ASSOCIATION LEADERS AND THE ANALYTICAL MINDSET

A COLLECTION OF INSIGHTS FROM SURGE 2017

SURGE 2017

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INTRODUCTION

What you're about to read is the result of an experiment in virtual collaboration. SURGE 2017 assembled association professionals from across the globe to harness collective knowledge within a virtual summit of a completely new model.

Attendees could not only hear from speakers, but converse with them in real time and contribute their own ideas. We have now assembled some of the best insights from these conversations into a body of knowledge for the benefit of the entire association community.

This eBook, one of the 12-part SURGE series, delves into the session, *Association Leaders and the Analytical Mindset*. It includes themes from the speakers' conversation, snapshots of ideas from guest speakers, contributions from attendees, links to further resources, and more.

Thank you to all who participated – and if you missed it, go to the SURGE 2017 event page to watch all the sessions for free, at your leisure!

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FEATURED SPEAKERS

Debbie King
CEO and Founder of Association Analytics

Combining experience as a former association staff member with a background in the fields of decision science, business and leadership, Debbie has over two decades of experience in successfully guiding associations through the maze of data analytics and business intelligence. Debbie holds a Master's degree in Leadership from Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business, is a graduate of the Entrepreneurial Master's Program at MIT, and earned her B.S. in Decision Science. She is certified as a Project Management Professional (PMP), Certified ScrumMaster (CSM) and Balanced Scorecard Professional (BSP). She holds six current Microsoft SQL certifications, including MCITP Business Intelligence Developer. Debbie serves on the ASAE Key Consultants Committee and previously on the ASAE Technology Council. She is a frequent speaker at association events, delivering energetic presentations on the subject of analytics and visualization at ASAE Annual Meeting, ASAE Technology Conference, Great Ideas, and more. Debbie competes in the sport of equestrian eventing.

Wayne Eckerson
Senior Consultant, Association Analytics and Founder and Principal Consultant at Eckerson Group

Wayne Eckerson has been a thought leader in the business intelligence and analytics field since the early 1990s. He is a sought-after consultant and noted speaker who thinks critically, writes clearly and presents persuasively about complex topics. Eckerson has conducted many groundbreaking research studies and written two widely read books: The Secrets of Analytical Leaders: Insights from Information Insiders and Performance Dashboards: Measuring, Monitoring, and Managing Your Business. He is currently working on a book about data governance. Eckerson is an industry analyst at TechTarget and principal consultant of Eckerson Group, a business-technology consulting firm that helps business leaders use data and technology to drive better insights and actions. Wayne served as director of education and research at The Data Warehousing Institute, where he oversaw the company's research and training programs and chaired its BI Executive Summit. He also served previously as an industry analyst at the Patricia Seybold Group.

Bryan Kelly
Software Executive and B2B Marketer

Bryan Kelly is the former VP of Marketing for Aptify and is now leading the "Community 2.0" charge as CEO of rasa.io. Aside from having the opportunity to combine his love of marketing and software into one really fun profession, Bryan enjoys taking long walks—seriously. A former recovering runner, he intentionally walks about 5 miles per day to stay healthy and get ideas flowing for the workday.

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GUEST SPEAKERS

Susan Avery

CEO of the International Association of Plastics Distribution

Susan E. Avery, CAE, is the CEO of the International Association of Plastics Distribution. She began her career in association management in 1998 as the deputy executive director/CFO at ARMA International, a professional association. IAPD owns and operates an AMC. Susan also serves as executive director for a couple of their clients, one of which is a European-based trade association. She is an experienced association management executive with both trade and professional associations and is known for her work with governance, strategic planning and strategy development, data-driven decision making, financial and strategic turnarounds, and building professional and competent staff teams.

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DATA & STORYTELLING

Debbie King shares her expert insight into the world of informed decision-making and how to communicate data effectively.

Why Data Analytics?

We are running into the future at top speed. We have more decisions to make and less time to make them, and without data we have an increased likelihood of making bad decisions or no decision at all. Now is the time for associations to take advantage of advancements in data to help them make decisions with confidence. **When we don't know what to expect, we often turn to instinct, politics, and tradition to influence decisions.** But that's a dangerous route when our professional landscapes are changing this fast. We must combine experience with data to make informed decisions. We're not robots, so data alone won't fix everything, but we can have the best of both worlds by combining wisdom with evidence.

Association professionals can advance their organizations and careers by understanding and explaining data. I worked at an association for seven years and eventually this led to the founding of my company, Association Analytics. A lot of people ask me about the return on investment of data analytics. The question makes me think of a cartoon I saw once that said: what is the ROI on a wheel? Back in the Bronze Age, before the invention of the wheel, people transported goods using manual labor, but they couldn't go as far as fast. Similarly, although it may be possible to make decisions without data, you will go further faster when you invest in it. My colleague, Reggie Henry of ASAE, recommends instead considering the return on not investing. What is the cost of a bad decision or a missed opportunity?

