Florida Society of Association Executives
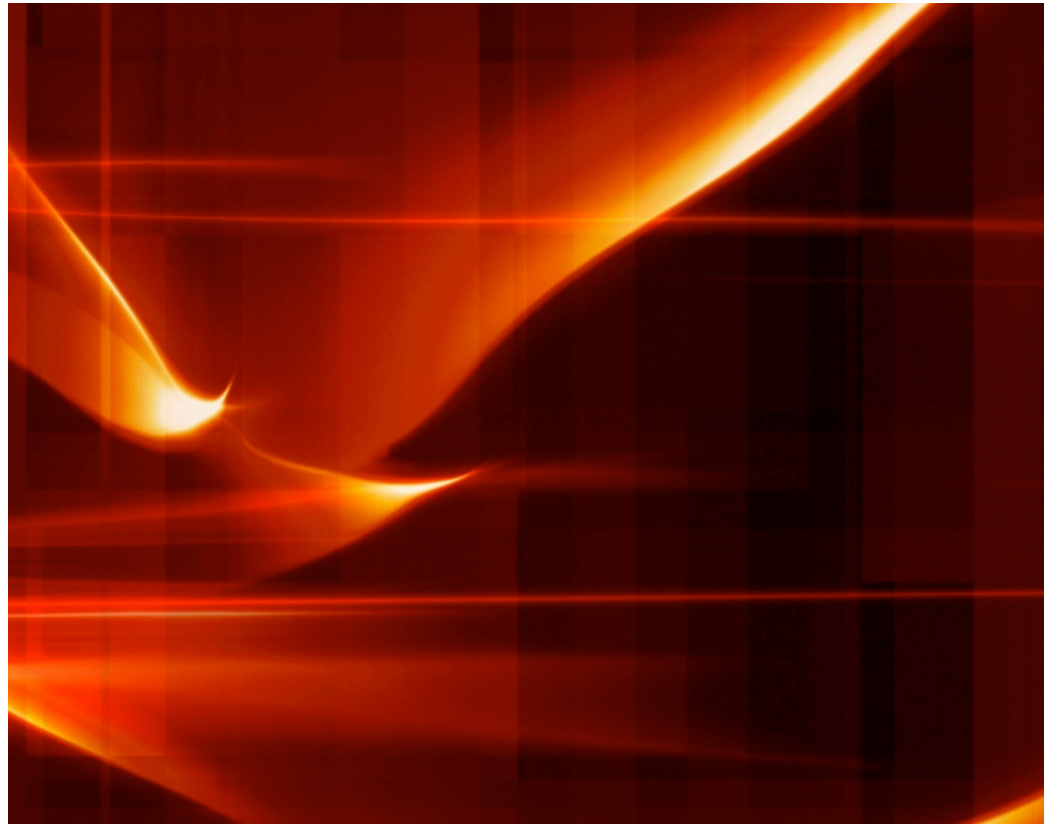
"The future has already arrived. It is just not evenly distributed"
William Gibson

The Future of Associations:
How do we influence and prepare for what is coming next?

By Jerry Matthews, CAE

The Foundation of the Florida Society of Association Executives (FFSAE) annually hosts a two-day Think Tank retreat of experienced association executives to consider issues and challenges to the association community. Those discussions and recommendations are then made available to FSAE members.

This year the topic was "The Future of Associations: How do we influence and prepare for what is coming next?" FFSAE sought to identify those emerging trends that will have an impact on association members and then determine what actions association executives and volunteer leaders can take to address or influence the concerns.

The FSAE Foundation invited futurist speaker and strategic facilitator Jerry Matthews, CAE to lead the discussions. His wide-ranging presentation, "The Way of Tomorrow™", covered three broad areas and several underlying trends. Think Tank participants then created a list of concerns related to these future trends. Breaking into work teams, the participants discussed the concerns and drafted possible actions for associations to consider. This paper gives a brief description of the areas and trends presented which became background and corresponds to the recommended actions from the Think Tank participants.

