

Global Membership Models

A Strategic White Paper on Global Membership Strategy

“There are no foreign lands. It is the
traveler only who is foreign.”
Robert Louis Stevenson

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Introduction

Overview of Global Membership Model Research Process

The Association Laboratory white paper *Global Membership Models* represents the company's continuing efforts to identify and document association best practices. This white paper incorporates commentary from nine association chief staff officers and senior association executives representing associations active in the global market.

Global Membership Models identifies the current state of global membership models, key challenges faced by associations pursuing global membership development, and success factors critical to effective implementation of global membership strategy.

This white paper is an adjunct to Association Laboratory's [annual association environmental scanning project Looking Forward 2013](#) which identified the global system as a primary factor influencing the future success of the association industry.

Looking Forward 2013 incorporates commentary from 28 association chief staff officers and 26 senior association executives representing 55 different industries and professions. It identified the primary environmental factors influencing associations and the implications on association strategy.

Association Laboratory recommends that association executives use *Global Membership Models* as a discussion guide to identify specific issues with significant impact on the association and the implementation of global business strategy. For additional information on the specific methodology by which *Global Membership Models* was produced, see [Appendix 1](#).

Association Laboratory conducts a wide range of strategic research for associations encompassing a client base of leading associations served through staff in Washington, DC, and Chicago, IL. For more information on the company's research capabilities, proprietary research products, and strategic planning models, visit the company's website at www.associationlaboratory.com.

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Why is Global Membership Strategy Important to Associations?

Associations Operate in a Global System

The following is an excerpt from [Looking Forward 2013](#), Association Laboratory's annual association environmental scanning white paper.

Participants in *Looking Forward 2013* believed that associations of all sizes now operate in a global system and that association professionals need to take this global system into account.

The global system includes the movement of capital, labor, and information. Even small organizations are participants in a global supply chain. Consider the following:

Economic Globalization – Individuals and businesses now access a global market place and the barriers to providing services and products worldwide are rapidly decreasing.

Government Globalization – From regulatory action to trade agreements, actions by governments in one part of the world routinely impact organizations across the globe. The actions of governments and relevant non-governmental organizations (NGO) are now seldom restricted by borders.

Supply Chain Globalization – Modern supply chains access raw materials and production capacity from all over the world to serve widely dispersed markets.

Financial Globalization – Capital markets operate across country borders allowing investors access to companies worldwide.

Workforce Globalization – Individuals have routinely traveled across borders in search of opportunities. Now, workers are connected virtually and communication technology has made it possible for businesses of all sizes to access labor on the other side of the globe through services such as [Odesk](#). [Odesk is an online professional services portal where individuals from all over the world post their expertise, accept business, and provide contract-based services.]

Cultural Globalization – Cultural influences now routinely affect people worldwide. For example, in Chicago, IL, USA, people gather each Sunday morning at an Irish pub to watch English premier cup football, then eat lunch at a local Ethiopian restaurant before dancing the night away “gangnam style” to a Korean pop song.

Communication technology virtually eliminates the barriers to cross-fertilization or transmission of ideas, meanings, and values across national borders. However, despite the enjoyment individuals receive from global influences in entertainment and leisure options; this creates pressure on cultural identities. Creeping nationalism is a growing influence as humans seek their place in a world with no borders.

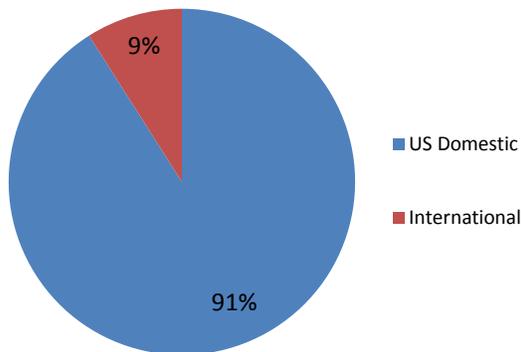
While these cultural influences have existed for some time, communication technology now allows aspects of globalization to be integrated at speeds unprecedented in human history. Today, even the smallest rural markets can participate in the global economy in a way that only larger urban areas could in the past.

In addition, many associations active globally are starting to use common platforms for communication via social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. A recent white paper titled [Social Media for Associations: Status Report 2013](#) published by Kellen Europe lists the results of a study including 136 European based associations and their social media use.

