

by Melynn Sicht

Motivation Proposition

In challenging economic times, members need association services and leadership more than ever. This stronger member reliance on association programs and products is your chance to either sink or swim. As many agents and brokers contemplate whether to stay in the industry or move on, proving your association's value to members' bottom line has never been more critical. ♦ Here are some great ideas from AEs across the country for keeping your membership strong, connected, and motivated.

Help members navigate the current local market

Members want to know what the local market is doing now and where it's headed. Make sure you have the data online and in an easy-to-read format with some accompanying analysis. Seek the advice of local experts (seasoned real estate professionals, economics professors from your local university, industry consultants) and provide it to members over a variety of media (print, online, e-mail, Webcast) and even through live presentations. You might even consider holding a panel discussion with veteran REALTORS® who have survived similarly turbulent markets. Tailor education to local market conditions, short sales, and foreclosures, as AEs say these are the most well-attended lately.

Turn members' downtime into a productive asset

"When you're not earnin' it's time to be learnin'," as the saying goes. When business is slow, your members can focus on education they have put off. From refresher basic education courses to those focusing on niches, such as international clients (targeting Europeans and others with investment dollars) and "green" issues, associations are promoting

education heavily. Many associations are offering more free and discounted classes, and even tuition loans.

Associations are also using their Web sites and newsletters to keep members apprised of current market conditions. One association offers a boot camp with specifics on how to survive a down market. A great way to maximize the impact of your courses and seminars is to join with neighboring associations to share the cost of bringing in high-profile speakers.

Be positive and personal

Of course you want to be positive and a good motivator for members, but just be sure your optimism doesn't read as denial.

It's your goal to let members know you are working for them, appreciate them, and understand their plight. In tough times, they need extra inspiration and motivation. All communications from your association should be upbeat, but honest and accurate. Personal messages from your president, experienced members, and affiliates on current issues are especially important. Stoke members' enthusiasm for the profession without seeming oblivious to market conditions. Also, ask members what they need to help them in today's market. A survey can be a valuable tool for adjusting or

changing your strategies.

Rather than cutting back on meetings, several associations are adding new committees to increase interaction between members and staff.

Develop young professionals

Young members are your leaders of tomorrow and they are especially vulnerable in a down market, with fewer contacts to rely on and no firsthand experience of anything but boom times. Embrace this group and take advantage of the extra time they may have by encouraging them to join a committee or workgroup (perhaps a targeted Gen Y or younger group), attend a networking event for young agents, or seek out a seasoned mentor. Members who never participated before may not realize how welcome they are. See more on young members, in "Get 'Em Involved" on p. 23.

Be sensitive to their financial needs

Explore whether you can offer an installment payment plan for 2009 dues or interest-free education loans. Remind your members of the free services you have always offered, such as Wi-Fi at your office, computer training, and education. But make sure members don't confuse "free" with "worthless." One AE tells us add-

ing a nominal \$10 fee to an education seminar ensured a packed room and greater perceived value.

Organize a community event

Especially in tough economic times, it feels good to give. Finding a homeowner, organization, or cause in need of volunteer help won't be difficult and it's a great way to build membership unity. Call for volunteers and promote the event as a way to show that REALTORS® are there for homeowners and the community in good times and bad. Remember to emphasize that the only thing members have to give is their time (which they have) and not their money (which they don't have).

Revisit the cocktail party and explore social media online

Most associations abandoned happy hours, cocktail parties, and other social meet-ups years ago because members were too busy to attend. Experiment with bringing them back as ways for members to reunite and stay connected with the association. Alternatively, launch social media groups online with a blog, Facebook page, or other medium where members can chat, post stories, and network without leaving home. ■