A New Tomorrow

Amazing shifts are occurring. They impact all levels of society, business, and personal life. These movements are empowered by new human desires and influence and enabled by technology. Many of the trends represent a reversal of decades-long fundamentals. These evolving trends are creating a new tomorrow for us as individuals and also for our associations. The changes that are most predictive of our future are concentrated in the areas of communications, technology and individuals. These three were presented in detail and became the base for team discussions on association responses and actions.

New Communications

The future trend with the broadest impact is communications. We now have the ability to communicate with anyone, anytime, anywhere, in any format, on any device. Communication is no longer just text, sounds, and numbers but is now rich with pictures, movement, and emotion. Distance and time have become meaningless.

New forms of communications evolved over the centuries but each one rapidly advanced when linked to a new platform such as roads or electricity. The Internet is the latest communications platform. Ever evolving, the Internet is moving from a one-way information distribution system to a two-way interactive platform. In this New Internet, participants have the power to create their own experiences and can participate, discuss, debate, and influence others in a virtual manner. The new Internet will be the most powerful force for change in this century.

Virtual gatherings are a natural evolution of the new Internet. A broad definition of this is Social Media, which allows participants to learn, receive advice, or share knowledge collaboratively with each other rather than from institutions or professionals. The forms of communication, direction or flow of the communication, and intent create the different categories of social media.

There are several types of social media. Blogs and podcasts are one-way forms of social media but have established credibility for many individuals. Social media that connect individuals – called social networks – are the most popular kind of social media. Examples are MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn and numerous others. Cooperating forms of social media allow for group creativity and are represented by Wikis and open source projects. The last type is action-oriented social media and includes subject forums, rating sites, and topic or theme virtual communities.

The final area of advancement of future communications is search. The power of search has made access to any kind of information on-line expected. Search capabilities are evolving and will include image, voice, and subject recognition and combinations of them. Soon search will be easily molded to an individual's desires and based on personal comprehensive history.

Associations are uniquely positioned to lead and model many forms of the New Communications. Following are some of the directions association can consider for the organization and for its members.

Communications Recommendations

Suggested Actions for Associations in Integrating New Communications

Δ Develop programs and solutions that assure the essential roles of members and the association in the evolution of the New Internet

    Serve as filter and trusted advisor on New Internet opportunities and / or providers of services and products

    Build trustworthy systems that demonstrate the value of the association to members and their customers

    Partner with social media providers for training of members

    Create the new mechanisms to determine the individual and collective current and future needs of members, and become known for meeting those needs

    Adjust the association search recognition tags regularly so members can be found on the major search engines

Δ Build an engaging and interactive community using web site and social networking platforms

    Connect members and the association through a multi-channel social media communications strategy

    Create a "Wikie like" collaborative social platform that engages members as contributors, experts and consumers of pertinent information about the members, the industry or profession

    Develop a place on the New Internet as the destination for members to collaborate, network, educate and create

    Create unique virtual games or programs to attract web surfers

Δ Model the use of information gathering technology and techniques to create dynamic content and business solutions for members and their customers

    Create options for members to choose how to participate either physically or virtually

    Use member case studies in the new communications as examples

    Provide direct information or platforms the enable the transfer of business solutions and examples to members

Δ Distill information to members and consumers in a manner that enables them to easily translate that information into knowledge

    Ensure that association content about members and member services is original

    Promote the value of association membership through providing useful information

    Link with other relevant websites and resources

New Individual Power

The individual is once again becoming the basic economic unit. This is possible through the rise of innovation and creativity as a business driver. Only individuals – in the immediate future – have the ability to create, which will become the most critical and necessary asset for new products and services. This shift will significantly influence not for profits and for profit organizations and society.

But individuals are not all the same. There are four unique generations operating in the market. They are: Traditionalists (age 60+), Baby Boomers (ages 40-60), Gen X (ages 30-40), and Millennials (under age 30). Each generation has a unique philosophy and approach to work and life. They have radically different definitions of basic concepts such as communication, reward, career, community, and time. Stress and competition among these groups will increase. Boomers will lose influence and Millennials will replace them in power in just a few years.

A new creative class of individuals will arise. There will be no boundaries – physical or organizational – on their talent. They will influence business structures, cities, and physical locations (if any) of companies. The business organization will serve them rather than the other way around. Wealth and power will shift to them.

