

Take the Pulse of Your Membership

Community as a Driver for Organizational Success

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Members' sense of community is the essential driver in an association's success, argues Sara C. Wedeman, and it is no longer enough to say we know community when we see it. Instead, association leaders need to know not only what it is but also how to measure it and how to foster it among members. Wedeman describes an assessment tool that is designed to help them do just that.

By Sara C. Wedeman, Ph.D.

As the year 2000 approached, association leaders faced market conditions many found challenging, worrisome, or just plain confusing. The Internet had risen rapidly to great prominence. Young people were not joining associations, or anything else, in large numbers. For-profit, Web-based virtual communities appeared to be eclipsing traditional associations in relevance and popularity.

For-profit businesses were entering the traditional association marketplace in large numbers. They appealed to communities of interest and claimed to establish meaningful connections across distances and differences. The new virtual communities offered comparative privacy, access to a larger audience, professional development, industry-specific information, informality, and speed—all at little or no cost.

Association leaders sensed that an intangible quality of connection or community was part of their organizations' value proposition, but they had questions: Will members attend meetings, or simply convene online? How will virtual communities affect meeting participation and enrollment in association-sponsored educational programs? To what extent do members feel they are connected to my association, and what are the trends? What can we do to increase the flexibility and resilience of our association?

We launched the Community as Strategy initiative to help association leaders find answers. Our goals were straightforward but ambitious:

- Identify an objective, stable working definition for the nebulous yet essential intangible we call the sense of community.
- Create tools that enable association leaders to objectively assess the state of community in their associations.

- Develop a toolkit leaders can use to learn where action is needed and to determine which type of action will have the greatest payoff.
- Assemble a normative database designed to enable member associations to benchmark their performance, compare it to those of their peers, and gain insight into promising practices.

To find a working definition of community, we spoke with association leaders, staff, and members, reviewed academic research and writing, and participated in technology conferences. We discovered that the community includes both inputs (actions that facilitate connection) and outcomes (the character and intensity of the experience itself). Moreover, community has both emotional and behavioral manifestations, as when a person feels a sense of belonging, which causes them to volunteer their time and resources to help fellow community members.

Based on our research findings, and particularly on the work of community psychologists, we assembled the following working definition:

- Community is social and emotional glue. It provides the stickiness and connection that motivate people to help one another.
- Community is a web of social relationships, some formal and some invisible.
- Community is much more than a physical or virtual grouping, based on a set of knowable attributes. It provides a foundation, a social infrastructure, that brings together and supports such groups.

The experience of community has four central elements:

- **Membership:** a feeling of belonging or sharing present or potential relatedness. Associations provide a space for people to connect around shared identity and relatedness.
- **Influence:** a sense that one matters and that what one does makes a difference. Associations enact this as voice, in the form of lobbying advertising, and advocacy. People want to know they have influence in the association, too, that leaders will listen to and value what they have to say.
- **Integration and fulfillment of needs:** confidence that membership in the group will fulfill needs and expectations. Associations accomplish this by providing members with venues for learning, advocacy, and interpersonal exchange.
- **Shared emotional connection:** trust on the part of members that they have shared and will share history or experiences. Although people do not typically join associations with friendship as a primary goal, the association membership saves them the trouble and the risk of screening colleagues and suppliers, assuring the member that another member is “one of us.”

From Ideas to Ideas in Action: Constructing the State of Community in Associations (SOCA) Tool

Having settled on a working definition of community and identified elements of one’s experience of community, the research team moved to the next step: making tools that could objectively measure the state of connectedness in associations. Through a rigorous process of development and testing, ASAE & The Center for Association Leadership thus created the State of Community Assessment (SOCA).

The SOCA survey offers a simple, accurate way to measure the sense of community in an association and to discern the nature of its relationship to the organization’s overall effectiveness. The SOCA measures both member sentiment and the ways this sentiment

manifests itself in the form of voluntarism, engagement, and increased willingness to commit resources to the group.

The SOCA includes measures of

- the level of confidence members have in staff and leaders,
- the extent to which they experience the organization as responsive and
- the degree to which they feel valued by others, which can in turn effectively predict critical outcomes such as the intent to renew, to attend meetings, and to volunteer. See figure 1.

