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Will the Last Boomer to Leave, Please Turn Out the Lights?

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I spend a good deal of time each year working with and speaking to a wide variety of associations. As the years have evolved, I have watched the average age of both leadership and membership within these groups age before my very eyes. What I have not seen is a groundswell of young professionals entering their ranks.

Many associations have been in existence since early in the last century. But it really took the Baby Boom generation to make these organizations what they are today. In the past 30 years, Boomers have embraced the concept of working for the collective good within an industry. Because of this, these organizations' influence on commerce, public policy, and social agendas has expanded enormously.

Boomers accomplished this thru monthly meetings, annual conferences, trade shows, research, lobbying, and publications. The business operations model that evolved for these groups was one based on dues, convention or conference registrations, exhibit sales, and sponsorships. Ask association executives, and most will tell you that a healthy portion, if not the majority, of their annual operating budget is based on these sources of income. But what happens if younger generations do not fill the seats of the aging Boomer members?

In most of the audiences to whom I speak, the majority are 40+, while those in the so-called Generation X might represent 20%. When I ask "Xers" why I don't see more of their peers in these meetings, their responses vary from explanations about maintaining balance of life to not seeing the value in attending meetings where the information might just as well be put on-line. Some execs confide in me that, long term, retirement of the Baby Boom might represent the demise of associations, as we know them. But it doesn't have to be that way.

What has become apparent is that over the next decade younger generations' expectations of return-on-investment will have to be met with services, schedules, and resources that respond to their needs for both time and money. The big questions are where to begin and how to do it.

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