



Global Strategies That Rise Above the Rest

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By Beth Ziesenis

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"We have moved very deliberately and have involved members all along the process," she says. "This has empowered members to do things with the association and member-to-member communications. The growth we're seeing is the result of a growing momentum."

While ASHA's international expansion has been slow and steady, the pre-recession growth spurt of The Institute of Internal Auditors (IIA) may have caused the global economic crisis to deal it a heavier blow. The organization operates with independent legal entities in more than 100 countries, and less than 50 percent of its members live in the United States. Vice President for Global Relations and Development Sylvia Boyd says IIA enjoyed double-digit membership growth around 2005, leading to a rapid expansion of IIA infrastructure and services. When the economies of the world began to falter, their members cut back on training, travel, and membership, and Boyd says IIA has had to cut about 30 percent of its workforce and increase participation fees for the independent country organizations.

While IIA's overall revenue has taken a hit, Boyd says it has not seen a huge decline in membership. The organization has created several programs to retain members between jobs. Boyd says IIA's focus is on the value of membership and strengthening loyalty to their members as their profession faces a tough economy.

"We have a worldwide membership, so sometimes there is a delayed effect. To some extent, being a worldwide global organization allows you to be more diversified, so the economy didn't hit every country in the same way or at the same time," Boyd says. "The more global you become, the more complex it is, of course, but that kind of diversity can be a strength for an association."

While the ups and downs of the global economy have affected associations in myriad ways, Martin Sirk, CEO of the International Congress and Convention Association, says the challenges of

international expansion have not really changed in the past few years, but they have intensified. Along with the economic crisis, Sirk says European associations are expanding their accreditation programs and services internationally, and other emerging markets are creating competition.

"U.S. associations are now in an ever-more competitive marketplace with worldwide associations," Sirk says. "Far-sighted associations see the opportunities for global expansion first and see the threats to their U.S. dominance second."

Develop a Strategy for Expansion

In a challenging economy, the basic principles for global expansion still apply, says Richard O'Sullivan, principal of Change Management Solutions. O'Sullivan also recommends associations ask themselves to analyze the benefit of going international to their existing membership. Then they have to identify the parts of the world where their members are already exchanging goods and services, and they must develop goods and services specific to the new markets.

"It shouldn't be surprising that the downturn did not change the association's approach to international development," O'Sullivan says. "The globalization engine has been running for about a decade or so. The trend is more developed now. The recession means that you have to pay attention to international more, not less."

Bonnie Koenig is president of Going International, a consulting firm that works with associations and nongovernmental organizations on international expansion. Koenig says she is working with several organizations that are moving ahead with their international plans despite the economy.

"The organizations that have their international strategies in place are holding their own," Koenig says. "There are clearly associations with international plans who can't move forward as quickly right now. But if an association

has a sense of what they want to accomplish and the research to say it's sustainable, there's no reason why they can't begin to put the plan in place with the resources that they have."

Identify the Motive Behind Expansion

Before an association makes a move toward international expansion, in good times or bad, the leadership needs to examine the motivation behind the efforts.

"Often what will happen is that an organization will get engaged in international because someone tells them to do it or they have an active board member who encourages them. You can waste a lot of money and organizational capital by making this move ineffectively," Koenig says.

O'Sullivan says that an association may tread into international waters because it receives more interest from other countries. "An association will say, 'Membership is down, but we're getting all these calls from foreign constituents.' Then they try to take their products overseas, and that will fail. The products that are developed for a North American market very rarely can be translated. If you truly are going international, you will have to change your product line."

Associations can also make mistakes when they expand internationally for the sole purpose of generating revenue or increasing membership, says Meggan Maughan-Brown, CMP, CAE, director of international relations and strategic planning for the American Society of Civil Engineers. She says the focus on long-term thinking instead of short-term revenue is what helps an organization survive in today's volatile economic environment, and getting member buy-in is key.

"Expansion is going to be costly and time consuming. If you're going to do this, there has to be a commitment within the entire association. You need to make sure your members support this type of outreach," Maughan-Brown says. "Even if things don't work out as

quickly or easily as you'd like, you still have that impetus driving you forth."

Find Expansion Opportunities

Global changes have unearthed new opportunities in China, India, and Brazil, all with economies on the upswing, says Maughan-Brown. And Koenig adds that Australia has not been hit as hard as other parts of the world, either. But O'Sullivan says choosing an area for global expansion is not just about picking a hot economy or a country where English is the primary language. When considering a growth strategy, leadership needs to carefully analyze regional market types to find success.

"English gives you a false sense of comfort," he says. "Your radar goes down. Questions that you would not hesitate to ask in another environment you don't ask [in an English-speaking country]."

of a tarnished reputation as an economic leader. But Sirk, who is based in Amsterdam, says the United States is still seen as a strong partner.

"The downturn and the big hit that the U.S. economy took hasn't changed the positive perception of these organizations as massive potential sources of future business, nor has the general belief in the ability of the U.S. to remain the primary global innovator," Sirk says. Maughan-Brown adds, "There's less purchasing power now, and maybe people are more risk averse than before, but I don't believe that people have a jaundiced view of American business."

Seek Partnerships on the Ground

Maughan-Brown says partnering with international organizations is a great way to step into an international market. The partners need to bring insight

leaders might find other association executives who have been through the transition and learn from them. "Whatever they do, they shouldn't just try to impose their U.S. style of business or legal framework on their international partners and suppliers," he says. "That way leads to great confusion and pain."

Look Ahead and Ask Questions

For associations with little experience abroad, Sirk advises asking questions to guide their strategies.

"Do they want to expand membership? Do they want to forge alliances? Do they want to sell products and services without building membership? Is it their professional accreditation program that they want to roll out? The events they organize will depend entirely on what they're trying to achieve," Sirk says.

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—Richard O'Sullivan

O'Sullivan says many associations think the idea of dealing with another language is going to be the toughest challenge, but the governmental and regulatory structures, as well as cultural differences, need much more consideration.

"I tell associations not to shy away from countries that are different," O'Sullivan says. "In fact, the more similar a country is to us, the more likely there are similar associations on the ground. Don't be faint of heart, but don't be reckless. You want to look at where your members are going and find out why."

Some associations may worry that the recession in the United States might hinder their ability to build a strong international outreach because

to the table, she says, and they should recognize in the U.S.-based association a product or service that they may lack. Partnering can also help an organization get through the challenges of understanding a different culture and language, McNeilly adds. Boyd says leaders need to remember that an international partner may already have the best programs and services for their markets, and the biggest benefit to partnering may be the value the relationship brings to the organization's members in the United States.

When talking about the mindset an association must adopt to succeed abroad, Sirk cites openness to build creative new partnership arrangements, as well as flexibility and the ability to listen. He also says that association

McNeilly agrees that associations need to address the fundamental question of why they are reaching out internationally. "If the answer is to truly increase the services you provide or increase the resources you have available or to strengthen the professional competencies of your members, this will not only open doors to communicate with individuals from other countries but will also help members in the United States understand why this makes good sense for the association."

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