Conferences and Family Reunions

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Abstract

Professional associations and conferences have similarities with and differences from families and family reunions. This comparison can illustrate some ways professional associations can approach the integration of new members and the planning of conferences in order to facilitate membership development and leadership renewal. Unlike family reunions, professional conferences are not closed events that require a shared culture in order to fully participate; they are events that should show the constant change and development of practice that is representative of the profession – for both members and non-members. Some of the topics explored in the article are: making it easy for outsiders to contribute, considering the tastes of new members, making it easy to volunteer in a meaningful way, and remembering who the future of the organization is. These simple considerations will assist in opening professional associations to new participants and help them to maintain their relevance and vitality over time.

Keywords

professional development; library associations; conferences

As I was preparing to attend a family reunion last month, I started thinking about the similarities and differences between our approaches to family reunions and conferences, especially in how they integrate new members. As someone who enjoys being involved in professional associations and has joined a fair number in the last few years, as well as having been involved as a board member and volunteer, I feel I can make some suggestions on ways to encourage greater participation from new members.

Family reunions

Family reunions are closed events. They are for people who don’t live near each other or see each other often to reaffirm their shared community — in the absence of real community which comes from shared geographical space and frequent contact. They reaffirm the shared traditions of a family, which may be anachronistic, especially to new additions to the family, but are needed to reinforce a shared identity.
Before the family reunion, my mother-in-law sent out a request for volunteers to prepare the meals, specifically the food that "Mom" used to make, referring to my partner’s deceased grandmother. This is a good way to enhance the experience of being in the family, through reinforcing the shared flavour of life and to remember a loved one, but a poor way to encourage a new daughter-in-law to volunteer to cook dinner. The alternative for me was to offer to clean up, which would allow me to contribute and develop an understanding of the family without challenging their shared experience by altering the flavour of the food they eat until I have become better integrated and understand their shared culture. It protects the group against outside influence before new members are assimilated.

**Conferences**

Conferences, in contrast, are only partly closed events. There is an assumed shared understanding of a discipline and a shared interest in a particular topic. However, unlike a family where the members are born in or marry in, professional associations' members choose to join, often on the basis of the conference. Even those family members who choose to join a family through marriage virtually never do so on the basis of the family reunion. This means that conferences and associations need to address the needs and preferences of new members as well as established practitioners: letting only those who know the family recipes contribute to the flavour of the shared experience is not a viable long term option.

At a family reunion, knowing the family recipes can be a legitimate criterion for selecting the cooks, especially if the recipes are shared, but at a conference it is inappropriate to assume presenters will be shoulder tapped by someone already in the group or that all presenters are already known to the organizers. It is important to have a regular stream of people who are new or outside the core group in order to have a dynamic system that doesn't become too insular. This is particularly important for a professional association, as new members are not born into the group. If an association doesn't fill people's current professional needs, it is easy to join another, abstain from outside professional activities, or create an ad hoc group of friends with shared interests to take its place.

**Suggestions**

This being said, here are my suggestions for those involved in professional associations and conference planning.

**Make it easy for outsiders to contribute**

Make it easy and open for contributors who are unknown to the conference planners to contribute session proposals. Often, a set of committees and interest groups has been developing and submitting sessions for a number of years. This distributes the work of developing ideas among groups with different interests and ensures that groups are contributing suggestions for what they want to learn. However, it is still important to have outside voices participating. This can mean involving those with different interests within the association and accepting contributions from people who are completely external to the association and possibly the profession altogether.
The easiest step to make this happen is to make it clear that unsolicited proposals are welcome on the website and the submission form. The website will often be the first point of entry for those who are not yet integrated into the group, so it should be as approachable and inclusive as possible. There should be no required fields for things like which committee is nominating the proposal or an assumption that contributors know deadlines and other information in advance.

There should also be contact information for the organizers or association office on the form so that any questions can be easily asked and answered, although there should be little need for that. Submitting to a group one is not integrated into may be intimidating, and contacting a group member with questions of this sort may be a barrier to an otherwise perfectly good proposal.

**Consider the tastes of new members**

Family reunions are by definition events that look to the past; a conference should look to the present and future as well as the past. There are many topics that may not be covered in conferences for various reasons. Here are a few topics that may not be well represented, but every conference will most likely have its own list:

- Practical guidance on implementing recent technological advances and their applications in practice
- Technical services perspectives to a frontline group
- Frontline services perspectives to a technical group
- Paper-based research for those young enough not to have become familiar with it
- Electronic-based research for those not familiar with it
- Knowledge management (both for libraries themselves and the institutions they serve)
- Developments in related professions.

That is not to say that every conference should cover everything or even try to do so, but it is important to include a wide variety of topics as this may be attendees’ main source of professional development in a year.

**Make it easy to volunteer in a meaningful way**

Just as I was not particularly excited about doing the dishes for more than sixty people, new volunteers in an association want the opportunity to contribute to the flavour of the shared experience. This can mean a large number of things, from introducing speakers to being on the coordinating committee. While clean up and similar activities must be done, they are not the activities that are most likely to make new people want to contribute again next time.
Many times I have spoken with older professionals who feel that they have already made their contributions to associations, having been more involved in the past. This may be true, but what it means is that an association needs to be regularly grooming new people to take leadership roles in order for the group to continue. This should include acceptance that the new leaders will take the group in new directions and include a release of control by those who are leaving their positions.

In order for this to happen, an association needs a good process for integrating new volunteers. I was recently greatly gratified, after sending an email volunteering to contribute to an association, to receive a call from the association president a few days later when I was invited to discuss my interests and was put in touch with others with whom I could work. This made me feel that my contributions were valued and created a very welcoming feeling to the group. This is in contrast to some other times when I have volunteered and not received any acknowledgement or been asked to perform any of the roles I offered to do.

**Remember who the future of your organization is**

It is an enriching part of joining an association to have relationships with people at all stages of their careers, but while it is important to have retired members and members who are close to retiring included in the group, they are not the primary audience of an organization that is aimed at professional development and advocacy. Hopefully, those members will continue to feel included, enjoy learning new things, and getting together with colleagues, while new techniques and ways of doing things are initiated aimed at those who are at the stage of developing their careers.

**Conclusion**

I believe that associations can enrich people's professional lives, fostering positive relationships and providing excellent opportunities for personal and professional growth. However, trying to integrate into a new association can be as intimidating as going to one's in-laws' family reunion for the first time. I hope we can work towards greater appreciation of the benefits of opening our associations more to new members and welcome them into the leadership opportunities and relationships that so enrich professional lives and create new possibilities for the future.