With the new Internet platform and the boundary less creative class, the ability to outsource becomes an expected extension. Virtually anything can and will be outsourced. An example is tutors for students that are available 24/7. Many company internal competencies long seen as assets – such as research and development – can be outsourced. Chemical research is an example. Even professional services will be outsourced. Base services of doctors, lawyers, architects, and accountants are outsourced directly by consumers or indirectly by the professionals themselves.

The most apparent display of individual power is with the new consumer. The control of the economic transaction has shifted to the consumer. Consumers can research, compare, shop, and purchase with a speed and convenience never possible before. There are numerous web sites and services like Buzzillions that provide consumers with product information and comparisons as well as ratings. Even professionals are affected by web-based information sources. An example of this is WebMD. This power shift to the consumer will change the role of every professional, business and organization.

The examples given of sites or services are just the current form and design but they give us a view of possibilities. They are the harbinger of the future. We will see much more developed and sophisticated sites that address customized concerns and offer personalized advice.

Associations, whether individual or corporate membership structured, can facilitate the rise of Individual Power. Following are some of the directions association might consider for the organization and for its members.

Individual Power Recommendations

Suggested Actions for Associations in Creating the New Individual Power

Δ Execute a multi-generational platform that promotes global communication, cooperation and collaboration

> Develop targeted, multi-channel communications, information platforms and benefits that allow for choice by each type of audience

> Reward, acknowledge and share creative ideas on a regular basis and translate them into revenue generating opportunities for both members and the association

> Integrate the engagement of every generation in all aspects of the association through programming and leadership

> Create a flexible work environment that honors generational differences and reward preferences

> Empower members by creating programs, tools and activities that create an understanding of the generational differences and attitudes

> Analyze the purpose, audience, and message for each association program, product and service

Δ Develop a creative environment for the association by:

> Moving beyond traditional committees and structure into new connections

> Looking at business models in other sectors not just 501 (c) 3/6

> Establishing a Virtual Innovation University that fosters creativity and innovation for our industry

> Promoting an association risk-free environment for creativity and innovation

> Nurturing staff innovation and creativity in a supportive environment that allows for risk to achieve a greater ROI

> Cross-pollinating ideas and team members to achieve positive results

Individual Power Recommendations

Suggested Actions for Associations in Creating the New Individual Power (continued)

Δ Develop strategies and tactics for associations and members to create consumer-centric models

> Construct the model to enhance online resources for members to identify, connect or collaborate with potential business partners
>
> Create structures that provides expertise to members and enable members who need expertise to receive it from members who can provide it
>
> Identify resources and opportunities for strategic partnerships to maximize the effectiveness of the association and the members' businesses / practices
>
> Define ways to save resources and create future business opportunities
>
> Provide business model alternatives for members to consider
>
> Take every opportunity to show how our members are "different" and "special" to the public

Δ Educate members to embrace different resources such as outsourcing as possible strategies for business success

> Accept advice and help from all resources
>
> Unbundle association services to give members more choices and experiences
>
> Build a collaborative conduit directly and indirectly with members and their customers to create better understanding of consumers' current and future wants and needs
>
> Design initiatives that address our members' need to provide value to their customers
>
> Position our association to be the trusted source for accurate, honest data for members, consumers, and the media
>
> Develop an ongoing process that helps identify programs and services of maximum value to the members
>
> Design the membership experience to assure that it is personal, memorable, valuable and engaging
>
> Create the opportunity for members and consumers to customize their association relationship and services
>
> Examine data to make informed, meaningful decisions

New Technology

Technology does not directly create change, but the application of it in a simple manner does. Technology is ever evolving. It is the leverage for the most powerful changes we will see in the future for not for profit and for profit organizations and society.

There is a movement to hosting all information, data, and images on the Internet. We can see that happening clearly today. The next step will be to host computational ability on the Internet also. The result is all information and the shaping of that information through processing software and hardware will be in one central place. This gathering of all function, utilities, and data is called The Cloud. Large Internet players like Google and Amazon have already tested the concept and others are moving quickly. Computing power and data will move from your personal device to the Cloud.

