



What is the future for professional membership?



WILSON FLETCHER
Digital design consultants

**The big
question:
How should
membership
organisations
adapt to
thrive in the
digital age?**

Here at Wilson Fletcher, we've been paying close attention to the membership sector for 15 years, helping dozens of membership organisations in the UK, US and Asia take advantage of digital opportunities.



In that time, many have taken substantial steps forward in their use of digital channels but few have undergone a true digital transformation. The professional-body end of the sector in particular has enjoyed greater protection from disruption than most typical businesses do and has remained largely unchanged for decades. Many simply don't have any direct competition.

That's going to change. The next decade will be the most disruptive era in history for professional membership organisations. Thanks in no small part to the diversity of their activities, a perfect storm of challenges looms just over the horizon.

The relative protection that even awarding bodies enjoy will not be enough to sustain membership numbers and commercial viability without substantive change.

The overriding lesson from the disruptive times we've been through is that it is better to embrace change as an opportunity than to fight it as a threat. Membership organisations need to take this lesson to heart – and build powerful organisations for the future.

Made for the past?

The majority of membership organisations were built to serve a world that no longer exists, to sit at the centre of systems that have since changed dramatically.

Legal status

Many professional membership organisations are registered not-for-profits or charities. In either case they must operate under the rules of their charter or legal status, creating a lack of flexibility and constrained mindset.

Governance

Legal status is usually directly reflected in the governance structure. The senior management team reports to the Board who themselves report to a Council, or the Trustees, or both. This can impose severe constraints on decision-making and on the freedom to innovate.

Silos

Operational silos are commonplace. Cross-discipline thinking is rare and sometimes even frowned upon. Innovation opportunities are missed simply because thinking is focused, and performance measured, vertically.

Stone and marble

Ironically, iconic headquarters that have stood for so long may now be the biggest weight around an organisation's neck. It may be an amazing financial asset, but it also centres a big part of the mindset of the organisation in something from the 19th Century.

Challenges born of the digital age

Legacy considerations aside, much of the future's disruptive effects will be caused by influences that exist today.

A successful future for any membership organisation will be built on addressing them now and shaping a redefined role in the world.

A new generation of members

Attracting new members has always been a challenge, but the differences between the Millennial generation and those of the past has exacerbated the challenge.

Organisations worldwide are struggling with how to adapt their offer to reflect the drastic change in attitudes that the Millennial generation embodies.

Notions of ownership, status, profile, access, ambition and career are valued in a completely different way to how previous generations saw them. And commitment is a concept that younger audiences are more averse to, presenting a direct challenge for anything under a 'membership' banner.

Networking is the easy part

Networks like LinkedIn and Twitter have changed forever how we interact with groups with common interest. Where clubs and societies were once the best way to interact with peers, we can now interact at any time we like with a networks of peers, globally and

instantly. LinkedIn is only 14 years old. Twitter just hit its teens. We're only seeing the start of the shift towards true network behaviour and it will continue to challenge the basic concept of membership.

Learning is everywhere

Professional development used to be the privilege of the few: an expensive investment in training and learning that most individuals only received as a benefit of their employer. Today, there are already a wealth of professional learning resources available in areas that were previously the domain of specialist providers.

Individual learning is the new classroom and it suits that emerging generation of I'll-control-of-my-life-thanks millennials just fine. Oh, and the price will be \$100, not £5,000. That doesn't mean you can't charge a lot (Harvard run their very prestigious and very expensive MBA online these days and still charge plenty for it) but it does make it much harder to do.

Monetising content is tough

The content industries have been some of those most affected by the impact of the internet, and across every area of publishing there has been enormous pressure on both price and volume.

Professional publishing and special interest areas have been the most immune, but that's changing. Academic publishing platforms are flourishing, and traditional forms of publishing are becoming less and less attractive for any form of professional reference content.

The perception of content has increasingly become 'available easily, for free' and that's only likely to continue as millennials and post-millennials become an ever-greater percentage of the target market.

Blurred lines

Professions used to be defined by a path that started in education and ended in professional accreditation. An architect was an architect and not a structural engineer.

In every walk of life, professional boundaries are becoming blurred by the accessibility of tools and information resources that allow anyone to create more individualised professional profiles than ever before – and that trend is only just starting. "I am a..." is becoming an increasingly difficult sentence to complete with certainty.

In the modern world, what you do is more important than what you are, which is going to place increasing strain on professional bodies who define what a profession 'is'.



Transforming Spotlight

Ben Seale, CEO Spotlight



Spotlight, the company that powers the casting process in film, theatre and TV across the UK and Ireland, has been through an astonishing transformation over the last few years. They've focused all efforts on members, moving beyond being known in the trade as 'Actors' Tax' by creating a warm, active community that actors are proud to call their own.

Spotlight's success has been down to the devotion of its senior leadership team to put a new membership mindset at the heart of every initiative.

We've helped them reimagine the underlying casting process as a digital platform, create a new brand and define and communicate the company's purpose.

Here are their trade secrets from the *other* side of a digital transformation...