These factors make understanding global membership models a priority for a wide range of associations.

Association Members Have Global Responsibilities

One reason that associations need to consider global membership models specifically is because the responsibilities of association members are changing to encompass the opportunities and respond to the threats and influences of a global system.

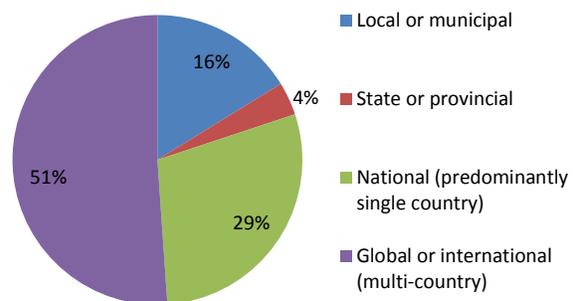


The National Business Travel Association, as part of research into the development of a global business standard and prior to their rebranding as the Global Business Travel Association, had more than 9 out of 10 members located within the United States. At first glance they are not an organization seemingly ready for global expansion.

Upon additional research, though, GBTA discovered an important fact:

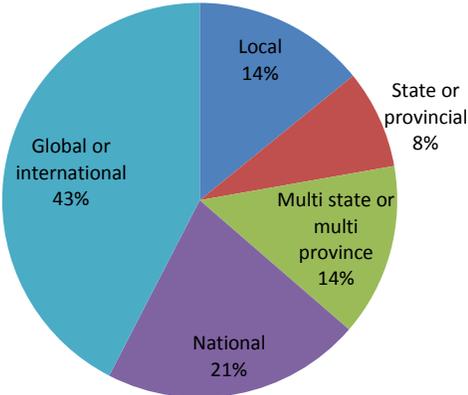
More than ½ of their members had *global or international* responsibilities.

Global interests are not **necessarily** determined by location but by activity.



In another example from a recent Association Laboratory study on behalf of the Society for Tribologists and Lubrication Engineers (STLE) the gap between perceived professional focus based on membership location vs. self-identified focus based on responsibilities was again apparent.

STLE Geographic Scope of Responsibilities



75% of STLE members reside in the United States but nearly 50% of members participating in the STLE study had global or multi-country responsibilities.

As associations evaluate the future landscape within which they operate, knowledge of the impact of global issues and their relevance to the association’s business strategy and model will grow in importance.

What Issues are Impacting Global Membership Models?

Global membership models are a subset of global business models. When considering global membership options, associations must keep the total context of their association's initiatives, products and services, and the delivery portfolio of these activities into account.

Based on the input of the nine global association executives participating in the *Global Membership Models* white paper, the following specific factors were identified within the global system as having substantial impact on association strategy and on global membership strategy.

Economic and Sociopolitical Environment

The better the state of the local economy, the more stable the political environment. The more stable the political environment, the higher probability of strongly established public and civil institutions, and the more likely that association initiatives will be successful.

Economic conditions influence membership needs and the ability of members (and customers) to pay for association products and services. Understanding the future of the economic environment within identified markets and its impact on target audiences and their needs is thus a priority.

In addition, it is important to separate the public- or government-funded economy from the private economy. Within particular industries or professions, the government's economic influence as a customer or provider may be substantial.

In many parts of the world, religious, tribal, or family institutions are stronger or more trusted than governmental or other public institutions. Identifying relevant divisions within the market and the behaviors, customs, and language of these market segments can be particularly challenging.

The greater the levels of political stability and of trust in civic institutions, the more likely prospective association members are supportive of other independent, 3rd party institutions as professional and business resources.

Cultural and Language Complexity

Regional and local cultures and languages have a substantial effect on association activity. Culture in this instance encompasses ethnic, religious, social, and business behaviors.

Cultural differences may not correlate to national or provincial boundaries, creating more challenges to the proper assessment of influences on individual membership or other association markets.

Cultural differences also create challenges in identifying and navigating the successful understanding of prospective member needs and implementation of local outreach efforts, particularly when identifying opinion leaders.

The broader the global reach of the association the more complex the cultural and linguistic environment becomes, requiring the association to focus more intently on market prioritization.

