Access for All

Grow and Retain Membership with a
More Inclusive Digital Presence

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S uccessful Executive Directors and Chief Membership Officers know that growing and retaining their membership base requires more than quality program content. They also consider how welcoming those programs are, and how those programs help to develop stronger relationships with members. That's because content alone doesn't create engagement.

Consider your annual meeting. A lot of planning goes into making it a great experience – from selecting the host city and venue, to assembling a diverse panel of speakers. Even the climate-controlled rooms and audio make a difference. All these details matter because if stakeholders don't feel welcome, they likely won't come back the next time. Worse, a poor experience might unconsciously paint your entire organization in that negative light.

People form a perception of your organization through every interaction, and if they feel excluded, that will have a negative impact on your ability to serve your mission and meet bottom line objectives. Every engagement with your organization, whether physical or virtual, affects people's decisions. We call this Mission Experience. A good Mission Experience reflects the community and creates a sense of belonging that is attractive to members and sponsors.

Last year ASAE published guidance for associations on the importance of diversity, inclusion, and equity. The guidelines stress that these values need to be reflected in your mission and actively demonstrated to be authentic.

No organization would select an event venue that didn't provide wheelchair access or invite speakers who don't reflect the diversity of their membership. Sadly, the same is rarely true for an organization's digital presence.

Associations increasingly conduct virtual events or offer online classes with the intent to provide convenient access to programs. This trend accelerated with the COVID-19 pandemic, but too often, programs are launched online with little consideration for the audience experience. People may, for example, encounter issues with accessibility, run into language barriers, or simply not see themselves reflected in the content. These missteps create barriers that can prevent people from engaging with your organization.

Often, organizations treat the web as a static place to store content, versus the vibrant and engaging place it can be. Internal silos, broken processes, or legacy technology may make it difficult to implement a more inclusive online experience, but ultimately user experience barriers occur because organizations don't have a strategy for digital inclusion.

It's unlikely online programs will ever fully replace in-person experiences. But it's almost certain that your digital presence is used by more people and has greater potential to attract and engage your core constituents.

> Without a digital inclusion strategy, you're simply creating the equivalent of a digital vending machine – people may stop for a quick transaction, but it's not an environment where they will want to linger or revisit.

Your digital presence – websites, social media, mobile apps, etc. – is a critical component of your overall Mission Experience. Your audiences likely spend most of their time engaging with your organization through these channels. If that experience isn't inclusive, you are likely creating barriers that prevent lasting relationships with your audiences.

Four Key Considerations
for Making the Digital Mission Experience More Inclusive:

Accessibility
Making the digital presence usable by people with a wide range of abilities.

Representation
The ways in which communities are portrayed.

Language & Tone
The use of words to convey attitude and feeling.

Digital Equity
Whether people can access and use technology.

Accessibility

The World Bank estimates that 15% of the earth's population has some form of disability. Assisted technologies, like closed captioning, help people with disabilities use websites and mobile applications, but organizations must do their part to make sure their digital properties work effectively with these technologies.

COVID-19 pushed accessibility to the forefront of inclusion issues because digital channels are the primary way people with disabilities can engage with your organization.

> ADA compliance lawsuits increased by 50% by the end of 2020, and that is an indicator that organizations are increasingly being held accountable for maintaining accessible digital properties.

An inclusive digital presence means people with disabilities have equivalent access to online experiences. They should be able to use adaptive technologies to seamlessly navigate and interact with websites and mobile applications.

Are You at Risk? Consider These Common ADA Compliance Triggers:

E-commerce

If your site has a shopping cart, online donations, or registration, can people using assisted technology search for products or complete a transaction? Any aspect of your digital presence that requires active engagement like online courses or event registration, should be 100% accessible.

Video Content

A large class action suit by the National Association of the Deaf against Netflix, set precedent for holding organizations accountable for close captioning video content. If your organization is publishing more video content, make sure you have procedures in place to provide closed captioning and transcripts.

Virtual Events

2020 saw an increase in online events because of the pandemic, and a growing area for accessibility concerns. Like physical events, organizations should make sure virtual events are accessible by including sign language interpreters, closed captioning, and the ability for people with limited mobility to navigate the event.

Representation

Potential members and donors are more likely to engage with your organization if they see their values reflected in your overall Mission Experience. Quality programs certainly demonstrate your core values, but that isn't the only way you communicate principles. The use of imagery is equally important because it portrays commitment to the communities you serve.

The images used throughout your digital presence signal your organization's values to external audiences. If images reflect only one segment of the community you serve, you may make some audiences feel less welcome.

> In addition, Millennial and Gen Z audiences expect diversity and are less likely to engage with an organization that appears to exclude different segments.

Representation is a more thoughtful approach to selecting and incorporating images that authentically reflect the community and portray diversity. If you have a formal representation policy in place, evaluate your digital properties to identify gaps.

Organizations that seek to grow their audiences need to commit to representation. As populations become more diverse, people increasingly expect to see themselves and their values reflected. A lack of representation will signal to audiences that certain segments are excluded, and that the organization doesn't share their values.

Three Steps to Representing Your Membership:

Review Audience Segmentation

Start with data about the communities you serve. Member studies, media analytics, and event registration can give you a clearer picture of your membership. Compare that to benchmark data about your potential audience to identify gaps. For example, if you over index in one segment, you have opportunity to grow audiences in other segments. Use this information to establish growth targets for each audience.