Change language to change internal mindsets

“When I first started at Spotlight, we used to call actors ‘advertisers’. The first thing I did was to ban that word and get everyone using the word ‘members’ instead.” Laura Albery was hired as Head of Marketing but that role soon transformed to Head of Membership – emblematic of Spotlight’s shift in focus. ***“The company started thinking of people as members, not as numbers,”*** Laura explains.

Build total empathy within your teams

In order to provide support at every step of the way, you need a team that understands the experience of members. Spotlight have gone about that in two ways: firstly, recruiting people with experience in the industry and secondly, opening up a dialogue between members and staff at all levels. ***“A membership team should be able to empathise,”*** explains Laura. At a recent company day, the most popular session was on on-stage open Q&A with members. Spotlight staff are also given tickets to the theatre, so they can build respect for the craft of acting.

Define your remit and focus on what you can become

“A few years ago we’d talk about being a technology company, but we came to understand that we can’t become the best technology company, but we can be the best membership organisation. So everything we do now is focused on achieving that mission,”

explains Ben Seale, CEO. That means focusing almost entirely on removing hurdles and enriching membership.

The result? ***“Financials become a really lovely by-product of doing good work.”***

Make legacy a badge of honour

Previously, Spotlight positioned itself as a heritage brand, with history held up as one of its key assets.

“When you’re a forward-thinking organisation you can talk about your history in a positive way. You’re not there any more; you’re not stuck in it,”

says Laura. With a clear, future-focused vision prevalent across the organisation, legacy becomes a supportive asset, and is used as a vehicle for the softer values across the organisation.

Internal transformation takes more than one presentation

Transitioning from service provider to membership organisation demands considerable investment in internal teams. **“You can’t do it in 24 hours: it takes more than just one session,”** explains Ben. From dedicating entire rooms to becoming spaces for anyone to post ideas about what Spotlight could do for its members, to appointing a team of internal culture and brand champions, to creating imaginative vision videos that staff want to watch rather than dull presentations, Ben and his team have made culture a central consideration for every initiative.

Invest in a physical space for your members

Spotlight’s HQ is a crucial touch-point for all members, as it’s where a large proportion of auditions and castings take place. The building has become an expression of Spotlight’s values. A recent refit makes the space inviting and comfortable, adorned with pictures and illustrations from history. **“We’ve been opening up the space so that our members really feel it’s somewhere they can own. It should feel like a clubhouse, like somewhere people can pop in for a coffee and a chat,”** explains Ben.



**The
future
can be
bright.**

Here are six of the key areas that we believe will be part of a successful membership organisation of the future.

1 **A strategy of complements**

While single-minded operational focus is regarded as an essential for success, diversity can be an asset, too – if used in the right way. A successful strategy will be digitally-centred, but more importantly, it will define a coherent approach to how each organisation's diverse activities are used to complement each other. Holistic strategy, built from a member perspective, will demand the final dismantling of silos and internal fiefdoms.

2 **Being digital, not using digital**

Success in the digital age demands a transformation in mindset more than methods. It will depend upon thinking the right way, not by adopting methods from the world of startups and technology businesses.

Being digital demands an organisation-wide digital-age mindset that is about capitalising on the dynamics of fast-moving markets, not delivering for channels or mimicking others.

3

Open-minded, confident leadership

That digital mindset needs most to be embedded in the people with most influence: the leadership team. Leaders need to build their own confidence and reset their own thinking if they are to have any chance of leading a successful digital-age organisation. It's simple: open-minded leaders who are confident enough to embrace genuinely progressive opportunities will lead the most successful organisations.

4

A platform, not a place

Facebook, Uber, Google, Airbnb, Amazon – you name it, the world-changing digital organisations are all platforms. The platform question is one of the most important for membership organisations to consider: should you be an exclusionary club that protects the past, or a progressive platform for the future? Platforms enable anyone to create things to a common agenda: the downside is a loss of absolute control, the upside is potential for genuine innovation.

5 Consumer-standard services

There's no such thing as a 'professional' standard any more, nor will there ever be again. Everyone carries the pinnacle of experience standards in their pocket every day, and their expectations start there. While there is still a degree of acceptance of 'professional' tools and services, we are rapidly reaching the end of the target audience's tether. Don't think you can do anything that isn't to the standard of the things you use everyday.

6 Using legacy as an asset

A substantial history can seem like a relic, evidence of an organisation having been designed for another time. But with legacy comes several assets that start-up businesses would snap at the chance of getting themselves: customer relationships, reputation, partnerships, success stories. But these can only be assets if they're reimagined for the digital age and modern members, not sat on and protected. Again, this demands a shift in mindset: how can we use what no-one else has to our advantage in the modern marketplace?

**So, do
membership
organisations
have a role to
play in future
society?**

The answer is a resounding yes... but if membership organisations are to thrive in the digital age, they need to move from doing digital to *being* digital.

That's where we come in. We're a digital strategy and design consultancy that specialises in helping established organisations worldwide thrive in the digital age.

Over the last 15 years, we have worked with stakeholders, staff and customers from hundreds of organisations to uncover powerful opportunities, transform strategy and design innovative services and customer experiences.

We focus on helping organisations with a past flourish in a world increasingly dominated by those without. If that sounds like you, we'd love to hear from you.

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