FIGURE 1 THE SOCA PROCESS



Since the SOCA debuted, we have collected responses from more than 13,500 members from more than a dozen associations. We have also learned a great deal.

Sense of Community

Here are some of the things we’ve learned about association members’ experience of community:

- That seemingly intangible I-know-it-when-I-feel-it experience of community actually has real contours. It can be defined and objectively measured.
- The sense of community has a powerful, tangible impact on the ability of all types of associations to generate energy and capital—intellectual, financial, and other kinds. Members’ strong, positive experiences of community are essential to the long-term success of voluntary associations.
- Compared to newer, Internet-based virtual communities, traditional associations hold significant competitive advantage. Whether intentionally or by instinct, associations have a far better grasp of what it takes to foster connection. The Internet will never deliver what only face-to-face interaction does, and the online-only networks that seemed such a threat a few years ago did not spell the end of associations. The question for

association leaders is how best to use new technologies to help members meet enduring and decidedly low-tech goals.

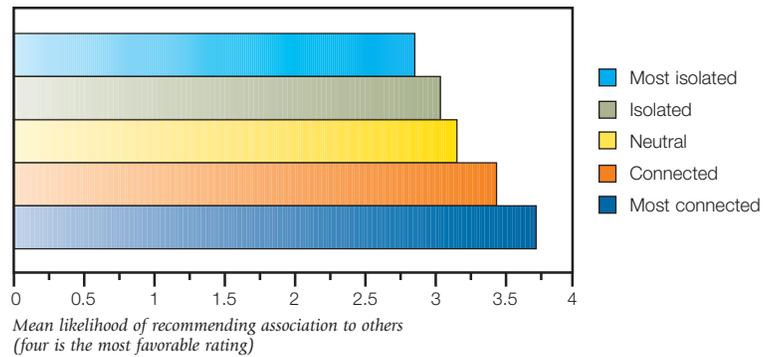
- For associations, community truly is strategy. Member needs are remarkably stable, even as the number of mechanisms for meeting them has increased beyond our wildest expectations. It is consistently true that, whether virtual or in person, ad hoc or structured (and preferably in all of these ways), connection with an association offers a loose-but-powerful structure within which we can meet our fundamental need for communication with, learning from, and helping others.
- We all need and want to make a difference, to get help in coping with difficulties, and to celebrate accomplishments. Associations that focus on our interests and facilitate such experiences will get our business. If they do not, we will go elsewhere. In many cases, your members' business is there for the taking, if you focus on the things that matter. The SOCA tool, designed specifically for associations, allows leaders to identify these things.

Fostering Connections

More than anything else, our results demonstrated that the bonds between members is the currency of voluntary associations. The association will especially benefit from such connections when it has played no explicit role in fostering them and is not even present at the point of contact. Quite consistently, associations receiving favorable scores on member satisfaction, commitment of resources, and voluntarism were those where the bonds between members were sufficiently strong to motivate members to make contact with each other outside formal association meetings and sponsored events.

Notably, the sense of community requires authenticity, which means that people will not always get along. Yet no matter how challenging our differences may be, the most successful associations acted in ways that embraced diversity in all its many forms. Indeed, a certain level of dissent made them stronger, livelier, and more interesting places to be.

FIGURE 2
HOW LIKELY TO RECOMMEND, BY SENSE OF CONNECTEDNESS



Top Tips for Fostering Connection

- A true sense of community is voluntary and cannot be forced. If you want your members to trust you, make sure you are worthy of their trust.
- Actively listen to member voices even if what they are saying is not necessarily what you want to hear. Contrary to popular belief, organizations that foster an open and authentic dialogue among stakeholders, including those who express dissenting views, are more likely to retain their vitality.
- Associations need to work hard at being responsive to members, in ways ranging from picking up the phone quickly to including them in product design. Members who feel their dues are well spent almost universally agree with the statement "This association is responsive to my concerns."
- Members need to connect both face-to-face and virtually. All age groups value similar benefits of membership, but they may meet these needs in a variety of ways. Your presence is not necessary. In fact, members who know other members outside association-sponsored events were most likely to feel connected to and valued by the association and to value the association in return.