Common Language Understanding

One thing that can hold an association back is differences at the semantic layer – the meaning of terms. It's important to establish a common language dictionary among and between organizations. I once met with a group of senior vice presidents of various departments at an association, and asked what I thought was a simple question: what is a new member? As it turns out, everyone gave me a different definition. The context and perspective of each VP meant they defined the phrase differently, for example, someone in finance would only count someone who had paid, whereas someone in membership would count anyone who had filled out an application. Lack of clarity around core terms can cause problems, because when different people within an association interpret the meaning of terms in different ways it will affect how they make decisions. **Coming to a common understanding of terms used within the organization is critical.**

Visualization

This common understanding becomes especially relevant when we are presenting data. The way you bring insights from data analysis to leadership and colleagues will make or break what happens to those insights. There's a twist on a famous saying that I apply to this: *a picture is worth a thousand numbers.* A picture presents dense data visually and quickly. However, even the best data visualizations are only half the solution. We need to become data storytellers to color in the picture and explain what it all means. Some think that an effective visualization should convey meaning without explanation, and in the simple ones, like a map, it can. However, in the association space, the data is often too complex to be distilled into an image without a narrative story. Associations simultaneously run multiple lines of business, including events, products, certifications, and more, and this multiplicity can't always be conveyed in a two-dimensional presentation.

The power of storytelling

Google's chief economist believes that **the ability to understand and communicate data will be the most important skill to possess in the next decade.** He's not referring to writing SQL or Python or any other specific data science techniques, he's referring to an ability to explain what data means. One of the best ways to do that at associations is to become a storyteller. Apply the evidence to your story and invoke the limbic system - the emotional part of the brain - and the visual cortex of your audience. When this visual component is combined with an explanatory story, it offers a compelling case for leaders to make fast, informed decisions. Storytelling with data is a skill to be learned and practiced and is a good way to advance your career.

From the Chat: Communicating Data

We should provide staff and volunteer training on expression through narrative - if we could be better storytellers, we would imbue greater understanding and dialogue. Also, if you automate and reduce the time staff spend getting the reports, that will consequently mean there is a higher level of expectation of the strategic analysis and recommendations to come out of all that data.

- Lowell Aplebaum -

I agree with Debbie regarding visuals. That is a great way to avoid overload - by making it into an easier format. if people don't read, comprehend, and then synthesize the data, then only the numbers people will be able to use it.

- Allison Ly -

A big issue arises when people use the data to tell their story instead of the data telling the story. For example, an accountant can make the numbers (data) show positive results or can spin it as a negative. So make sure you know the whole story.

- Mark Kibble -

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CASE STUDY: USING DATA TO BUILD AN LMS

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By Susan Avery

I'm the CEO of the International Association of Plastics Distribution (IAPD), a trade association representing about 250 headquarter companies with 2,000 locations worldwide. 2017 was the Year of Education at IAPD. We resolved to improve all of our educational products. How did data help us to do this? The answer starts with our membership dashboard.

The dashboard is a very complex and ugly spreadsheet that tracks each way that our members interact with the association. We can track if they volunteer on a committee, how many webinars they sign up for, whether they attend the annual convention, submit articles or press releases, and buy into our education.

Before looking to the data, we formulated some questions to interrogate our assumptions: who is using our educational products? Who is primarily funding the association? What do smaller companies versus larger companies need in terms of education?

The data acted as a mythbuster. For example, we historically assumed that smaller companies were the primary users of our educational services and that larger companies didn't need our services because they could create similar tools themselves. As we did our research, we found that the opposite was true. Larger companies were integrating our educational services into their employee orientation and ongoing training. To respond to this information, we bought into a robust learning management system (LMS). It elevated us from offering piecemeal products to providing education as a well-rounded service.

What changed as a result of that? As part of the LMS, we can create sub-sites or portals for our members. We customize and co-brand a training site for them that provides IAPD courses, training on business skills like human resources and safety at work, and their own custom content. Many companies have existing webinars or online training programs that we can host on our system. These sub-portals have been a game changer for us. Larger companies wanted the association to use collective purchasing power to offer them what we could do collectively, something better than what they could do alone.

The result? In six months, our revenues for education have quadrupled. We have seen the engagement level increase across the board, from small to large companies, in all of our membership categories. The Year of Education for IAPD was a great success. Now this project is advancing from early adopters into the heart of our membership. I look forward to seeing what happens in the years to come.

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PURPLE PEOPLE: BRINGING BUSINESS AND IT TOGETHER

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By Wayne Eckerson

Who are 'purple people'? When the term was included in my book, *Secrets of Analytical Leaders: Insights from Information Insiders*, it resonated widely with the core audience. The story goes like this: imagine your organization is color-coded by department. In the red corner are the IT whizz kids, and in the blue corner are the business-minded employees. When you combine those two skillsets, you have what I call purple people who straddle both worlds.