The impact of the Cloud will be enormous. Entirely new business models will arise. Old business models will die. And the combination of the other concepts already mentioned in this report – new Internet, search, the Cloud, creative individuals, social media, consumerism – will move power and creative influence to new structures or non-structures. Virtual organizations and business models will proliferate and in some fields dominate.

New technology will have the power to know everyone intimately. Search goes to the next level through the addition of a degree of intelligence. A current example is Netflix. Algorithms will be created to assist, search, filter, and provide individualized responses. Eventually these algorithms will even be able to predict any individual's desires.

Every thing will have imbedded intelligence. Physical objects will have chips identifying history, format, purpose, and will enable communications. Today's RFID chips are the beginning. In the future the scope of this power will increase. Things will think and support you in the background. As an example your house will order its own repairs. This invisible intelligence will replace most routine functions of today.

The integration of all the technologies and functions discussed previously will create a new form and level of understanding and support for individuals and organizations. This symbiotic relationship will create new capabilities. You will receive individualized and specific advice in personal activities through a new virtual entity. This entity will resemble the avatars now found in virtual worlds like Second Life. An awareness – an Intelligent Presence – will understand, assist, support and enhance our daily lives both personally and professionally.

Associations are well positioned to lead and implement many forms of the New Technology. Following are some concepts for association to consider for the organization and for its members.

Technology Recommendations

Suggested Actions for Associations in Incorporating New Technology

Δ Become the catalyst for utilizing "The Cloud" by the association and members

> Ensure a robust association presence on the Cloud and implement using its services

> Prepare association members to leverage the Cloud for their business through education, training and dynamic content

> Provide information that helps members anticipate and prepare for changes to information processing and storage

> Earn the position of trusted authority in application of the shift of processing technologies and software

> Assist members to keep their businesses and practices relevant and successful / profitable in this transition

Δ Create the "Golden Trinity" of the new Internet, the Cloud and intelligent presence as effective business models for the association and our members

> Capture and extrapolate all member interactions and preferences to power the embedded intelligence capability of the association by anticipating member needs and wants to enhance the member's unique association experience

> Increase members' understanding and utilization of intelligent presence in conducting their businesses/practices

> Incorporate intelligent presence into the conduct of all association activities

> Assimilate member information to use and redistribute in offering customized value-added services

> Create new revenue streams for the association in these new technologies

Comment on All Recommendations

In working with different groups on these future trend concepts, the depth of the recommendations developed by participants are based on degree of current experience with the topic. So it is understandable that Association Executives will create more robust recommendations in the New Communications area since that is a core competency of the association and the executive. They have already been touched by some areas such as the new Internet and social media so they can extrapolate future possibilities there. Other concepts are somewhat distant from current activities, and while they understand the trend, they are less connected with eventual impacts. So recommendations in these areas tend to be less specific.

An Overview of Tomorrow

Isolated trends can have differing levels of impact if on their own. It is the interplay of several trends that multiplies effect. In our future massive, connected and simultaneous movements will dramatically and permanently affect greater society and our personal worlds. Associations, businesses and societies aware of these changes can create organizational and philosophical solutions. These solutions are through new programs, products, and services that assist and even lead the transition. The opportunity is available for associations if they desire. An amazing, creative, and personally powerful future is coming.

Speaker / Facilitator

Jerry Matthews assists organizations and individuals in creating successful futures. He specializes in making presentations on future trends, facilitating strategic thinking and planning sessions, and executive coaching. Jerry is nationally recognized for interpreting future concepts through presentations, workshops and videos.

During his 27 years of executive experience as CEO of the Florida and Illinois State Realtor® Associations, he created a vast array of new programs, products and services. The leading-edge technology products he developed are used nation-wide.

In the past five years Jerry has made over 75 future presentations / workshops and completed 90 strategic thinking events for associations and companies. These events were throughout the US and Canada.

Jerry has a Bachelors Degree from Samford University and an MBA from Florida Atlantic University. He holds the CAE designation and a Black Belt in Karate. A member of ASAE, Jerry is also a Professional member of the National Speakers Association. His advising business is based in Orlando, Florida. You can reach him at Jerry@JerryMatthews.com.