

VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT

Below is a summary of a webinar about volunteer engagement which I recently watched, as well as a webinar about how to keep remote volunteers engaged. In addition, there is a summary of a white paper called “Associations Evolve” which came with an associated webinar.

The *[italicised]* sections are my comments and questions for Council to consider.

Increase engagement with your volunteers using technology

[This was run by Techsoup New Zealand on 4 February 2021. They are a programme run by a not for profit organisation called Connecting Up, who provide information, products, resources and programmes for not for profit organisations across Australia and New Zealand, as well as helping to develop relationships with business, community and government sectors for the development of the sector.]

First we need to understand what the problem is that we want to solve. For example: volunteers can be unreliable and noncommittal due to having other priorities.

Volunteer management, volunteer coordination and volunteer engagement are three different things. Coordination can be automated depending on what the volunteer tasks are. Engagement is more complex, and can be hard to measure.

Golden circle:

- Activate and involve: provide regular reminders of opportunities; make opportunities highly accessible.
- Thank and appreciate: show volunteers the outcome/impact of their work – both qualitative and quantitative; recognition; upskilling; offer LinkedIn recognition of the work they have done/skills they have developed.
- Stay connected: make connection always available and easy to access; foster connections between volunteers.

Keep remote volunteers engaged

[Run by Tobi Johnson, an American volunteer engagement consultant, on 10 February 2021. She is known for her modern thought leadership, highly practical evidence-based strategies, and innovative, “big hat” thinking around engaging, supporting, and acknowledging the work of volunteers.]

Misunderstandings about the organisation can stop people from getting involved. *[Do members joining via registration really understand what it means by the fact that NZAP is an association?]*

People can be encouraged to get involved if they are encouraged to believe in their capabilities, and given reassurances about the support available to them.

Benefits for the organisation of utilising technology to engage with volunteers:

- Opportunity to obtain feedback and information on member needs and requirements;

- Opportunity to improve services to members;
- Better understanding of what people are doing throughout the whole organisation;
- Increased levels of trust;
- Increased access to expert knowledge;
- Information exchange;
- Increased quality of knowledge;
- Increased idea creation and enhanced problem solving.

Benefits for volunteers of utilising technology:

- Access to a wide range of peers, information and experiences;
- Access to obscure or inaccessible information;
- Help and provide support to other members;
- Opportunity to offer and receive emotional support in a climate of trust, equality and empathy;
- Opportunity to meet people and build friendships;
- Ability to store and retrieve messages;
- Access to research articles and links of interest.

Types of digital engagement include:

- Surveys
- Calendar
- Discussion forums
- Live webinars
- Document library
- Multimedia library
- Member directory
- Email blasts
- Social media sharing
- Quick links
- Q&As / Frequently Asked Questions
- Newsfeed

Digital content strategy needs to include:

- A predictable schedule of communications, so people come to expect to hear from Council at regular specific times (this includes emails as well as more formal communications such as newsletters);
- Topics related to larger story arcs (which could last several weeks or months);
- A focus on members' goals rather than on wider organisational/Council goals;
- Readers think of Council as a helper, rather than as an interrupter;
- Content is repurposed across platforms (website, social media and email);
- Think of members as partners not as a passive audience.

What hinders online participation?

- Cultural and generational differences;
- Uncertainty, fear;
- Lack of access to appropriate equipment;
- Lack of training in how to use the software *[this might be alleviated by creating a simple training video, for example]*.

Boosting online participation:

- Do regular welcome messages and introductions for new members;
- Produce an easy to find and easy to understand user guide and tutorial videos;
- Create a culture of sharing;
- Have a distinct newcomer area where people can ask “silly” or “obvious” questions without feeling awkward *[this would need to be moderated by an experienced member (or the Executive Officer) who can answer their questions or point them in the right direction]*;
- Have clear norms for posting;
- Low-risk “asks”;
- Set up buddy/mentoring systems;
- Crowdsourced content creation *[i.e. get members actively involved, so they’re not just passive recipients]*.

Associations Evolve: Aligning membership models to purpose

[The white paper was written by Belinda Moore, an Australian consultant with 25 years’ experience of organisational and membership strategy development for not for profit associations. The associated webinar was run on 12 February 2021 by Answers for Associations, an Australian online community for people working in associations.]

