

Looking to the Future Through Strong Partnerships

Associations provide unity and strength in a time of crisis.

The relationships that are formed with like-minded individuals lay the foundation for camaraderie, trust and support – all critical in times of need. This need has never been more significant than it is today: the coronavirus has devastated the global environment. All facets of life have been significantly impacted: healthcare, economy, employment, government, technology, daily life. While pandemics are not unprecedented, the exponential global reach of this disease has forced business into a tail spin like never before.

Trade associations and professional societies are feeling the blow of COVID-19. Yet, opportunity and optimism prevail. Commerce needs to continue, people need to meet, and life needs to go on. A good month into this situation, associations have moved beyond the triage stage and are focusing on *doing what we do BUT in a different way.*

At SMG, leading through these tough times has sparked creative, just-in-time solutions for our association partners. Commitment, agility and consistency are a part of our daily practice that helps us guide our associations toward the light. It is a rebirth for some groups, especially those that came into this situation in a less-than-optimal financial position. Survival for some is predominate. SMG chief staff executives are learning how to do more with less and creating value through virtual mind-share and networking opportunities that move our clients forward. Technology applications were prevalent before the current reality but they were still considered emerging in the association sphere. Cut to mid-March 2020 and every association was investigating online solutions to replace all kinds of in-person events from board meetings to large-scale conferences and trade shows. Technology solutions for the

virtual event world have become ubiquitous seemingly overnight and Zoom, a virtual meeting platform, has quickly become a commonplace verb (“Let’s zoom”) similar to Google (“I’ll google it”).

Senior account executive Kristen Philips summed up SMG’s proactive response this way: *“In general we are learning that while this has been extremely challenging for associations to navigate, that it can also be turned into an opportunity: an opportunity for associations to break the chains on ‘what has always worked’ and try something new; an opportunity to show memberships that the most valuable time to belong to a professional association is during times of uncertainty because our focus is on them; and an opportunity to be the voice of our industries and truly HELP people and make a difference.”*

SMG’s twenty-four association clients have all felt the heat of COVID-19. Our association account executives have banded together to present creative solutions in order to keep members engaged, communication fluid and revenue streams active. Foremost on their minds was the need to reach out to their association members to see how they were faring, both personally and professionally.

Here are several stories from the front lines of the industries we represent and how the SMG teams are leading the charge alongside their respective volunteer leaders...

In the **sports design and construction industry**, the reports were mixed in terms of immediate impact of coronavirus; they seemed to be based on geographic location and market segment.

The SMG team proposed a virtual industry panel to gauge the

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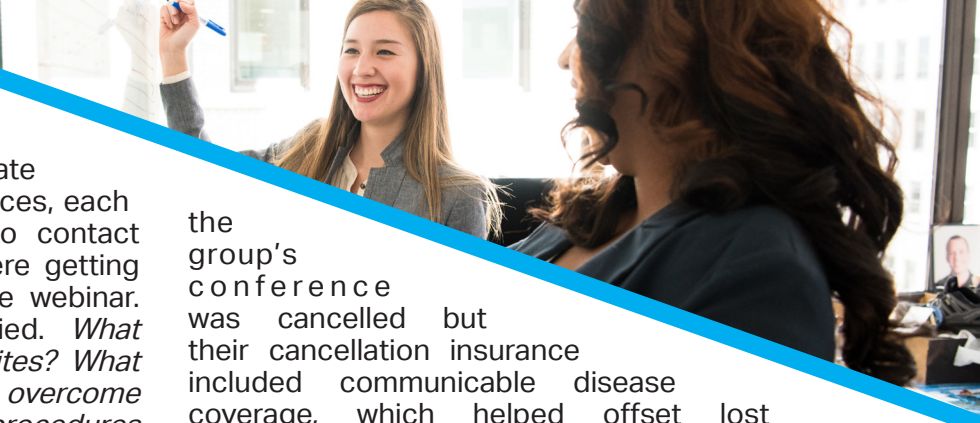


unique perspectives on how members were being impacted. Galvanizing panelists was easy as many felt the need to educate others in the industry on their experiences, each of whom took it upon themselves to contact other members to make sure they were getting different perspectives to share on the webinar. As suspected, responses were varied. *What challenges were they facing on job sites? What workarounds had they developed to overcome some of the obstacles? What safety procedures were they putting into place with work crews in light of COVID-19?* Participation was overwhelming and the SMG team received an outpouring of calls and emails of appreciation immediately afterwards.

