

Associations the Internet – a love story



The Associations and Not-for-Profit (NfP) sector have a special place on the internet and web, but it is often overlooked as ‘part of the landscape’ and taken for granted. Whilst commercial organisations battle for the same level of exposure and leverage online, the advantage gifted to Associations and peak bodies is often being squandered. The web loves you and you should love the web right back!

This paper discusses both sides of the story; why the web favours peak bodies; and what benefits they should be looking to reap from it. The input for this paper is drawn from our experience in web as seen by commercial organisations and importantly our service provision to a variety of NfP’s and Associations (see www.membermanager.com.au).

To provide structure to the analysis we have utilised a proprietary framework called AIM9. This framework helps break down the web environment into groups of discrete elements with closely related attributes about which we can draw practical conclusions. As you can see from the model’s structure (Diagram 1), it is designed to assist thinking and planning in a web 2.0 environment. AIM9 is not described in detail here, but more information is available at www.aim9.org.

Diagram 2 highlights areas that we will examine further:

1. The Audience – the individuals or organisations that Associations target as members and stakeholders
2. The internet itself – a place to interact, a marketplace, environment, technology, communications channel or place
3. The Association – their needs and objectives and the options that are available to them online

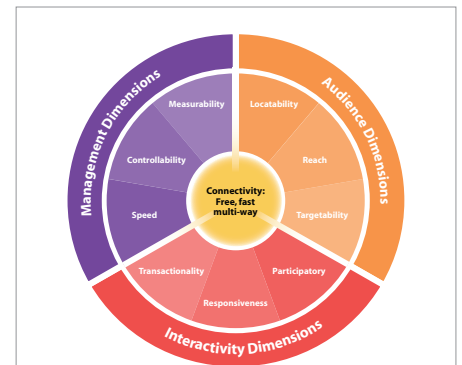


Diagram 1.

AIM9

A proprietary strategic approach to evaluating Web 2.0 style sites and activities. To download the original publication please visit: www.aim9.org.

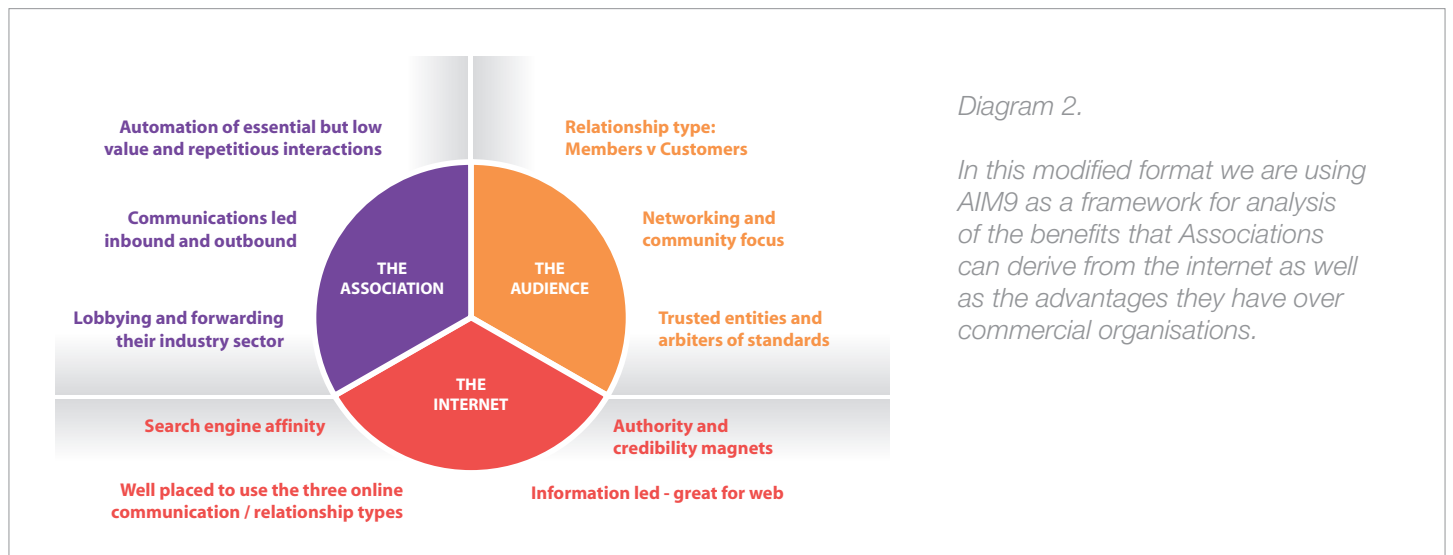


Diagram 2.

