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Joel K. Schettler

— Joel Schettler, editor

THE FIGHT FOR RELEVANCE

For associations, the eternal operating mantra was once a simple proposition to its members: Get connected, get ahead. Not so much any longer. So said organizational management consultant Cathi Hight in early June during MSAE's 57th Annual Meeting & Expo. "Today it's about access, connections and solutions," she said. "If we are not in this business, we aren't relevant."

Relevance is an all-encompassing theme. Taking stock of your association or business using relevance as your measure involves not only looking at the bottom line; it forces you to find how your services (your brand, if you will) exist in the hearts and minds of those you serve. This fight for relevance, aptly the title of Hight's presentation, is getting more difficult every day.

Associations are increasingly competing for space they once held to themselves. As Hight noted in her presentation, many other entities now fulfill the services that associations performed for members, in areas such as networking, business support, and even training. And while it isn't the only culprit in the changing landscape, technology, particularly developments in areas such as cloud computing and social media, is quickly changing the ways that associations engage with their members. Hight cited the work of Mary Byers and Harrison Coerver, co-authors of two books on the subject of associations: *Race for Relevance*, 2011, and the just-released follow-up *Road to Relevance*. I had the opportunity to interview them both for this issue's Q&A feature (see page 27) and podcast episode.

"Competition is heating up because groups have realized that when you connect with an association you are connecting with a lot of people that fill a single space, whether it's dentistry, or engineering, or medicine or new car dealers," said Byers during our interview. Competitors are quickly reaching out to those same demographic groups with a broad range of products, services, programs and activities that once may have only come from an association, she said. Today such services may come from nontraditional areas such as other associations themselves, for-profit companies that see the potential buying power of select groups, and even the Internet, which can quickly give users specific industry information once only offered by associations. "So the competitive landscape has changed," Byers said, "but what really hasn't changed is how our associations are doing business."

For more information on this very subject, check out our feature story "Rules of Engagement" beginning on page 40. In the story, association leaders and consultants examine what engaging with an association really means in today's fast-paced, connected business world. Nothing is automatic any longer. "You can't have your doors open and expect members to flood in anymore," says one consultant in the story. Associations must reassess what they need to do to remain relevant. There's that word again.

What both Byers and Coerver suggest in their book, and what Hight also stressed in her presentation, is that associations take a hard look at what they offer. For some, the road to relevance may be paved with some soul-searching and a lot of hard work. It's what High calls thinking outside in. "It's not about selling what you have to the outside world," she said. "It's about listening first and then bringing that information into your association."

I hope you enjoy this issue. And, as always, we would love to hear from you online.