

AMCS AND INTERNATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

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Thinking of going global? Consider your options carefully.

The benefits of an international presence for a North American-based association are many: Increased stature and influence, a knowledge base enriched by new approaches to familiar problems, and a potentially limitless pool of members and clients for products and services. But before rushing to add an "I" to your association's acronym, take a moment to review strategies for successful positioning - including the facilitating role that an international AMC can play.

Are You an International Business or Organization?

I asked Mr. Robin Lokerman, CEO of GIC Management (www.associationhq.com), one of Europe's largest AMCs, based in Brussels, Belgium, about the challenges facing associations seeking to expand abroad. "Associations need to decide how they want to be perceived outside of their home country," he remarked. "If they just want to sell products and services, they will be seen as one more business among many. There's no problem with that, but they must alter their marketing from association style to one more typically business like to stay competitive."

Lokerman contrasted this with another, more ambitious expansion model for associations, that of an international organization. "An international organization aspires to true globalism by sponsoring international product and service development and ensuring delivery around the world. It often relies on a support structure of regional offices, national chapters, and international boards to do this," he explained. The ability to draw upon local leadership and experience is crucial to successful global product development: "If you want region-specific products, you have to have staff there," Lokerman asserted.

A Practical Example

For both approaches, the key rule of thumb is to acknowledge cultural differences and, whenever possible, adapt to regional tastes. This applies equally to large-scale decisions such as where to hold events abroad to minutiae such as how many holes to punch in handout materials. By way of illustration, I asked GIC's Conference, Communication, and Community departments how they would advise a fictitious North American professional group, the Association of Technology Engineers (ATE), to proceed in Europe, using the services of a European AMC.

The Conference team recommended holding a small-scale event in order to gauge the level of international support for their products. Based in part on ATE's demographics of likely attendees, the Dutch city of Maastricht was suggested for the meeting site. While not well known in North America, the city would offer a European AMC attractive hotel and venue rates as a repeat client and is easily accessible by train and plane from most major cities in Northern Europe.

In recognition of ATE's technologically savvy audience, GIC's Communications team advised forgoing traditional marketing methods (and higher European postage fees) by advertising the event electronically using a website and regular email blasts. The AMC would ideally take great care to design a site with Europeans in mind, offering basic information in several languages and tailoring registration forms to accommodate different phone number exchanges and address fields. Email reminders should be sent out at the middle of the European business day to maximize their chances of being read, the team pointed out.

While well known at home, ATE held zero name recognition abroad, said the GIC Community team. Crucial background information about the association and its activities would therefore need to be included on the conference website. Additionally, all of the association's materials should be reviewed before the event to ensure that North American references and examples were adapted for local relevance.

Going the Extra Kilometer

If you decide to go the route of an international organization, the infrastructure investment, staffing concerns, local bureaucracy, and cultural barriers may seem like steep hills to climb, but the rewards are real enough. Access to underdeveloped markets of clients and members allows you to shape the global evolution of your association's industry or profession in your favor. As members join from around the world, credibility and influence at home inevitably increase.

As the ATE example demonstrates, the path can be made easier by enlisting the services of a European AMC. Associations primarily dependent on the contributions of volunteers often have difficulties going abroad because the volunteerism that is central to the North American character is largely absent in new members. This purely cultural phenomenon means that associations must find fresh ways of involving leaders and contributors, by emphasizing the tangible benefits of membership over a sense of individual development. Local staff support is even more essential than at home to make sure that the business of growing the association is attended to.

An AMC offers a flexible international presence without the headaches. Multilingual staff, culturally adapted communications, and intimate knowledge of the local market are a few of the bankable advantages of going with a local AMC. Susan Humphreys Klein, EVP and CFO of the Tampa, Florida based International Society for Pharmaceutical Engineering (ISPE) had this to say: " From my perspective in finance and administration, closing our office in the Netherlands and outsourcing that to an association management company in Brussels has been a great success. The benefits have included a savings of a minimum of \$200,000 in the first year, improved affiliate relations, and only paying for staff functions when we need them. For us, this was the right move."