing, do your research to see if there are associations in other parts of the country that offer what you're looking for.

There's a good chance you'll find one that would be open to starting a chapter in your area, and starting a chapter of an existing association delivers benefits you can't get from starting a brand-new chapter. Read on to learn about some of them, and the first few things to do after you've decided to join that organization.

3 advantages to starting a local chapter of a national organization



Becoming a new affiliate (i.e., a chapter, a section, etc.) of a national organization can provide the support and expertise/experience needed to get an organization up and running and operating effectively. Plus, it's a whole lot easier and more straightforward than if you did it on your own. More specifically, partnering with a national organization to start a local chapter of their association can deliver:

Credibility. As a new organization, you'll need to connect with multiple audiences — potential donors, sponsors, board members, members, vendors, etc. — but without any sort of existing reputation, making those connections could be difficult. These groups have nothing on which to base what you're telling them about your chapter. As an affiliate, you'll take advantage of all the positive press your parent organization has, and as you create your own reputation, their existing credibility will provide the trust your new audiences need to believe in you, even if that organization isn't well known in your local area.

A head start. As an affiliate, you won't need to start from scratch creating all the documents and resources your chapter will need to operate. Much, if not all, of what you need should be available from the national organization. You'll be able to access and customize resources like bylaws, handbooks, policies and procedures and even website templates. And if you plan to implement systems that will allow you to manage your membership, take registrations for events online, etc., there's a good chance the national organization will already have those in place.

Time. In the beginning, you may have just a small group (hopefully not just you!) responsible for getting everything up and running. The time you'll save from taking advantage of all the things the national organization has to offer will provide you the time to focus on all the important activities that go with setting up a new chapter, like connecting with the community, finding new sponsors, scheduling information sessions and your launch party, etc.

What comes next? 3 things to do after you decide to become an affiliate

First, form a legal partnership with the national organization. The exact agreement will depend on the organization, but will incorporate items like your chapter's geographic area, chapter boundaries (i.e., what the chapter will and won't do), fees and dues paid to the parent organization, etc.

Once the legalities are out of the way, here are three things you'll want to do early on, to give your new association chapter the strong foundation it needs.



Form the board. Starting a chapter, even an affiliate, involves more than one person can handle. To avoid burnout, create your association chapter board early on and split up the tasks. Look for people with similar interests, expertise, etc., who have the time and energy. This first board may be just a few people, but as you bring on members, you'll be able to put people into roles like treasurer and secretary and bring on committee chairs. Explore your own network for board members; you'll probably find people just as passionate as you are. Ask your new parent organization, other chapters of the organization and similar organizations how they found their board members. You might also want to post your needs on your personal social media, as well as your new chapter's social channels.

Design the right systems. You may think your association chapter online resources and web presence can wait, but they shouldn't. Making it easy early on for potential members and other audiences to find you, learn about you, attend your events and work with you is critical to your success. As an affiliate, this will be easier than doing it on your own, because as we mentioned, your parent organization should have existing resources and guidelines in these areas, as well as templates you can use.

Find members. To find potential members, consider asking:

- other chapters of the organization how they found their members
- other local organizations where they found members, and if they'll mention your new organization to their members
- companies and other organizations whose staff may be interested
- your parent organization to mention your new chapter on their website and in their social media
- friends and family to spread the word.

You may also want to hold an open house and have your association chapter board members talk about the organization and answer questions. Whomever you ask for help, be sure they have the details they need to discuss the benefits of your organization. Share your mission, services, your events, and anything else that will show you're a reputable organization and a good fit for them.

By no means is this all you need to do to set up a new local chapter of a national organization. But these are the big things you should do early on to be on track for success. Get these done and then, instead of stressing about how you're going to set up a brand-new chapter, it'll be time to focus on the important things, like your launch party.