Language barriers also create challenges in two main areas:

First, it is naturally more difficult to effectively communicate with someone who speaks a different language.

Second, operationally, the association has to understand how its materials and other content critical to value are translated into other languages and, if translated, into which languages.

Third, translation needs to take into account the contextual and situational meaning. For example, where, how and when you speak is different, particularly in Asia and to some degree Europe and Latin America.

Cultural Perceptions of Associations and Association Membership

There is no common global perception of the role of an association or the meaning and value of association membership.

Different areas of the world have varying levels of awareness of associations.

As noted earlier, in many parts of the world, religious, tribal or family institutions are common forms of societal interaction to solve problems. The very awareness of associations as participants in the solution of societal, professional, or business challenges may not even be considered as an alternative.

There is a lack of historical experience and understanding in many parts of the world by governments, businesses, and professionals regarding how to access or use associations through membership or other strategies for the betterment of their society, industry, or profession.

Different areas of the world have different opinions on the role of associations in society.

Different cultures have different expectations regarding how societal problems are solved. While associations in the United States are a common component of government and civil discourse, in other parts of the world there are very different perceptions on how societal issues are discussed and solved, and how and why an association would exist and the roles it would fulfill in society.

In France, for example, with a tradition of centralized government, citizens are much more likely to expect the government to provide solutions for a particular problem than in other parts of the world that may have more historical experience with decentralized government.

Associations within the United States are private not-for-profits independent of the government but associations in China are state-organized and managed extensions of the government.

Different expectations and experience means different behaviors.

Because of the different levels of awareness and expectations of the role of associations in society, the participation of individuals with associations as volunteer leaders, subject matter experts, and members is also different.

Associations seeking a global footprint are confronted by individuals who have very different understandings of the meaning of “associations,” “volunteering,” and “membership” even though the terminology might be very similar.

These perceptions affect market acceptance of association membership, products, and services, and thus the corresponding membership model.

Even if the business model is the same, its application might be quite different.

For example, in a global study conducted by Association Laboratory for [Lions Clubs International](#), members in the United States worked enthusiastically to welcome any person who desired to join. Conversely, in southern Europe, Lions Clubs members perceived their organization as more private and were far more selective in who they identified and recruited for membership. The model was the same but how local clubs positioned membership was different.

Another example of differences in business model application takes place in countries where there are caste societies. It is not uncommon for a membership association to be associated with a specific caste or a narrow selection of castes. This results in people from higher and/or lower castes not engaging with or joining the association.

Perceptions of U.S. Policy and Organizations

To develop successful global membership strategy, it is critical for domestic association executives to understand that the United States is not necessarily the center of association activity.

While U.S.-based association executives may consider the U.S. a global leader in association formation, it is important to recognize that many international and European *federations* were formed in Europe.

Examples of leading international federations include such influential organizations as the Switzerland-based World Health Organization (WHO), the Federation of Red Cross Societies, and the International Olympic Committee. Within specific industries or professions, national associations in France or Germany have historically had substantial global influence or played leadership roles.

In addition, associations in Australia, India, and other nations, particularly within the historic British Commonwealth, have also been active in advancing the role of associations in public discourse.

Many of these federations have fewer staff or smaller budgets than their U.S.-based counterparts, in part because the European governments play a bigger role in society, creating limits on the opportunity for these associations to provide the same breadth of products and services considered common in the U.S. However, this does *not* mean they do not have power or influence in their individual industries and professions.

During the past ten years, more European associations were formed with direct individual membership or direct company membership to reflect the growing importance of the European Union's activity in professional and industrial regulation and standards. Still, for many professions or sectors in Europe, the national association is larger in staffing and budget than the pan-European federation for the same profession or trade.

For example the German associations have more members than the European Society of Association Executives (ESAE) because they serve the many professionals of national groups in Germany, in their own language and addressing locally relevant issues.

While the number of association executives working in federations spanning Europe who would join ESAE as members are still less numerous and do not form as cohesive a group, neither do they have specific burning association issues to resolve. When including associations focused on activity across the European Union and national associations focused on country-specific issues, you have a substantial number of associations.

In addition, individual nations may have very robust national associations tied to economic sectors in which they, as a nation, are historically strong.