In this modified format we are using AIM9 as a framework for analysis of the benefits that Associations can derive from the internet as well as the advantages they have over commercial organisations.

The Audience

Audience related advantages

Relationship type: Members v Customers

Associations and Member-based organisations have a distinct advantage over their commercial cousins as a result of the type and closeness of relationship they maintain with their primary audience: *Members*.

Importantly Members do not have the same type of short term transactional mindset as their primary equivalent in the business world: *Customers*, their loyalty is usually considerably higher. Amongst other advantages this means that Associations have gathered (or can easily and legitimately gather) relatively detailed data about each individual. When on the web this information is additionally valuable as:

1. It is highly actionable as communications costs are very low
2. 'On the fly' segmentation is straightforward allowing communications to be highly targeted and therefore relevant and valued
3. Triggered email notifications supporting events or news help present the organisation as responsive and pro-active

Finally, the permission to communicate (that businesses pay significant sums to achieve) is all but automatic for Associations. The status of membership implies a relationship and therefore an automatic opt-in to communications. This may vary and should of course be verified before email communications begin.

Networking and community focus

One of the core functions of Associations is to connect their respective industry participants and its stakeholders. They connect and build relationship between the people, organisations and vendors targeting the sector. Traditionally this activity has been handled via functions,

letters and faxes and occasionally the media; now the web offers new options.

Hosting events and functions is usually the most desirable approach, but has some practical drawbacks; events can be costly affairs and are bound by location. Direct Mail (DM) style communications are unidirectional (broadcasting information) which cannot connect individuals in a peer-to-peer manner.

Online web 2.0 tools and functions (forums, blogs, wikis, social networking sites) can help support and build connections whilst increasing awareness of the Association itself. Emails can replace some of the DM components reducing costs and increasing relevance and frequency. The web is still perceived by some as an impersonal media, but this feeling is abating as its (often asynchronous) use becomes better understood and more familiar.

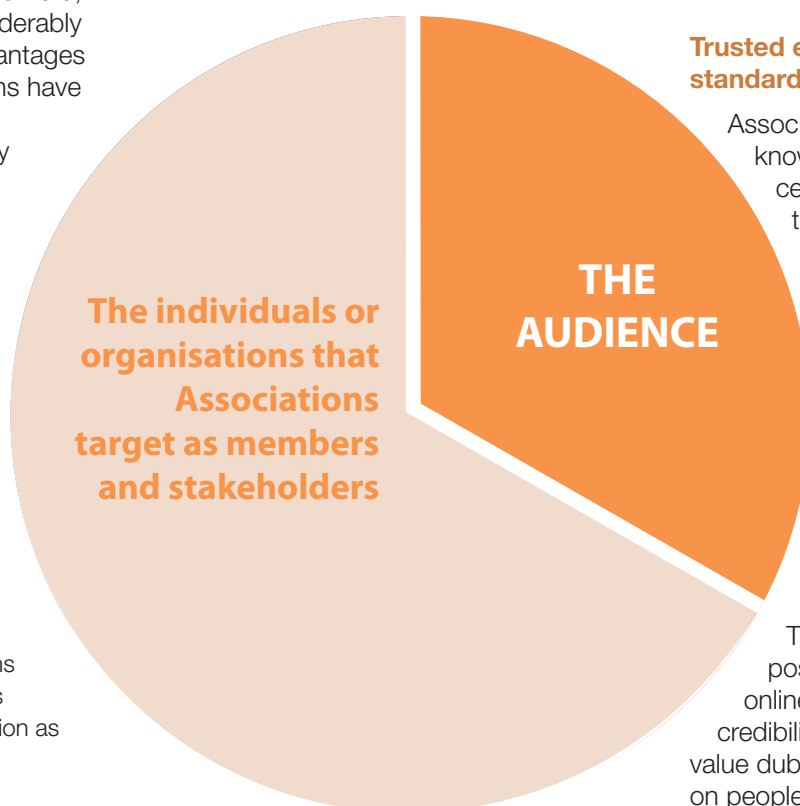
Much hype has surrounded the web 2.0 and social networking phenomena over the last few years,

and it has represented a step change in the way we perceive and use the internet. However it is largely a social movement, so mainstream commercial organisations are struggling to find value in its use. Associations, who bridge the social / organisational gap, are much better placed to get involved. Creating new communities from scratch is very difficult indeed, but providing communities new ways to connect, discuss and have fun is considerably easier to achieve.

