

Whether you're a new president, a new company or a new association, the path to success or failure is often set in the first 100 days. Over the past ten years, Virtual has helped dozens of organizations find and pursue that path. Here's how your organization can emulate their success.

1 An experienced legal team pays for itself.

Too many organizations burn through tens of thousands of dollars writing bylaws, intellectual property rights (IPR) policies and incorporation documents from scratch. There is a tremendous wealth of knowledge and work that has already been done and is available to address a vast array of scenarios. Here's a good rule of thumb: if your legal team is starting from square one, find another team.

2 Staffing decisions can wait.

Before you run out and hire an executive director, make sure you can afford one and you understand what skills are important. Do you need someone to be an external voice for the organization and someone experienced with non-profit governance? If the answer is yes, consider that this profile will be difficult to match with one person. Industry expertise often dictates that you find someone in the private sector, one who is unlikely to have non-profit association management experience. Seek advice, and if you need an immediate resource, do not enter into a long-term commitment.

3 Budget drives dues, not the other way around.

Too many organizations set their dues levels too low, only to discover they have left themselves with insufficient funds to finance effective operations. Successful organizations start by crafting a first year budget, then set the dues based on a market assessment of how best to attain the funds needed for a successful first year.

4 Have a sales plan.

Particularly in today's climate, memberships won't sell themselves. Thought leaders are often easy to persuade, but someone needs to work on converting the masses. Your earliest members and board of directors must come to the situation with a commitment to open their "rolodexes" and make some calls.

5 Administrative details matter.

The best sales force in the world doesn't matter if no one is following up by faxing agreements, answering inquiries, processing checks and invoices and tracking membership growth. Be sure to have a plan in place for professional class administration before launching a sales effort. While considering your staffing needs, assess the scenario of employing an association management company (AMC) to manage your operations, finances, membership management, marketing, PR and other functions. Many small and mid-sized organizations never hire their own staff; instead they rely on an AMC to provide them with an appropriately sized and skilled team to address some or all of their business functions.

6 Craft the board carefully.

The makeup of the board is one of the most important decisions an organization will make in its early days. In considering the initial board composition, think carefully about the heavy lifting that will be required in the first year. Be sure to recruit board members who are able to put in the time required to make the organization successful—both operationally and financially.

7 Don't launch too soon.

Often, new organizations are met with a degree of skepticism. The way to overcome it is by showing critical mass from day one—the right players, the right numbers. If you don't have the right mix of "doers" and "marquee players" from the start, hold off on a public launch until you do.

Want to start your association off right?

At Virtual, we've helped dozens of new and growing organizations meet and exceed their goals. Contact us today about partnering for success.