These countries or regions may exhibit a stronger association presence than the European Union as a whole depending on the relative strength of the country in a particular industrial sector. For example, the chemical industry has a strong presence in Europe, but the specific German association is larger than the European or umbrella organization.

Additionally, many industries have shifted their geographic focus as the economic drivers of their industry have changed.

For example, the bulk chemical industry, manufacturing, and many energy intensive industries have moved to Korea, China, and the Middle East. This relocation influences the culture and behaviors of members, and thus global membership strategy.

Local perceptions of the United States, specific policies of the U.S. government, and attitudes regarding U.S. businesses influence the perceptions of people, positively and negatively, worldwide.

Negative local perceptions of U.S. policy and organizations may influence attitudes regarding U.S.-based associations. A powerful U.S. association presence can be perceived as overshadowing local expertise, customs, or decision making, creating resistance to association initiatives.

Many U.S. associations enjoy substantial global support and acceptance because of the desire for the unique industrial, scientific, or technological information they can provide to audiences challenged to produce this level of content or related services locally.

U.S. association executives should be careful, though, that they are not being perceived as “taking over the world” or “planting the U.S. flag” in other countries. It is essential to clearly demonstrate the advantages for other countries to participate with U.S.-based organizations, and to clearly demonstrate that local opinions and voices are taken into account.

Associations based outside of the United States or with a historical legacy of global activity may also face challenges overcoming the perception of “home country bias” whether the location of the office is in Washington, DC, Brussels, Belgium, or Beijing, China.

Market Demand, Capacity, and Capability to Buy

Do they want it?

While global demand for common association services is increasing, this demand may not best be served through membership strategies.

Global economic expansion has created incentives for industries and professionals to achieve and maintain competencies sufficient to compete in a global market. Expanding national economies, particularly in developing markets, have created a market for technical, operational, and scientific knowledge exchange.

This increases incentives for associations to collaborate on standards and market access strategies and creates a demand for training, professional development, and credentials that provide 3rd party validation of expertise.

In addition, because of changes in government policy and the global movement of money, goods, and expertise, common association activities in government relations and industrial and professional standards are gaining in acceptance.

Can they afford it?

While global demand is increasing, member models providing various benefits must take local expectations of cost and local payment behaviors into account. Different parts of the world have differing capacities to pay.

The [Economist](#) has, for many years, published the [Big Mac Index](#), a comparison of the price of a relatively stable product (McDonald's restaurants' sandwich "the Big Mac") across different country markets. It is a useful representation of how people in different parts of the world are accustomed to purchasing goods and services based on the economic reality of their local market. Another and more formal example of a measure is the [GINI Index](#), a common measure of differences in wealth by country.

The expense of many association products and services (and thus their end user price) is based on the inputs and *expenses* of the host country, which can be substantially different than the target country.

This creates substantial financial pressures on association products and services that might be included in a membership package because of the difficulty in providing membership benefits at a price that meets the expectations and capability to buy of the target audience while achieving association financial goals.

In addition, in some countries, members may be accustomed to the membership model but expect to pay a single fee for all inclusive access for a substantial period of time. For example, in some associations in India, instead of paying annually, the membership is considered a lifetime membership and they pay only once.

Who pays for it?

Global membership models must take employer support into account.

For many associations, company support of membership and association activity, such as conference attendance, is critical to successful membership strategy. If the benefits of the association are perceived as too expensive for local, individual consumption, the more important the employers' financial support becomes.

In addition, since employers are financing or subsidizing membership, the concerns of employers and their desire for specific and tangible return on investment influence membership decisions.

Association Laboratory's research targeting both trade and professional associations indicates that membership strategy must take the needs of the employer into account.

How do they pay for it?

People in different parts of the world often pay through different mechanisms. For example, in some markets, such as Japan, credit cards may not be a commonly accepted form of payment for some services, or infrastructure to support electronic payments may be less well developed.

However, in some countries it is the reverse where electronic payments via mobile phones, smartphones, smart cards is preferred. Many countries may frown upon the requirement by a US association to "cut a check", i.e. leading to much paperwork, old fashioned postal mailing and drop-boxes, banking fees or handling costs.

A challenging issue for associations is to create mechanisms for the collection of funds that meet the scrutiny of external auditors and meet the financial stewardship goals of the association as well as strict rule on anti-bribery and money laundering.