Trusted entities and arbiters of standards

Associations are seen as knowledge and best practice centres of excellence for their industries. Due to their lobbying stances, some are not seen as entirely impartial, but nonetheless are often contacted as information resources. Many hold the privilege of judging standards and awards within their sectors and encourage continued professional development.

This privileged and trusted position holds great sway online, an environment where credibility is often low and its value dubious; it has both an impact on people browsing and the web itself. This perception guarantees a level of visitation and provides a level of freedom and acceptance that commercial organisations battle to achieve. Communications by Associations are rarely viewed as sales materials (or the online pest: SPAM), so tolerance for, as well as interest in them, is considerably greater. After all there is an altruistic or higher purpose motivating NfP operations: they support themselves to support us.



The Internet

The Internet's unique application

Search engine affinity

It is estimated that over 80% of new visitors to websites are directed by search engines. So those who dominate on Google (and her cousins) wield a huge online advantage. Add to this that the most desirable of the target keywords of commercial entities are category descriptors ("social worker" for social workers, "planner" for planners - you get the idea). And who is it that naturally dominates for these key terms? The Associations and peak organisations that represent the industry!

As discussed there is a natural tendency for people to look to Associations as authorities offline and this often replicates online. In fact after government departments and Wikipedia, Associations tend to do well in search engines with relatively little effort. Because many Associations are not fully aware of the commercial clout gained by high search engine rankings they are not reaping the related rewards. Whilst they do understand the details of selling sponsorship at events they are less familiar with selling consumer or supplier-oriented advertising online, which is a revenue opportunity missed.

Well placed to use all online communication / relationship types

From an academic point of view the web allows for several kinds of conversations. These include inbound communications (such as completing online forms or placing orders), outbound (such as email broadcasts), and peer to peer (forums, wikis, social etc) and real time (Online Meetings and Instant Messaging (IM)).

Many organisations are taking advantage of only one of these by putting a static website in place to act as a brochure. Some do facilitate interactions but few go any further.

As the internet provides very low cost communication, the more Associations transfer online the greater the savings. Associations are in the fortunate position that each and every form of online communication can be leveraged, for example:

- Inbound: Join, renew, book events, modify membership details etc
- Outbound: Value add (and value notify), sponsor communications

Not only is the web great at making information accessible (24/7 access, secure areas, access control, subscription and alert automation, collecting fees, viral / network distribution, interactivity and animation), but the web also loves information-heavy sites, promoting them up search engine rankings and driving increased traffic volumes in their direction.

Authority and credibility magnets

The web as an environment struggles with credibility. The low cost of entry to getting online is a double-edged sword; on the one hand it allows for amazing phenomena such as social networking but on the other it leads to SPAM, phishing and millions of low value sites.

The web is therefore keen to promote and forward credible and authoritative sources such as government sites and Associations. These organisations and therefore their websites (typically .gov's, .asn's and .org's) therefore hold a special place online. This is particularly true in Australia where these top level domains can only be purchased and used by registered organisations.

This head start means that whilst businesses struggle and fight to generate interested and less sceptical web visitors, Associations are generally liberally referenced spontaneously online, which constitutes free promotion and funnels visitors in your direction.

Therefore not only are Associations promoted as authority figures, but they have a greater volume of 'free' and unsusceptible inbound visitors. Harnessing these visitors is of course the next challenge.



- Peer to peer: Community forums (build relationships knowledge transfer), LinkedIn and Facebook, networks around events
- Instant Messaging: Distributed (e.g. state based) stakeholder and Member enquiries

Information led - great for web

Associations are often generators and distributors of information. This information is derived from many places, but regardless of source becomes increasingly valuable as it is circulated and used by others. This fits perfectly with the paradigm of the web.

The Association

The Association's unique needs and objectives

Automation of essential but low value and repetitious interactions

At the core of many Associations are a number of quite transactional activities which can be costly to administer. These include the Membership cycle, events management and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) administration. Whilst these are very important to both the organisation and their members, their administration is repetitive, highly processed and therefore low value. Traditionally this administration has been carried out manually by individuals communicating by letter, phone and fax. Often it is a slow and multi-step process which can act as a frustration and a barrier to joining. Management of events can take considerable time and effort, from venues and promotion to payments and seating. If linked to CPD, the allocation of points and management of attendance can also be laborious.