An SMG partner association board member representing the **industry of language service companies**, provided the following testimonial in response to SMG's expedient development of virtual global roundtables designed to connect CEOs from all regions of the world: *"When the pandemic shut down the economy, our association needed a fast response in facilitating meetings between our members. As a result of the collaborative efforts that Stringfellow offered our association, we were able to schedule dozens of virtual meetings seemingly overnight. We held meetings in all global time zones and Stringfellow never missed a beat! Their support in all areas whether it be calendars, technology, or emails helped us successfully keep our association members connected and it also innovated our communication opportunities."*

With weddings and events all being cancelled, the **floral industry** has been hit hard. Growers have been destroying their crops. A major industry event involving hundreds of global participants with enough flowers to cover a stadium floor had to be cancelled. Safety of its members and the non-existent donations of floral product necessary to conduct the hands-on floral design certifications made the decision to cancel inevitable. The account executive conducted a risk assessment outlining financial projections, legalities, contractual obligations, and so on. Leveraging industry relationships, hotel cancellation fees were mitigated and pre-paid expenses were reallocated to the future conference. Focusing on the future was evident: members sought guidance from their industry trade association on how to navigate this storm and how to find the help they desperately needed to get through this situation.

The **human resources industry** professionals are being asked to change and lead company policies daily, if not hourly, with new information, requirements and situations landing in their laps. With meetings prohibited and travel curtailed,



the group's conference was cancelled but their cancellation insurance included communicable disease coverage, which helped offset lost revenues. Virtual solutions are planned to replace the conference and additional virtual programming is in development. Online resources to help HR professionals navigate and lead in their arena are updated routinely on the association website. With so many layoffs, the association also created a biweekly virtual Career Search Support group for those in transition.

Creating member value for organizations in the **synthetic turf industry** is key and the SMG Team launched a webinar series to address pertinent information on COVID-19 and the impact on the industry. A 10-day turnkey effort netted a successful event and five more webinars have been scheduled over the next two months. Additionally, providing the right tools to members is important as companies regain strength and begin their fiscal planning. Understanding the market and positioning for growth is key moving forward. This partner association is releasing the most comprehensive industry study of the North American marketplace including data points depicting the most accurate portrayal of size, shape, impact and systems across North America.

Mastery of virtual events is becoming a vital skillset for SMG teams. Understanding existing platforms and integrating complementary technologies are important in delivering an enjoyable user experience. Many other SMG association partners are adopting virtual alternatives to their in-person meetings. The association representing **generic medications** has led the organization's migration toward offering its quarterly meetings entirely virtually. For its client focused on the **geospatial industry**, the SMG management team organized a six-part webinar series focused on navigating through business challenges related to COVID-19, including promotion via social media, its website and an email campaign. Still, another SMG team for an association in the **global economic development** field successfully cancelled its Spring 2020 conference, re-negotiated its Fall 2020 conference, all the while continuing to lead the association through a name change, full rebranding, and

migration to a more cost-effective and robust membership portal and website. And, for a **foundation client representing obstetricians and gynecologists**, guidance e-blasts have resulted in a few new members and morale has been elevated through periodic zoom meetings.

Aside from continuing the course of association activities, government relations has heightened importance when certain roles in business need to be deemed essential. For SMG's client representing **commercial building owners and managers**, concern about their ability to get employees to their buildings should a shutdown be necessary was pressing. SMG's account executive urgently communicated with the Maryland state Governor so that the industry would be on the radar of essential employees. The Governor's office supplied copies of the association's brief to the Maryland Department of Commerce and Maryland Emergency Management Agency and the industry was included in the executive order. Now the state government is working on a plan to safely reopen the economy and our partner association will be represented on the state business advisory group.

Metrics are key – they provide a benchmark of the success of virtual events compared to in-person ones. Attendance at virtual events is up as compared to some in-person events of the same nature. With restrictions on travel, association members still desire to connect. For our partner association comprising organizations who set **industry standards for global business education, trade credentialing, training and practice**, online participation came in at a healthy 55 percent among those originally registered for the onsite version and new registrations were sold once the virtual options were announced. The group netted over \$50,000, which was an increase over the in-person event projections. By eliminating all the hard costs of the onsite event (food and beverage, a/v, printing, shipping, staff travel, etc.), the SMG team created a reasonable cost structure for the virtual events and refunded part of the original registration fee.

Looking forward is the only direction now. Standing alongside our association partners, working through difficulties together, and innovating how we do things will allow us to provide the best level of service to our clients. It's about customer care. *"I have been making calls to long-term members to check in on them and their families, just to say hi,"* SMG associate director Melanie Taylor stated. *"They are eager to share their experiences. The conversation alone is worth its weight in gold just knowing they are surviving and feel supported by our association,"* Taylor added. ♦



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