Identifying and Serving a Common Need for a Diverse Audience

An association by definition has a singular Mission that guides strategy decisions. The more diverse the audience served, the more difficult it is to maintain focus on this singular Mission. This Mission is then achieved through the portfolio of products, services and initiatives promoted by the association.

Regardless of Mission and motivations, if the association does not identify and provide an important solution to a member or customer's need, the global membership model will not be successful.

An important challenge is identifying how to serve this global Mission through widely divergent and customized membership models that successfully deliver customized value to specific audiences.

Historically, many associations in the U.S. hoped to use their professional credential to lead global expansion but then realized that adjustments to the local language, context, market conditions, or price level made this very challenging.

The global market consists of a combination of local markets that have a common need consistent with the association's Mission.

Each market, though, may desire or require that solution in widely divergent ways.

The challenge for associations is to identify the common solution across audiences and markets that allows for locally customized solutions within the overall framework of the membership model.

Associations need to develop an appreciation for the differences placed on member benefits across the globe by different member audiences and balancing the different types of membership models that create distinct value for each audience.

In addition, associations need to understand that the communication of a membership model may change substantially across the globe. In some parts of the world membership may be simply another word for individual or bundled product purchases — fairly straightforward transactions couched in the terminology of membership.

The more complex the audiences, by definition, the more complex the membership model with correspondingly more difficult operational and marketing challenges.

Technology Enabled Knowledge Exchange, Community, and Competition

Information exchange is a central tenet of association existence and experience. In addition, knowledge transfer, through research and education strategies and global professional and industrial standards, are common goals of many associations.

Communication technology has dramatically reduced the barriers to information exchange and helped provide a means for creating specific communities based on geography, industry, training, or interest in a way that allows individuals to connect with their peers.

A recent study by Kellen Europe titled [Social Media for Associations: Status Report 2013](#) highlights the use of communications technology by 123 European association executives from a variety of industries and professions.

Unfortunately, improved communication technology also creates challenges for association global membership strategy.

First, it is much more difficult to maintain control over the intellectual property that may be fundamental to an association's membership value proposition.

Second, it reduces barriers to entry for new direct or alternative competitors into the market for association membership, products, and services. Since it is easier to enter a market, more competitors are likely to develop and these competitors will be able to enter markets much more quickly than in the past.

Third, access to sophisticated communication technology may vary widely across the world. High speed Internet access may be the reality in Paris, France, but not in Abuja, Nigeria. Urban areas may be well served while more rural parts of the world may not be. This creates operational challenges to the association who may need modern communication technology to provide value but not have consistent access to this capability for key audiences or markets.

Matching Internal Expectations to External Opportunity

The reality of global activity and the rationale for a global membership strategy is not necessarily clear cut. It is critical to manage the expectations of the desired return on investment for global activity and the timeframe necessary for successful global initiatives.

Internal expectations of global opportunities influence the interest in global opportunity and specifically, association global membership strategy. Associations are challenged to match these expectations with the reality of their opportunity and maintain appropriate expectations over the longer timeframe required for global membership success.

As noted earlier, many association members have global responsibilities at work. The result is a comfort level with global activity based on their experience that may not be consistent with the association's opportunity.

An association's global opportunity may not be best pursued through membership strategies. Some association leaders may be limited by a U.S. or native country bias that limits their creativity in understanding problems in other markets or identifying relevant solutions to these problems.

Membership strategies rely on either the desire of a particular audience to affiliate with their peers, or the market's desire to purchase a bundled set of benefits as opposed to individual product purchases.

Business Model Assumptions

Current association business models rely on several characteristics that are often less viable globally.

Content Assumptions

The content of many association programs is currently produced through volunteers. In many regions of the world, though, there is not a similar culture of volunteerism. Without the ability to rely on volunteers to produce or evaluate content, associations may be challenged to produce local relevant content in sufficient quantity and sufficient quality.

In addition, as the association adds audiences through global expansion, it naturally requires a greater volume of content to serve new audiences. There is a danger that increases in the quantity of content impact the quality of content.

Delivery Assumptions

Within the United States, associations benefit from the network of interrelated public and private institutions. Public and government knowledge and acceptance, combined with professional and industry reliance on associations for education and networking, create a favorable environment supporting association activity.

