

Get Ready for Virtual Competition

BY SHERRY BUDZIAK

In a highly competitive environment, members are not always turning to their professional organizations to get connected. Rather, they are forming their own online communities or seeking out other Web sites to find what they want.

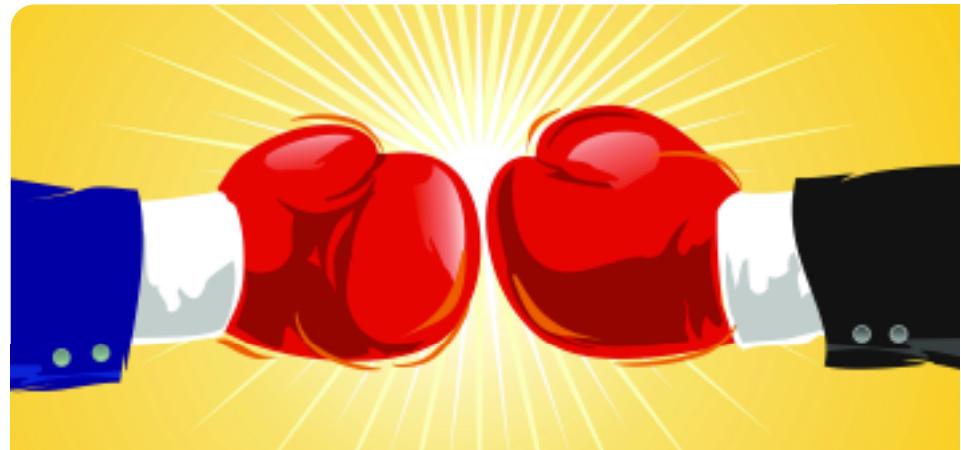
While these activities may seem benign, the end result can — and has been — the rise of a competing Web site or organization that siphons stakeholders away from their primary professional group. This second generation of social networking tools — now becoming known as Enterprise 2.0 — is facilitating more online interaction and is user-driven, cheap, easy to use and self-organizing. It also represents a significant threat to the proprietary value of a membership community.

This is particularly true with younger members who already are using such collaborative services as Facebook, MySpace, Digg, LinkedIn, Friendster, CollectiveX and YouTube in their day-to-day lives to connect with like-minded peers; they expect the same opportunity with their professional groups. Your association's challenge is to remain relevant in the face of this new reality.

COME OUT SWINGING

Don't shrink from the competition; rather, you should embrace this new technology. Social networking represents a change in thinking for most associations and a fundamental shift in how you generate and share information. Associations must abandon top-down communication tactics and embrace collaborative content creation and open communication. These Web offerings can give members a more powerful voice and enhance brand affinity.

One of your first steps should be to do a search of existing online communities (e.g. Facebook) to find out what competing networks serving your profession/industry may already exist. You can search almost any professional interest on Facebook and MySpace and find groups that have the potential to disrupt your organization's relationship with stakeholders. For example, a group of



association professionals started a networking community on Facebook called Association of Associations. If you would like to gain further insight about other sites your visitors are going to online, visit www.alexa.com.

ONLINE STRATEGIES

In order to maintain your leadership position with members and other stakeholders you need to offer them a strong online personalized experience. This can be accomplished through the use of e-communities to facilitate collaboration between and among members. A number of Web 2.0 technological tools like blogging, podcasts, wikis, RSS feed readers and photo sharing can be used to support your new collaboration efforts. These communication tools already are helping your competition to reach audiences easier and earlier. It's time you started taking advantage of them as well.

It should be noted that an online community that truly shares doesn't try to exercise control over the content it contains. Rather it permits users to judge what content is good and what isn't. The true test of your community will be whether you can step back and allow stakeholders to speak their minds.

BENEFITS

What are the benefits of social networking? With an increased focus on collaboration you can:

- Enhance the image of your association and the relevance of its Web site content through content ranking.
- Enable opportunities for your members such as the ability to become mentors or find members who have similar interests as them.
- Improve networking by allowing members to build enhanced online profiles, including a Facebook-like posting, with personalized content and reminders.
- Allow stakeholders to add value to your information assets by posting content related to their interests and expertise.
- Gain opinions from your members by offering blogs on topics important to members.
- Improve operations by creating volunteer portals for the board of directors, committees, task forces and working groups.
- Negate time and distance issues for members who would like to participate in volunteer service.

Social networking technologies provide the ability to cultivate audiences and generate revenues through sponsorship. You have an opportunity to use these tools to form deeper relationships with your members and prospects while you promote your brand identity. □

Sherry Budziak is president of .orgSource. She also will moderate a panel on this topic at the Forum's Annual Meeting, June 17. See page 37 for details. She may be reached at sherry@orgsrc.com.