These folks, who carry a deep understanding of the business aspect of their organization, and know how to use technology to facilitate success, are the best positioned to implement the smart use of data and an analytical mindset. Compartmentalizing the development and maintenance of data analytics to the IT department alone limits its application, because it takes a business-oriented mind to ask the right questions of the data. In the 90s, we called this process business intelligence. Before that it was data warehousing. Now we call it analytics. **The semantics change every decade or so, but the goal stays the same: collect data, use it to create insights, then translate those into action.**

When clients come to us for guidance on expanding data analytics in their organization, I identify two types of users. The smaller group, about ten per cent of the workforce, are **power users**. They already use data and any analytical tools they can hack together, usually outside the purview of IT. They are proficient in Excel and might even be a data scientist who knows how to program, use Python, and build predictive models. The majority of the workforce fall into the second category, **casual users**, who use whatever reports and tools are given to them, if any at all.

It helps for us to go in and speak with power users first. **Often, they work in isolation in different departments but can support each other if they are corralled together in a physical or virtual forum.** When they can piggyback on each other's work and compare notes and tools, they never have to reinvent the wheel alone. Other fun collaborative projects can enable this kind of sharing, like hackathons for developers, visualization bake-offs, and the game-ification of analytics. This also prevents people within the same organization from creating conflicting technologies.

Data analytics stops us from making bad decisions. I once worked with an online office supplies company who were competing with physical stores for customers. One marketing manager identified this problem as a virtual disadvantage and thought it would help to roll out a direct mail campaign to any customers located within one square mile of a competing store. This assumption made sense on the surface. However, it was set to cost over $1 million. The marketing director went to analytics first so that they could run a test to find out if the assumption was correct. As it turned out, there was no correlation between proximity to competitors and customer attrition. They abandoned the campaign and allocated their marketing resources elsewhere.

At the time of writing my book, e-commerce was just beginning. When a creative person had an idea in an organization, they would simply build it and publish it. Of course, not all of these ideas were very good. **Soon, people learned that data analytics allowed for tests to be run on assumptions before launching.**

Marry together business and technical skills, and the resulting analytical mindset will benefit your organization exponentially. If even one leader in your organization takes a chance on the power of data analysis to improve one specific set of circumstances, the momentum will build from there and the funding will follow. **Data analytics can change the game for good.**

From the Chat: The Importance of Data

I equate understanding and having a data strategy to fiduciary responsibility. Without it, are you stewarding the organization effectively and efficiently?

- Linn Wheeling -

If management at any level does not know what problem they are trying to solve, no amount of data or reporting will produce an effective decision.

- Mike Moss -

We suffer from data overload. We collect a lot of info, but don't always agree on what's most important.
- Heidi -

Data needs to be organized with an overarching theme in mind, in order to form associations and see how it all ties together. Otherwise, it's rote memorization, at which many minds (raises hand) are not inherently skilled.

- Allison Ly -

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CASE STUDY: PLANNING A CONFERENCE

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By Debbie King

At Association Analytics, we work with many associations who want to create the best offerings for their members, including attractive and exciting conferences. We help them use data to ensure their events are purpose-built for potential attendees.

We once worked with a client that always held their annual meeting in Las Vegas because they assumed it was a place people wanted to go. However, when we looked at the data, it turned out the organizations that would send the most people to the meeting were located on the East Coast. By moving the meeting closer to them, they tripled the number of attendees in two years. **It was a simple case of trusting the data instead of relying on instinct, politics and tradition.**

Meetings and events are a primary source of revenue for many associations. Another client I worked with had a board that set an aggressive goal to triple the number of registrants attending their events per year. This was five years ago, and they were not using any data modelling or segmentation. To achieve this goal, they decided to triple the number of events they held. As you can imagine, this was an expensive failure, and the number of attendees only increased by a quarter.

We stepped in and profiled the optimal customer by segment, looked at behavioral analysis to get a snapshot of their online activity, and ran a propensity model to identify those most likely to register. Using predictive analytics, we automated recommendations for next-selling, cross-selling and upselling with different events. We also profiled the optimal "customer" and then harnessed data from the wider ecosystem of the industry, beyond existing members, to understand what types of topics were of interest to the wider community of interest for this association. **This increased the amount of participation and engagement extensively and within 5 years they had tripled the number of registrants.**

Want to learn how to host your own virtual event, much like **SURGE 2017 ?**

AssociationSuccess.org is in the process of creating an online course that will walk you through the steps involved in putting on your own interactive virtual summit.

Want to be notified when the course is available?

SIGN UP HERE

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WORD CLOUD

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What were the most discussed topics in the attendee chat? The more frequently a word was used, the larger it appears in this image!

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FURTHER RESOURCES

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During the live chat, speakers and attendees alike chipped in with their tips for further reading and resources about the future of learning. We've compiled them into a list here. Keep on learning!

- Article: Education as a Service

- Article: How a Taxonomy Helps Web Users Find Their Way

- Author on Analytics: Tom Davenport

- Book: Secrets of Analytical Leaders

- Article: Our Fear of Big Data

- Article: What Story Does Our Data Tell Us?

Tools for Data Visualization: Qlik, Tableau, Power BI

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