In other parts of the world, this network is less established or nonexistent. As a result, association activities that might be successful in the United States may lack the critical mass of local support necessary for long-term success.

The lack of important local connections, such as chapters and other local components, which create important value points for association members and delivery channels for association products and services, can be a substantial barrier to entry and global expansion.

Associations should assume that they will need to create or collaborate with local networks in order to be successful.

Language barriers continue to present challenges as associations seek to effectively deliver services and to effectively communicate marketing offers in local languages and dialects.

Legal Assumptions

Different states, provinces and countries have different legal structures. It is difficult to create a model that takes differences in local laws and regulations into account. Specific areas of concern include copyright law, member privacy, and relationships with local agents or partners and in many cases tax and employment law.

What are Success Factors in Global Membership Strategy?

The following highlights key success factors participants considered important to successful development and implementation of global membership strategy.

Opportunity Identification and Selection

Successful associations properly identify the size and relevance of their opportunity relative to their Mission, other strategic options, and their capability and capacity to pursue a global strategy while clearly communicating their rationale for global activity.

Just because an association *could* pursue global membership strategies does not mean that it *should* address the following.

First, the association must consider the opportunity cost. Generally speaking, global membership models are more complex, time consuming, and expensive. They require a long-term commitment of resources and leadership attention. The association must consider how outcomes can be improved if this same level of resources and attention were applied to domestic membership strategy.

Second, while a global membership may present opportunities, the association must consider these opportunities relative to other association initiatives.

How is a global membership strategy relevant to the overall Mission and goals of the association, and how is it relevant to current programs and services are structured to achieve these goals?

A key factor in opportunity identification and assessment is to communicate to your current and domestic members the rationale and importance of this expansion and how domestic members will benefit.

This reduces the suspicion by current members that resources are being siphoned from current identified domestic member needs to fund a risky overseas strategy designed to benefit a small number of organizations or of interest only to a few influential volunteer leaders.

Market Identification and Prioritization

Successful associations effectively identify and prioritize the most relevant and feasible audiences for action.

The world is not homogenous. It is a complex and dynamic mix of cultures, languages, and business, professional, and personal needs formed by centuries of cultural, economic, government, and demographic change.

As a result, while an association may aspire to be global, **a global strategy is really an aggregation of multiple market-specific strategies.** Each market strategy is unique *because each market is unique.*

In order to be successful on the global stage, associations interested in pursuing global membership strategy need to be very methodical about identifying potential markets, evaluating their relevancy and worth to the association, and carefully selecting the markets that represent the greatest opportunity.

The broader the global reach of the association the more complex the cultural and language environment becomes, requiring the association to focus more intently on market prioritization.

In addition, decision makers need a creative and entrepreneurial mindset allowing for experimentation with potential ideas and encouraging a culture of continual learning and adjustment based on each market's reaction to membership strategy.

In Association Laboratory's Strategy Blog on [Defining Membership Needs](#), we identified the criteria for market definition based on standard business theory. The existence and practicality of a market is evaluated by assessing the following criteria:

- **Identifiable:** the differentiating attributes of the segments of the market must be measurable so that they can be identified.
- **Accessible:** the segments must be reachable through communication and distribution channels.
- **Substantial:** the segments should be sufficiently large to justify the resources required to target them.
- **Unique:** to justify separate offerings, the segments must respond differently to the different marketing mixes.
- **Durable:** the segments should be relatively stable to minimize the cost of frequent strategy changes.

The more difficult it is to address each criterion, the more difficult a particular market will be to successfully penetrate.

Providing Relevant, Customized Solutions to Local Market Needs

Successful associations identify relevant local solutions to local market needs consistent with their Mission, capabilities, and capacity.

There is no “global membership delivery model.”

Since every association pursues different goals, targeting different audiences through a wide variety of products and services, the global membership delivery model is not only unique to each association but frequently unique to each association audience.

The result is a variety of delivery models customized to different regions and alternative engagement models that may not rely on membership, but on individual products as a driving factor for success.

If the association does not provide a solution substantially differentiated in quality, convenience, and/or cost from existing local solutions, then membership penetration and growth within a market will be challenging.

