

The Secret for Association Executive Success: Study Air Guitar!

by Jim Carroll

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A few weeks ago, my blog offered humble advice to CEO's everywhere as to the most important thing they should do "right now." "As you work to navigate your way through the challenging economic shoals that surround you," I wrote in my "Memo to the CEO" blog post, "you need to make sure that you don't kill innovation in its tracks."

The response to that posting suggests to me that a lot of leaders are continuing to struggle with what they should be doing today in a world in which their strategy for tomorrow already seems like it's "so yesterday."

Things are happening very fast out there in the world of business, as they are with associations. Are you witnessing turmoil within your membership base? A challenge attracting the younger demographic? Lower attendance numbers at conferences and events? More information than ever that has to go to your membership but increasing challenges in getting it to them? Is your association brand becoming a bit "tired"

instead of energized? Do you have a consultant studying the role of your association and how you might need to change it in the future?

Probably so, and here's the thing. You've got to do all that, except you've got to do it faster. That's why you need to keep innovating, and make that a key part of your leadership role.

The challenge with association leadership today is ensuring that you stay on top of, and ahead of, fast paced trends. That's why I focus on innovation in the broadest sense. Innovation isn't just coming up with the next great iPod -- it's asking yourself the hard questions, and always challenging yourself to do something different to deal with the realities those hard questions pose. If you aren't attracting 25 year olds as members, why not? And how do you fix that? By innovating -- by trying to do something differently!

So my "memo to the CEO" generated a whack of email, with many people asking "ok, so what do we do to ensure we keep innovating?" Here are a few ideas I tossed out for an association keynote last week:

-- Study air guitar -- and think "transformation"

There's innovation, and then there's market transformation. While Sony and Microsoft spent their time developing a faster video game machine, Nintendo

transformed the video game marketplace with the Wii by introducing wireless 3-d spatial action to video gaming. That helped refresh enthusiasm for the already-popular GuitarHero game -- since people could now do wireless GuitarHero. An entire generation of baby-boomers who mastered air guitar in the 70's who could never figure out an X-Box controller -- are now video game customers! Search YouTube for grannies playing Guitar Hero, and you'll see the results organization that has taken innovation to the next step! Not just innovation, but transformation. Is your association -- its mandate, role, focus, responsibility, deliverables -- due for transformation?

Do you need to be delivering an air-guitar experience instead of the same old game-controller that everyone else has?

Energize your brand. I tell my business clients: if your brand looks tired, your customers will see it as tired. Once that happens, you'll start to lose all the equity you've built up. Brands today need to be full of energy; I spent time with a company last week that is re-approaching the world of brand-image with enthusiasm and passion. There was a lot of energy, and I suspect we will see that continue over time. Is your association brand image out of breath? Exercise it a bit and freshen it up!

Fail faster. Imagine that you are a company that has some stuff that will help to make the next market of LED TV's happen fast --that's the next big entertainment industry market. (Hint: they're more environmentally friendly) Imagine that you can't decide whether to get involved or not. Imagine that your competitor has already worked on three prototype projects with the new platform. Who is going to win? From an association perspective, think the same way. Are you taking on enough, small unique projects that you can fail from, with the specific objective of trying to figure out this crazy new fast world you find your members within?

Check your bench strength. Really smart people with the ability to structure themselves into self-assembling project teams are your best hope for the future. And the fact is, their skills are continuing to be in extremely short supply as everybody becomes more of a specialist. If you don't have an organization that can expand, contract and collaborate at will, drawing the capabilities of your A-team, you've got a big problem. Do you need to refocus and re-jig your volunteer base so that the A-list in your industry or association are helping to guide you into the future? Does your Board need a refresh, with some new insight from some of the more progressive individuals in the industry or profession? Tough questions, but necessary ones.

Scare yourself. Do you know who your new competition will be five years from now? What association or network or professional group or technology could come along and usurp your role and undermine your value? Where will your association deliverables be irrelevant five years out? Think big -- I tell my clients to imagine

a world with a Google Car, an iPlane, or WalMart Hip Replacements. I believe we are living in transformative times, in which all markets and industries are seeing big transformations with the rapid emergence of new competitors. How will that impact your association?

Check your speed. How fast can you innovate? Perform? Undertake miracles? Tackle a problem? I'm still on a mailing list for the Sporting Goods Manufacturing Association; I keynoted their conference last year. This week, members are scrambling to deal with a fast new environmental challenge, and are being led by their association leaders. That's powerful stuff. Surviving today's economy is all about how quickly you can assemble and reassemble your team to fix fast problems; that the SGMA is doing this is indicative of an association that is learning to think and act fast. Can your association act that fast, so that's it's solving real problems, rather than going through the same old motions that it went through a decade ago?

Invest in experience. Get a bit crazy. Try things out. Study my "Where's the Growth" document on my blog, and find out where your own market growth potential is. Rush a few new services to your membership. Don't have committee meetings about doing a new newsletter -- just do it! Find contributors. Heck, I'll write you something! The fact is, trying something out will help you learn from the process. The insight your team gains in learning how to innovate will be extremely valuable. It's called experiential capital, and it's the new currency of the 21st century. The more you have, the better you'll be positioned. Innovation isn't something you just do: it's a culture, and a mindset that you invest in. By doing things.

Set the tone. Okay, these are scary times when it comes to the economy. Yet if you let the current economic headlines drive your leadership spirit, you're sunk. You have to keep people focused on the future -- otherwise, your team will smell your fear. Leadership is all about keeping your team focused on opportunity and goals, not on ongoing and regular ("new normal") volatility.

I'm seeing innovative leaders do innovative things, and there's a certain core theme that is out there. One of them is to get moving, because by the time tomorrow gets here, your strategy from yesterday is already going to seem like it's from the last century.

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