

Mark Levin, CAE, CSP

“Friendly” Competitors

Wouldn't it be great if we could communicate with our members, and get them more engaged, without having all of that competition for their time and attention?

Good luck on that one. Not gonna happen.

So let's be realistic, and think about how to deal with the competition and maybe even turn some of them into partners.

Over the last few years we've been talking more and more about how hard it is to keep up with our competition for attracting and keeping members and increasing member engagement. We point out frequently that our competition is coming at us in many different forms: other organizations in our industry, profession, or community; the private sector, which now provides products and services directly to our members and potential members that they previously had to join our association to get; and technology, especially social media, texting, and Google, which compete directly with us to get their attention and their loyalty.

So, while we all face these challenges (and another, obviously HUGE one right now), there are still ways we can work together with other organizations and institutions – even those we have long considered competitors – to move forward in a mutually beneficial way. Here are some examples of ways to that.

- 1) **Identify areas of mutual concern.** Take another look at your “competing” associations. Go to their websites and read through their Mission and Vision Statements. There is probably a lot of similarity to yours. Why fight it? If you both have a mission statement that talks about improving or advancing the profession, are there ways you can do that together without diluting anyone's “brand”? To get these other groups to work with you, you need to focus on the **outcomes**, not the logistics of working together, competitive attitudes, etc.
- 2) **Work on knowledge exchange, not just information exchange.** Too often groups that could/should be working together are afraid that their members will get information from the other group that will get our members considering joining that group (and maybe dropping out of ours!). Don't worry about that. Everyone's members are facing *information overload* every day. No one's members are facing **knowledge overload**. Try to point out to your members how your collaboration with another group is increasing the knowledge base of the industry or profession, and that is good for everyone.
- 3) **Acknowledge that the numbers DO matter!** Yes, it has long been said that “there is strength in numbers.” But there is also power, influence, credibility, and brand recognition in *greater* numbers. All of the people or institutions you are trying to influence have one thing in common – they can count! Government officials, regulatory bodies, certifying entities, legislative representatives, exhibitors, sponsors, funding agencies, etc. all have two questions for you when you ask for their help: #1- Who do you represent and #2 – How many? This is where coalitions and other partnerships with would-be competitors makes the most sense.
- 4) **Build a foundation for the future.** Just as every organization faces the challenge of competition via technological advances, they also face the mutual challenge of generational diversity. Generational issues are the number one concern of many associations at all levels,

as the average age of their current membership skews higher each year. The concern for many groups isn't just getting young people to join their organization - it's getting them to join their profession, or industry. Workforce development and generational awareness is an open opportunity for groups to create a credible information base from which to work together. For example, by sharing the cost of high-quality industry/profession-wide surveys that provide information which can be used to attract new people to the industry, all participants benefit from the information and credibility of the survey. It's then up to each participating group to use the information as they see fit.

- 5) **Increase the globalization of your group.** Every organization is already "international," whether it is in their name or not. Find other groups around the world in your field which can help each other by providing knowledge about various customs, language barriers, cultural nuances, communications variances, etc. Shorten the learning curve of dealing with multiple time zones, leadership norms, etc. Find new sources of members, sponsors, and other partners.
- 6) **Enhance your impact, don't duplicate it.** Here is an example of what collaboration can mean to an industry.

In the United States, there are literally hundreds of organizations representing one or more segments the construction industry. For more than a century, many of these groups competed for the same members or member firms. It was, at times, an incredibly intense type of competition. At some point, the leading construction associations realized they all had several things in common.

- a) A shortage of skilled workers for their members
- b) An ever-growing list of overlapping training programs
- c) A lack of qualified instructors
- d) An inability to standardize training curriculum

Eventually, they set up a combined, industry-wide training program. In doing this, they found that every participating group: *saved money, saved human resources, saved time, kept and enhanced) their individual brands, and gained influence and recognition from current and new critical partners.*

The success of all these opportunities to share, exchange resources and knowledge, and move closer to accomplishing the mission of the involved organizations depends on one key element – **mutual trust**. The organizations must put aside their competitiveness for the benefit of helping everyone succeed.

American Poet Ralph Waldo Emerson is credited with saying "***There is no limit to what we can accomplish if no one cares who gets the credit.***" That was true 130 years ago, and it is true today. Seek out those "friendly" competitors and see what you can accomplish together. Don't worry about who gets the credit.

Just be sure your members get the benefit.

Mark Levin, CAE, CSP has more than 20 years of experience as an association executive and is also an internationally-known speaker and consultant to the nonprofit and association community. He currently serves as Executive Vice President of the Chain Link Fence Manufacturers Institute, an international trade association, and as President of B.A.I., Inc., his speaking and consulting firm.

He can be reached at mlevin0986@gmail.com or via his website at www.baileadership.com.