The easiest way to provide this solution is to customize an existing product that, with adjustments, may sufficiently address the need of the local market. As the specific needs of the market become substantially different from those of existing, currently served markets, new solutions may be necessary.

To identify local market needs, association professionals should investigate the following strategic areas of inquiry:

1. How is the local market defined and what are logical and meaningful divisions within the market important to decision making?
2. What is the external, industry, professional, and personal influences with the greatest impact on the local market relevant to the association?
3. What is the current relationship to the association and its products, services, and initiatives?
4. What is the influence of competing or alternative solutions to the needs of the market?

These questions need to be addressed for each market. In addition, similarities and differences across markets need to be identified to determine how substantial the opportunity might be. The more homogenous the solution across markets, the more likely a global membership strategy might be successful.

More detailed information on [determining membership needs](#) for domestic and global models can be found at www.associationlaboratory.com.

Local Community Relationships and Outreach

Successful associations are sensitive to the local culture and identify and use local networks to act as advisors to the association and opinion leaders influencing local target audiences. The creation and maintenance of successful relationships is critical to sustainable global membership models.

Assessing the local culture and being sensitive to the unique political, tribal, religious, and other customs unique to the local market is essential to success. Only by understanding these local factors and the “unspoken rules” of a particular market can association solutions and corresponding marketing activities be successful.

Critical to understanding local culture is outreach to local market opinion leaders.

Using volunteers is core to the U.S.-based association business model and, while not as prevalent in other parts of the world, this core competency can still be a strategic advantage in the marketplace.

Local networks based on professional, educational or business opinion leaders can advise on content, communicate the association’s value proposition in local terms, and advise the association on potential barriers to acceptance or opportunities for service.

The association business and membership model needs to serve local individuals or companies in the manner to which they desire, not impose a different model with which they may be unfamiliar.

Long-Term, Sustained Investment in Marketing and Communications

Successful associations invest in long-term, customized marketing and communication efforts designed to create awareness and positive perceptions of the association and its value proposition to local audiences.

In a market less familiar with the existence, role, or value of an association, long-term educational efforts through strategic marketing communications are essential.

In addition, marketing communications need to be customized by target audience and delivered in a manner consistent with local expectations.

Associations also need to focus on brand protection to ensure that the promise the brand is making to members and customers. Failure to protect the brand promise may result in copyright infringement; individuals misrepresenting themselves as members of the organization; cheating on exams and certification programs or miss use of standards and other content.

The less experience an association has in a market, the more time and effort it takes to be successful. When attempting global membership strategy, the long-term sustained investment in marketing and communication activities in outreach is more critical.

Marketing and communication strategies need to consistently reinforce three key points:

- Awareness – educate prospective and current members about role and value of the association as a solution provider.
- Brand Strength – communicate the prestige and demonstrated success factors surrounding association engagement and membership.
- Value Proposition – communicate the specific relevance and value of the association's offering and how it meets local market needs.

Associations should not expect immediate results. Influencing a market takes time. In addition, the more markets the associations is attempting to influence, the more time and resources this strategy will require.

Adaptable Global Management and Governance Models

Successful associations develop and maintain adaptable internal business processes to create and sustain long-term commitment by volunteer leaders and staff, supported by operations with the capability and capacity to support long-term global initiatives such as membership.

Operations

Form must follow function.

If the association seeks to pursue a global membership model then association staff, structure, and corresponding business processes must support this model.

Successful associations establish realistic expectations for success and create systems for long-term attention to these goals while balancing the necessity for risk with a common sense assessment of market opportunity.

Global membership is a long-term strategic investment. Successful associations are methodical about establishing realistic goals for their global opportunity and the number of new members they will be able to recruit and retain in each identified market.

Global membership is a long-term strategic investment.

Staff

Successful associations engage staff knowledgeable about and comfortable with global activity.

Global activity requires a unique set of skills. Staff must not only have expertise in their particular domain but the knowledge to apply this domain specific expertise to different parts of the world. Global activity also requires the patience to deal with the long timeframes characteristic of global activity and a mindset comfortable with the changing landscape characteristic of multiple markets, needs, and delivery models.

Technology

Successful associations invest in sufficient technology and communication infrastructure to create and maintain networks for identified stakeholders essential to delivering a successful membership value proposition.

