

Different, is to be..

Let's talk about one of your organization's most vital pieces: your differentiator. What makes you different? What is your unique value proposition to compel your audiences to join, stay, engage, and become an ambassador?

For associations, the most common answers we get from staff and members alike for these questions—gleaned from over ten years of quantitative and qualitative data—are a variation on the theme of “great connections.” It probably sounds something like this:



Honestly, that isn't enough.

It hasn't been enough for the past decade, and it surely won't be for the future.

Great connections are what your members expect of you at minimum. That isn't an above-and-beyond differentiator compelling people join and stay engaged even when their professional development budgets are chopped in half. It's the free bread at a Michelin-starred restaurant, not the Bon Appetit cover-worthy reimagining of Chilean sea bass. I'm sure the bread is delicious and is fabulously presented, but there's more coming, right? (Unless you are Olive Garden, where breadsticks have become the cornerstone of their brand—they own that.)



Let's have some fun.

Try a little exercise with a handful of team members and association members/volunteers. This is a lite version of an exercise we work through with clients in our Kamp process—and many agencies do similar exercises.

We all remember the beloved **Mad Libs**...

The reason why I'm so passionate about _____ (organization's name)

is because we make a difference in _____ (audience, industry, market, product)

by being **the only** organization that _____ (unique differentiator)

Fun? Hard? Boring? Eye-opening?

Now ask yourself and/or the others that completed the exercise: Can any other organization, business or product say the same thing? If the answer is yes, that's not your differentiator.

More often than not, professional development budgets are the first item on the chopping block. If the main thing you offer is connections, that's not a compelling dues renewal argument for an organization tasked with trimming the fat wherever possible. In today's world, people can find relevant professional connections for free and faster than ever before. Your brand must give your audiences something they can't find anywhere else.

If your organization is having a hard time articulating a clear, meaningful, and consistent differentiator, here are two questions to prime your engine:

1. What is the biggest pain point those you serve are trying to solve every day that you can help with?
2. What one product or service do you offer that those you serve can't perform their job without?

Now, if you find yourself coming back to "it's the networking opportunities at our conference" or "it's our community," then get more specific.

1. What is the one way our community advances an individual's ability to supercharge their career trajectory?
2. What is the one way our community is future-proofing the industry we serve?

Final thoughts

Don't underestimate the impact of diving into the specifics of your organization's differentiator and value. It's so much more than a group that gets together in a different city each year to talk shop or a web experience that provides connections, leadership, and education.

It's time to get more meaningful to secure "we absolutely can't live without this" status amongst your members.