Competence and Collective Action

Members expect their associations to protect their interests, keep them informed, and ensure that fellow members are who they claim to be. They want to feel welcomed and valued, no matter what. They also expect consistency, fairness, and integrity from their associations.

Top Tips for Demonstrating Competence

- Reinforce members' sense of identity, affiliation, and value through credentialing, standard setting, and recognition programs.
- Provide high-quality education and training, using a variety of media and formats. Make your association a gathering place for learning and innovation.
- Serve as a unified voice for members through activities such as civic advocacy, lobbying, public relations, and volunteer opportunities.
- Make sure you listen a lot, to members and stakeholders. To be an effective bellwether, you need a full and nuanced understanding of the complexities with which they struggle.
- Make sure members have equal access to leadership roles once they have joined the association. Exclusivity is appropriate at the borders of some associations, but cliquishness within can be damaging.

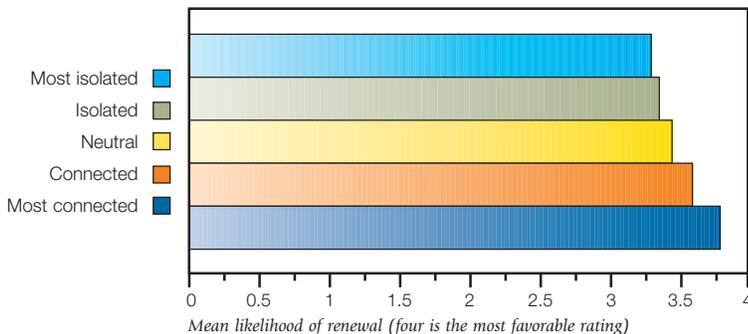
Technology: A Great Servant

Technology provides a powerful delivery system, but there is no substitute for the human touch. It seems that promoters of early virtual communities failed to grasp the importance of knowing fellow members as people, which requires some face-to-face interaction. Associations can extend their competitive advantage in nurturing community if they are creative in using technology to support members' low-tech goals (connection, for instance). But they can lose their edge if they either ignore the power of technology or treat it as if it could solve every problem.

Top Tips for Using Technology to Support Community Building

- Convey a sense of place through a warm, welcoming Web presence.
- Increase responsiveness and flexibility by using Web-based tools to assemble and communicate with members of ad hoc task teams, rather than creating more standing committees or boards.
- Customize online interactions so that members feel known and valued and know that you are respecting their need for privacy.

FIGURE 3
HOW LIKELY TO RENEW, BY SENSE OF CONNECTEDNESS



The Bottom Line: Community Is Present

Community, that most essential driver of an association's success, is present throughout your organization whether you recognize it or not. It is there in the form of special interest groups, sections, online and offline networks, friendships and collegial relationships between members, and even those pesky, heated controversies that seem to crop up at inopportune moments.

When you decide to assess the state of community in your association, you have chosen to learn what will make the most difference to members and to your association as a whole. Armed with this knowledge, you can begin to leverage existing successes in ways that will reap the greatest rewards, in the areas of greatest importance the association's well-being.

Community as Strategy: Resources

- Three abstracts: a series of white papers designed to answer the questions Community as Strategy was designed to address.
- Full assessment: a 60-item survey instrument designed to measure member perceptions while assessing their impact on key outcomes. This version also comes with the ability to identify and compare member segments, and, given an adequate number of responses, predict future outcomes.
- Pulse assessment: a 25-item version of the full-scale instrument. The Pulse version provides a reliable directional snapshot that can be very helpful in tracking progress over time and in benchmarking.
- Consulting: because making sense of data is equally an art and a science, some may choose to retain expert consulting and support in customizing the instrument, advanced data analysis, meaning making, or action planning.
- Benchmarking: a normative database of all survey responses, for use in a variety of benchmarking activities.

How Connected Do You Feel to Your Association?