Conduct an Image Audit

Once you've established your audience segments, review the images on your digital properties. Assess how each audience is represented. Be sure to review videos, icons, and graphics in addition to photos. This is an eye-opening exercise that will identify groups that are underrepresented.

Update Imagery

Update images to make your digital presence more inclusive. Representation may be depicted several ways in a single image by showing a diverse range of ages, gender, and cultural references. Train content contributors and designers on representation guidelines to keep digital properties inclusive going forward.

Language & Tone

What's changed the most in day-to-day operations since the beginning of the pandemic?

> [93% of association executives](#) say they're working on messaging tone. The reason is simple, people are stressed out. 2020 brought not only the pandemic, but a variety of social, political, and economic issues that have put everyone on edge.

While you may not address these issues directly in the context of your association's web presence, it is the constant backdrop to everyone's daily life.

The language and tone of your digital properties may become barriers to connecting with your members. Overly technical language, long blocks of copy, and English-only content are just some of the challenges people encounter that may create a perception that certain people aren't welcome.

Your digital presence should reflect your organization's values and the communities you serve. Language and tone go a long way in building authentic connections. If they are misaligned, you could risk alienating audiences that are critical for growth.

Language and tone used on your digital channels can build trust with your audiences. When content reflects the audience, you are demonstrating shared values. Constituents are more likely to engage with your content if it is written in a language they understand and a tone that feels welcoming.

How to Make Copy More Inclusive

Avoid Jargon and Organizational-speak

Every organization has their own language made up of acronyms and references to internal structure. Unfortunately, these references only make sense to people who are very familiar. If they're reflected in your website navigation or peppered throughout content, it places onus on your audience to decipher your language. Any online content should be written for the public. Even if your audience is more technical, content should avoid references to internal jargon.

Write for the Medium

Don't just repurpose print content on your digital channels. Content viewed on a screen is easier to consume in bite-sized, skimmable chunks. Avoid long paragraphs that resemble gray blocks of copy and create endless scrolling pages.

Evaluate Content for Bias

Attitudes about age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, social class, sexuality, disability status, and nationality can unintentionally creep into your digital content. Implicit bias may signal to certain audiences that they are not welcome. Review content to ensure language and tone don't reinforce stereotypes or exclude an audience.

Digital Equity

An often-overlooked aspect of digital inclusion is access to technology itself. Digital equity refers to the technical capacity of a community to fully participate in a digital experience. Despite advancements in broadband and wireless technology, rural communities, for instance, may lack access. Similarly, different segments of your audience may not have skills or experience using different digital platforms.

As many organizations shifted to online only programs during the COVID pandemic, they quickly realized a gap in technical abilities. Zoom meetings and other digital applications are familiar to those of us working in offices. But, outside of your office, you may encounter members or people that work on the frontlines of your organization who are less tech-savvy.

The people who design and implement your websites or mobile applications may have an unintentional bias toward digital technology because they work with it daily. This can create a digital divide for your audiences if they lack similar access or technical skills. If you are trying to scale your digital programs, you'll want to pay attention to digital equity concerns and plan accordingly.

Thinking inclusively about digital technology will help alleviate challenges for your constituents as well as stakeholders that implement programs.

Equity Check for Digital Programs:

Mobile-First Designs

People that live in rural communities or areas with limited broadband often rely on mobile devices to for access. Taking a mobile-first approach to website design ensures a wider audience will be able to use the site.

Optimize Page Load

Even with a mobile-first design, sites that are full of large file sizes (i.e., image files and complex code) are slow to open. This can cause audiences to lose patience and close the site before the first page downloads.

Provide Training

As you introduce new technologies and virtual experiences, be sure to conduct training sessions with members and sponsors of all stripes. If they stumble with the technology, you're likely to disappoint similar segments of your membership.

How to Get Started with Digital Inclusion

Successful organizations reflect the continuously more diverse communities they serve. To remain competitive and grow, you need a Mission Experience that demonstrates shared values, enables accessible operations, and maintains relevant content.

A thoughtful approach to digital inclusion starts with an honest assessment of your gaps, then taking measurable steps to close them:

1 ### Begin with an Assessment
Start with an audit of your digital properties focused on inclusion. Use a third-party to conduct an objective assessment. That will help you avoid institutional bias.

2 ### Start Small
Making wholesale changes may not be feasible, especially if you have a lot of legacy properties to update. Create a path to inclusion that breaks down efforts into interim milestones. Measure progress against milestones and share results with stakeholders so they can evaluate change as it happens.

3 ### Connect Inclusion to Your Mission
Think of inclusion as an ongoing process, not a one-and-done exercise. Tying it to your mission aligns inclusion with strategic initiatives. It ensures sustained commitment to a more inclusive digital presence.

Your digital presence has great potential to attract constituents if it accurately reflects the communities you serve. With a digital inclusion strategy, you're creating a Mission Experience that is more welcoming and demonstrates shared values between your organization and the community. As a result, people will want to stay and build a lasting relationship with your organization.

About SAI Digital

Established in 1993, SAI Digital is a consultancy that understands how rapid changes in digital technology and people's online behaviors impact the way organizations drive value. We continuously monitor the landscape and talk with leaders in the association and nonprofit space to identify emerging trends and guide clients toward strategic decisions.

About the Author

Christine Pierpoint is a leader in digital communications and management with over 25 years of experience helping clients better serve their online communities. As leader of SAI's Digital Consultancy, she navigates the overlap between digital technology and consumer behaviors and applies strategies to improve business outcomes. Christine works with association and nonprofit leadership to help them realize the full potential of their digital presence to serve a higher purpose and the bottom line.

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