In this area, the web 2.0 style of application can be of significant assistance. A very large number of these types of transactions can be extensively automated, including Membership cycles, events, CPD tracking along with invoicing and payment for them all. This represents several benefits:

1. Members can self serve at their own convenience meaning an improvement in perceived service levels
2. A significant reduction in administration burden and cost
3. The option to reallocate resources to manage relationships and exceptions
4. Ability to move the organisational focus back to value adding and away from processing
5. Reduction of errors in processing

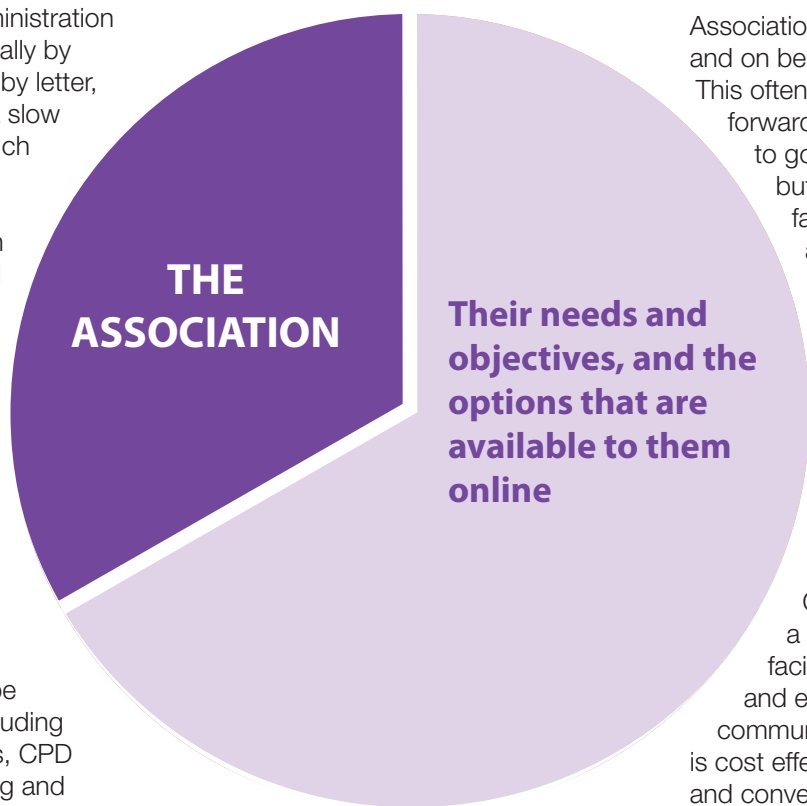
It should be recognised that not all Members will be inclined to take all (or sometimes any) of their interactions online, however more and more

commonly Associations are finding that Members are preferring the self service approach and are less nervous about transacting online. This is perhaps in part a result of the level of trust in the Associations; alternatively it may be because Members are increasingly time poor and looking for flexibility, often including interacting out of office hours.

As these activities are now facilitated online, new opportunities arise for sponsorships. Sponsorship is a prime example of an activity that can be taken onto the internet with great effect. Sponsored email communications are particularly popular as the recipient groups are well defined and niche, the volume quantifiable and measuring response straight forward.

Lobbying and forwarding their industry sector

Associations play other roles within and on behalf of their Members. This often means lobbying and forwarding the industry's interests to government and the public, but can also include a facilitating role, for example acting as a recruitment agent, connecting industry participants together or connecting with suppliers to that industry. These functions include an element of interaction that can be facilitated over the internet, typically via a website, and many can be revenue generating. Garnering feedback from a constituency can also be facilitated online cost effectively and efficiently. Combining email communications and online surveys is cost effective for the organisation and convenient for the recipient.



Communications led - inbound and outbound

We have touched on the role of community and connections to Associations, but also important online is the level of communication between these parties and the hub. Much of the communication emanates from the Association (the hub), often as the output of research or dissemination of respected opinion. Previously these communications have been in the form of paper publications, lectures, events and via the media. Once more this is an area in which the internet is now playing an important role.

To talk to the experts and leverage the internet for your organisation we can be contacted on **1300 528 233** or info@membermanager.com.au