The Community as Strategy SOCA survey instrument asks association members to indicate how strongly they agree or disagree with statements like these:

- I feel a sense of belonging in this association.
- I believe that this association will protect my interests.
- If I am in need of guidance, other members of this association are generally willing to provide it.
- Being a member of this association makes it easier for me to be successful.
- I feel I share a common bond with other association members.
- I am not interested in this association's future.

Their responses reveal their level of connectedness, which in turn can predict their level of participation in the association and the likelihood that they will remain a member.

Browse the Strategic Research section of the ASAE & The Center for Association Leadership Web site at www.asaecenter.org, or send an e-mail message to community@asaecenter.org for more information on Community as Strategy or to purchase the SOCA tool.

Community as a Driver for Organizational Success

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Questions for Conversation

- ▶ Sara C. Wedeman argues that community is the single biggest driver of organization success for associations. How does your association foster a sense of community throughout the organization? Are community-building activities woven throughout a member's experience with all aspects of the association? (S/B)
- ▶ Research shows that an association especially benefits from strong member connections when it has played no explicit role in fostering them and is not even present at the point of contact. Would you say that the typical member of your organization counts among his or her professional friends and close colleagues a number of other association members? What does your organization do to make it easy for members to connect informally with other members? (S/B)
- ▶ Wedeman says that contrary to popular belief, organizations that foster an open and authentic dialogue among stakeholders, including those who express dissenting views, are more likely to retain their vitality. How well do you foster open dialogue? What does your organization do that might hinder this kind of openness? What can you do to create a more open and honest exchange among members and the association? (S/B)

Action Checklist

- Initiate a series of strategic conversations with your board and staff about the state of community in your organization.
- Explore whether your organization might benefit from using ASAE & The Center for Association Leadership's State of Community Assessment (SOCA) tool. More information can be found at www.asaecenter.org.

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About the Author

During the course of her 25-year career, Sara Wedeman has been a clinical psychologist, a banker, a researcher, a writer and consultant. She has...

- Run her own successful consulting firm;
- Been a principal at the Wharton Center for Applied Research;
- Led the Research Division of CoreStates Financial Corporation (now Wachovia Corporation);
- Practiced as a clinical psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania and in private practice.

Sara holds a Ph.D. in Professional Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania, Masters' degrees from the University of Pennsylvania and Bryn Mawr College, and a B.A. from Swarthmore College as well as a certificate in Business Administration from the Wharton Graduate School.

She is very interested in emerging technologies, particularly the social aspects of their adoption and use. An expert at working with and making sense of quantitative data, Sara is equally skilled at grasping the subtleties of personality and organizational culture. Her unique professional background, together with her extensive overseas experience, enable Sara to see and sense things others do not. Thus, she helps clients craft novel and effective strategies, while remaining true to their identities and aspirations. She particularly enjoys working with clients on emerging issues, where innovation is not an option but a necessity.

About ASAE & The Center for Association Leadership

ASAE & The Center for Association Leadership are two organizations linked together by a common belief and passion. We believe that associations have the power to transform society for the better. Our passion is to help associations and association professionals achieve previously unimaginable levels of performance and reach even higher goals. We accomplish this by fostering a learning community of association professionals, industry partners, outside thought leaders, and other stakeholders who embrace this vision.

The American Society of Association Executives is an individual membership organization of more than 22,000 association executives and industry partners representing nearly 11,000 organizations. Its members manage leading trade associations, individual membership societies, and voluntary organizations across the United States and in 50 countries around the globe, as well as provide products and services to the association community. We are also a leading voice for the nonprofit sector, advocating for voluntary organizations so that they may continue to improve the quality of life in the United States.

The Center for Association Leadership is the premier provider of learning, knowledge, and future-oriented research for the association profession. The Center delivers innovative learning experiences, performance-enhancing resources, new thinking and models for the profession, opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration, and strategic tools and data designed to advance the association profession. Offerings include nearly 100 professional development programs through Center University, environmental scanning and other future focused research, a peer-reviewed journal, and more than 5,000 online articles, models, and case studies. Together, ASAE & The Center for Association Leadership provide resources, education, ideas and advocacy to enhance the power and performance of the association community.

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