

As the Belgian Society of Association Executives is supporter of the Associations World Congress in Antwerp this edition of the magazine contains a large English section. This way, visitors to the Congress will get a chance to get to know Belgian associations and members of the BSAE as well.

## Engage your members. Let them contribute!

**BSAE spoke to Damian Hutt, executive director of the Association of Association Executives, in the run-up to the Associations World Congress in Antwerp (from 12 to 14 March 2018).**

The ultimate goal of the Association of Association Executives is to inform, educate and provide networking for all association executives in Europe. 'We are here to help associations help their members improve their quality of work and life,' Damian tells us.

Damian Hutt has been at the Association of Association Executives, formerly known as Associations Network, since 2006. He has seen the mindset of the members change. 'They have realised that they can learn from each other, even though they are in different sectors. Now they see how worthwhile it can be. This is now common in Europe, but not yet in India, for example, where we have 6,000 members and subscribers. They don't readily see the advantages.'

### **Free membership**

'Five years ago we turned our information service into a membership organisation. We now have 7,000 members and about 8,000 subscribers in Europe. What we do in the rest of the world is in addition to that. Membership is free



of charge and there will always be that. The difference with subscribers is that members contribute. They take part in specialist panels, provide value with their opinions, share their experience of change in their organisations... And of course they have access to a huge amount of information and education in videos, case studies, briefings and reports.' Damian reckons.

So how is the association funded? 'We get our funding through sponsors of our organisation, event sponsorship, exhibitors, delegate fees and a few other areas, like selling books. We don't have associate membership for suppliers and we don't let suppliers into our online member communities, because our members want best advice from their peers and practitioners and can approach certified suppliers and consultants in our AAE directory.'

**Membership provides them valuable content and also enables us to know what they need to work and develop better. Let your members contribute.**

'We see that a lot of associations executives don't want to be paying all the time for things they don't need or rarely use included in a membership fee. We ask members to join and ask them for information about their interests and what they would like us to provide them in terms of events, training, advice and information. Then we really know what they want and can produce this

for them the way they want it and they are willing to pay a reasonable fee for that. Membership provides them valuable content and also enables us to know what they need to work and develop better. Let your members contribute. The fact that members share their visions, habits and changes makes it a valuable community. At our association, members only pay for what they want, not for what they don't want or need.'

### Hot topics in associations

'There are three main topics in association management that are now evident to me. Traditionally associations would only focus on the professionals within their sector or profession. As an association, you educate your members and want to improve their profession. But now the ultimate goal of the association has shifted from educating and protecting the profession to making sure that the businesses of your members thrive. Associations have realised that they need to engage with the public more, especially as they benefit from special charity status. Nowadays associations communicate directly with the public, through information websites, campaigns, focus groups and more. The public wants information and education in these fields and wants their voice to be appreciated. And this is something that really helps the members of the association as well. Because if you are an architect's association, for example, you want to create a better environment for everybody, or at least that should be your aim. You want to engage the public directly with the power and resources you have - and learn from them so you can advise your professional members. It does a lot for the credibility of your association, and most importantly it gives your association authority as well.'

**Members only pay for what they want, not for what they don't want or need.**

'Secondly associations are realizing that they have to know all about their members if they want to provide the value their members need and deserve. This boils down to good membership systems, recording what your members want and what kind of information they need. You need to capture what your members are looking for on the website, in e-mails, videos, webinars ... Only then can you really know

what members, different segments of members and even individuals really want from your association. It is unacceptable now to not have a CRM type system. It is your job as an association to know what your members want and give them value for membership.'

'And as a third hot topic I would say thought leadership is on the rise. Some association executives realize that a substantial proportion of their members are to be made redundant in 10 to 20 years time because of technology and artificial intelligence. In many jobs tasks that are done manually are going to be taken over by automatic processes in the future. As an association it is really important to think ahead: "what is our sector going to be like in ten years time?" If you can see changes coming, you should prepare your stakeholders. The taxi drivers associations, for example, should have seen the Uber model coming ten years ago, but unfortunately they ignored this possibility. It is important to be open about what is going to happen in the future and discuss it with your members. Associations have to look ahead to the future and be thought leaders.'

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### Sharing successes and failures

Dozens of speakers will be coming to the Associations World Congress to share their experiences and success stories. But are association executives also willing to share their failures? Damian Hutt: 'It is very easy to find associations that are willing to share experiences, because they themselves have their own conferences where their members share their experiences. They are in this area as well. In terms of failures, they come to talk about what not to do and about what could have been done better. And occasionally we do get people who say, "Yes, I want to talk about this absolute failure we went through." And then they tell us how they turned the situation around for the better again. What's very important with our members is that the association world is very willing to share figures, including financial ones.'

What are the types of stories that appeal most to association executives? 'We find that association executives mostly want to hear about case studies in detail. How did someone implement a new system or a new e-learning platform, a new directory, an information service... Or if an association held an event in India for the first time, how did they do it? What did they have to look out for? Our members want that valuable information, details, statistics and figures, before they go ahead and do something, and invest in it. They want to hear about how other associations did it and why at the congress, and then examine the detail in case studies and learn processes in workshops.'

As an international association do you need to take into account cultural differences and habits when working with your members? Damian Hutt: 'Within Europe these differences are less pronounced. What's more important than being a member in one country or another is what type of association it is, i.e. a professional body (60% of our members), a trade association (30% of our members), associations with individual members (but not a profession) and business member associations (10% of our members) - they have different needs in each area of membership, communications, systems and overall member needs - and we provide a whole range of information for this. (JD)