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Pandemic Opens Doors for Doing Good Bob Harris, CAE

There is something in the genes of association executives. They are driven to achieve impressive deeds and to support the success of people and businesses.

It is inspiring to hear the achievements of executives.

The annual conference of the **Council of State Restaurant Associations** (CSRA) was convened in person for the first meeting in two years. There, membership, marketing, and communications professionals, and CEOs described how they have weathered the pandemic.

Throughout the USA the restaurant industry is often the state's largest employer. That came to a standstill in the spring of 2020. Restaurant associations faced the unknown.

Force for Good

Collectively, associations are a force doing good for their communities. Traditionally, they are known for advocacy, education, and networking. Some expand their efforts to respond to disasters and promote quality of life.

What the CEOs described at CSRA was amazing. While their mission may be "to advance the success of America's restaurants," they have been doing far more. They positioned themselves as being indispensable to members in new ways.

These execs repurposed their organizations to be able to take on new opportunities. Mission statements were broadened to address food and housing insecurities, support for the survival of restaurants and employees, and promoting public health in a pandemic. Many acquired grants to fund efforts to serve restaurateurs and employees.

New Allies

They shared how they reached out to entirely new coalitions. Instead of concentrating only on food service, they expanded their focus and leveraged their resources for public good.

These execs described collaborating with health officials and unrelated industries. Everybody agreed that broadening outreach and collaboration with new partners was advantageous.

Prior to COVID their strategic plans did not include “pandemic survival.” The team of board and staff pivoted resources and adapted to the situation.

They researched and found government stimulus and relief dollars. One executive shared, “If our state is receiving \$10 billion from the federal government for recovery, we want to be sure our industry is a beneficiary of the funds.”

Another explained a paradigm shift. They transformed from serving members-only, to being a resource to the entire industry, whether they pay dues or not. The new efforts and perspectives will have lasting impact.

In the Genes

Associations are known for offering positive experiences. Members are seen as investors. Association employees must view them as their boss; without members there would be no association.

Another trait of associations is to answer questions positively. Members rely on the staff to provide solutions. Some organizations describe this as KAPS, “kick-ass problem solving.” During the pandemic and since, much of the restaurant industry has sought the counsel of the associations to find solutions.

Rarely would a staff member say, “I don’t know the answer to that.” Researching solutions and providing credible answers is a role of everybody on staff.

Positioned as an Authority

Innovative executives and boards have positioned their associations to be respected authorities. During the pandemic associations have formed alliances with organizations beyond their scope.

For example, Laura Nelson, executive director at the **Apartment Association of Southern Colorado** explained they collaborated with all the private and public sector entities that have interests and needs in housing. The outreach has repositioned the association as a credible source for community solutions. Before the pandemic associations were more focused on members’ needs exclusively. Thanks to Laura for sharing her experience at the **National Apartment Association’s** AEX Live conference in August.

Recovery

The pandemic has taught associations plenty. I was moved to hear how CSRA executives thrived during the pandemic.

Laura Morrison, Managing Director of Membership & Employer/Food Safety at the **Ohio Restaurant Association** said, “Building a career in the association space is individually and professionally enriching. Association leadership allows professionals courageous enough to dedicate their time to the advancement of the industry they serve, to be rewarded through the extraordinary, innovative, educational and charitable contributions the association industry brings to society.”

I’ve always said that associations support quality of life, the economy, and jobs. Few careers provide such rich opportunities to make a difference in society. The pandemic has opened doors for associations.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.