Global activity must be successfully accomplished across time zones with people who rely on the association to inform and advise them on issues of importance and connect them to their peers. Without sufficient technological support, it is very challenging for an association to create and sustain a global membership business model that can meet the needs of members.

Business Processes

Successful associations commit to establishing and maintaining internal business processes such as strategic planning, market research and monitoring, as well as staff orientation and training that create and reinforce a culture of global support.

Business processes link association outcome to the decisions of staff. Without information, planning, and training functions consistent with the needs of a global membership model, the association will not be able to optimally serve the identified global membership audience.

Governance

Successful associations create consensus among volunteer leadership, develop mechanisms to sustain this consensus over time, and initiate efforts to extend this consensus through local leadership outreach.

Internal Consensus

Leadership needs to have clear agreement on how success is defined and consensus on the rationale and expectations of the length of time and amount of resources considered reasonable to achieve this success.

Sustainability of Consensus

Traditional governance models often result in substantial leadership turnover within just three years. Unfortunately, the timeframe for a global membership model will exceed this timeframe. Associations need to develop governance systems, such as steering committees or other mechanisms that allow for governance oversight of the global membership strategy, to survive the turnover of volunteer leadership.

Local Outreach

Global activity also requires cultivating personal relationships in target countries and local markets. This means creating and maintaining a long-term focus on a membership strategy beyond a single budget year or the interest of a particular volunteer leader is critical to success.

Successful associations recruit volunteer leaders for advice on global outreach and maintain, through global steering committees or other governance mechanisms, a multiyear focus on global membership strategy.

Finally, successful associations balance risk with the actual opportunity. There is an opportunity cost in pursuing a new market. Investment in global membership activity reduces investment in domestic initiatives and this trade off needs to be understood.

Appendix 1: Methodology and Principal Author

Methodology

To develop *Global Membership Models*, Association Laboratory conducted the following research activities and analysis:

1. Reviewed association qualitative and quantitative research conducted by Association Laboratory during 2012, specifically activities related to global marketing and membership strategy.
2. Reviewed qualitative research related to the global business environment conducted as part of the [Looking Forward 2013](#) environmental scanning project.
3. Distributed a qualitative worksheet to association chief staff officers and senior executives active in associations with substantive international activity.
4. Implemented a modified [Delphi](#) review process of draft *Global Membership Models*.

The initial input from association executives was consolidated and used to develop the initial first draft of the *Global Membership Models* white paper.

The first draft of *Global Membership Models* was distributed to participants for review in early April 2013 and their comments were incorporated into a second draft.

The second draft was distributed in late April 2013 to participants for final comments.

Thirteen association executives participated in providing information and reviewing and commenting on draft versions of the white paper.

5. Association Laboratory inserted supporting commentary, quotes, secondary research sources, and primary research from relevant studies as necessary to support specific points.

About the Author

The principal author of this white paper is Dean West, FASAE, President, Association Laboratory. Executive editor was Cecilia Sepp, Vice President, Association Laboratory.

[Dean West](#) is one of the nation's most recognized experts on association strategy. Mr. West is a Fellow of the American Society of Association Executives. He is a former association CEO and has served as Chair of the ASAE Professional Development Council and as a member of the ASAE Membership Council. He is also a former member of the Board of Directors of the Association Forum of Chicagoland.

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Association Laboratory Inc. is a strategic think tank and consulting firm that helps associations make better decisions through qualitative and quantitative research and strategic and business modeling. The award-winning company serves a national client base of leading associations through staff in Chicago, IL, and Washington, DC.

More information can be found at www.associationlaboratory.com.

Appendix 2: Global Association Models Defined

Associations and their corresponding membership models take many forms. For purposes of this white paper, Association Laboratory defines association scope as the following.

Domestic Association

A domestic association operates within a single country and has little or no activity outside of the host country's boundaries.

International Association

An international association operates primarily within a single country but may have a substantial percentage of members and/or customers from outside the country's boundaries.

The governance of the association is controlled by individuals based within the host country and the prevailing business culture of the association is consistent with that of the host country.

Global Association

A global association serves audiences in multiple countries equally and, while based in a particular host country, has a global governance, membership, product and operational footprint.

The culture of the association is global and all participating members, regardless of location, are considered a primary audience for service.