Below is a summary of the white paper, plus some additional notes from the webinar. If you would like to read the full paper, please let me know and I will send it through to you. It is 19 pages long.]

To remain relevant, associations must deliver clear and tangible value to members. Quality is far more important than quantity.

To create true community, people need to be emotionally connected.

It is no longer enough to have a compelling offer; we also need an equally compelling communications strategy. Great communications can grow enthusiasm, deepen bonds, and inspire action. This only works when the right messages go to the right people, at the right time, via the right channels. Few associations are offering options for member facilitated communication. *[Is Connect still the right tool for members to talk to each other and to Council? Do we need a discussion space on the website, or a private Facebook group, or something else? What would work well for both younger and older members?]*

Sustained and enduring change is only possible when those responsible for authorising and implementing that change truly comprehend the need for change, and are committed to the level of change required and able to empower others to make those changes.

Internal barriers to change include:

- Not understanding the change(s) needed;
- Lack of skill sets, manpower or financial resources;
- Organisational inertia and/or cultural resistance to change;
- Failure to generate “buy-in” from members to support the initiative.

Sense of purpose:

- Motivates those unmotivated to act and engage;

- Creates a reason for people to be passionate and to engage;
- Develops a compelling value proposition;
- Creates powerful impact around that purpose.

An association with a strong sense of purpose is formidable. The purpose/vision/mission should be used as the lens through which all initiatives are evaluated. *[How well do members understand NZAP's vision statement, and how well have the strategic goals from Council's 2015 strategic planning day been implemented and/or communicated to members – not just those people who were members in 2015, but also people who have joined since then?]*

A sense of purpose is deeply connected to the association's branding and positioning strategy. The positioning strategy is where the association decides what they want people's opinion of the association to be. Branding is how the association physically demonstrates that position. Any positioning and branding strategies implemented to influence how the association is perceived will not be successful if they are missing purpose. A sense of purpose brings the strategy to life. *[What does this mean for the branding process Gabriela is overseeing? And what does it mean for the revamping of the Newsletter?]*

There are five key activities which an association may choose to focus on:

- **Mobilisation:** members are empowered to take collective or independent action to achieve a stated objective.
- **Representation:** exerting influence on behalf of members.
- **Community:** enabling members to find solutions to their challenges by sharing with each other.
- **Participation:** creating pathways for members to actively engage in activities coordinated by the association.
- **Service provision:** provide products, services, events, education and/or communications to assist members achieve their objectives.

The more activities an association chooses to employ, the more challenging it becomes to structure an effective membership model and deliver compelling value to members. For an association to effectively fulfil its purpose, the choice of activities must be carefully considered and focused where the most impact can be achieved. *[Which of the five is NZAP currently offering, and which should it be focusing on?]*

The type of membership activity will influence the communications strategy:

- **Mobilisation:** purpose-focused, clear next steps, celebrate milestones.
- **Representation:** update members on the journey by seeking input on campaigns, provide updates on progress, celebrate outcomes.
- **Community:** most content is created by members, and the association's focus should be on encouraging participants to develop and share content and engage with each other.
- **Participation:** inspire ongoing participation, aims to build a sense of community.
- **Service provision:** focus on generating uptake and service engagement, most content is created by the association.

There are nine enablers which need to be running effectively if the association is to be successful in achieving its purpose; these need to be aligned with the association's membership model.

1. Dynamic leadership supported by effective governance processes.

2. Embrace technological innovation to create an efficient, responsive and competitive association.
3. Useful, interesting, accessible and timely communications *[this includes website, emails, newsletter etc].*
4. A robust and sustainable membership framework.
5. Skilled staff and volunteers working in a nimble and positive organisational culture.
6. A competitive, compelling and viable value proposition to attract new members and retain current members; quality, not quantity, is key.
7. Engaging member recruitment, engagement and retention activities via an ongoing programme of proactive community engagement, management of the range of member journeys and a feedback mechanism that allows for refinement of the association's offering.
8. Diverse revenue sources supported by the full range of proactive business development processes; think about other ways outside of membership subscriptions to generate revenue, including events, sponsorship, advertising, etc.
9. Planning that converts a shared vision into a practical strategy.

Nikky Winchester
Executive Officer