Aligning an Association with Member Needs
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An association that aligns the needs of its members with its services provides value and maximizes its mission and market potential. This article presents a data-driven approach to support the alignment of an association's portfolio of offerings with member needs. The resulting output of the analysis is a map of how members (and non-members) perceive the organization and the value that it can/should credibly offer. By developing measures of the needs that individuals look to an organization to fulfill – across the spectrum of basic human needs - it can understand how it should align offerings, content, context and experience delivery.

Empirically, most organizations recognize that their offerings must cater to more than just affiliation needs. At the core, many associations emerged based on the needs for belonging to a group that shares similar profession/occupation, interests or beliefs. But there is much more needed to explain demand for services and concepts such as advocacy efforts, journals and publications, conferences, list-serves, affinity programs, discount cards, and recognition awards programs.

The model developed by EurekaFacts serves as a framework to systematically measure member needs (also known as motivators or drivers) and effectively incorporate them into an organization's strategic orientation. This serves not only as a robust needs-profiling tool, but also as a tool to measure the relevance of each need for the organization as a whole and to each one of the segments making the target market. It also supports the strategic and tactical activity required to effectively execute member acquisition, service and retention efforts.

Applications

Conducting a systematic and quantifiable analysis of the needs members seek their association to fulfill offers great potential benefits. Because such measurement is conducted at the needs level and not the product level, the resulting profile will provide rich context that is versatile enough to be applied at strategic and tactical levels. Among the key applications are to:

- Facilitate analysis of portfolio of offerings with member data.
- Prioritize resources and benefit/product/service decisions such as identification of new opportunities, pinpointing underperforming key service areas, and eliminating strategic distractions.
- Inform strategic and tactical marketing and communications efforts with a knowledge base on member perceptions regarding core positioning (brand DNA), awareness, knowledge, and attitudes toward the association and its offerings.

Most organizations focus on evaluating which features and benefits are sought by the membership. This is an appropriate measure in the short term. However, when evaluating such benefits most measures are in fact assessing a specific product with its current strengths and weaknesses. Stepping back to assess the needs that individuals seek to fulfill through the organization can provide important context to evaluate alignment with customer (member) needs, performance, and mission contribution.

The Key Dimensions

The EurekaFacts Member Needs Assessment approach utilizes an inventory of needs that are grouped into several factors. Each factor clusters a number of the needs that an individual perceives that their association should fulfill.

To get to these needs we searched not at the service level but at the level of the basic human needs every individual looks to fulfill. It is important to note that that people look to organizations as instruments to meet different needs, so we developed a method to measure what individuals look to an association to provide and not simply measures of their total aggregate needs. The resulting approach was then applied to the development of a survey instrument that can be administered to a sample of the target population and then used to build a profile of what members and prospective members seek from their association.

The identified factors form a framework to measure needs in a professional association as they relate to an adaptation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs pyramid, and Henry Murray's inventory of 27 psychogenic needs, integrated into a single structure. Depending on the particular focus and the target population, three to eight factors emerge. The most common factors to emerge from the data in professional associations are: altruistic (changing the environment – such as advocacy, public education and enhancing the image of the profession or represented population), esteem-enhancing (accomplishment, recognition, exposition, and understanding), growth & development (skills and abilities, marketability/net worth, cognition), belonging, basic resources (survival resources, professional tools), safety/protection (i.e. collective agreement, licensing, insurance).

When the analysis goes beyond overall perceptions and measures the set of member services and products, findings become even more insightful and applicable. The questionnaire design can examine a variety of services and benefits in relation to the needs that they intend to fulfill. These needs are then measured using the inventory of human needs. During the analysis of data, organization-specific factor analysis helps identify the natural grouping for the organization. The most commonly emerging dimensions are presented below:

EurekaFacts Factorized

Member Needs Pyramid

Altruistic/ Influence the Environment
Esteem
Belonging
Development/ Achievement
Mobility/Safety/Protection

While the image above presents the more widely known general structure of priorities, individuals will look to their association to fulfill different needs and the make-up of these sought-after needs may vary by segment in any given population. So the member needs profile for an organization may take various shapes according to the relative weight of the needs of their members in each category. This may make an advocacy or philanthropic group heavier in its altruistic dimensions, while a union may have stronger protection and altruistic measures accompanied with lower perceived needs in the belonging and development areas. However, each organization is likely to have a unique profile representing its position in the service/markets served.

These theoretical organizations are presented for illustration purposes; reality tells us that individuals look to their organizations to meet not one but a wide array of services. Understanding the value assigned by individuals to each of these categories can help prioritize resources and develop services appropriate to the sought needs of the membership.

Within an organization it is common to find that although general patterns exist and define the nature of the niche filled by an organization, different segments of the population served have distinct needs they want to fulfill. These are often explained by career stage, by generational cohort or life-stage, by specific regional differences, by occupation or by a combination of several variables.

Measuring the various needs and grouping them into factors can help pinpoint those areas where there is high interest, as well as where there is divergence in opinions. The figure below illustrates a profile of a hypothetical organization where the various needs are clustered into eight factors. The width of the inner area shows potential for segmentation of membership services. The dimensions with highest score and widest dispersion are the best targets for possible segmentation. Those with highest scores and narrow variations are good targets for overall priorities and messaging. Once represented in their actual measures the profile of needs may look like this:

Figure 2 – Member Needs Profile
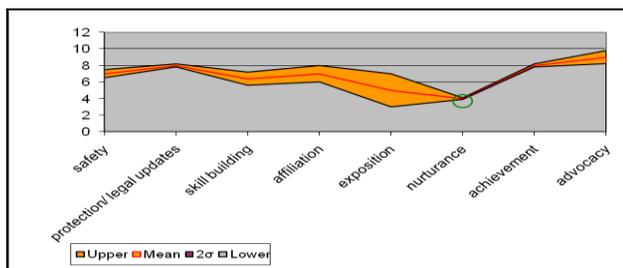
Needs plus Positioning

The resulting profile is a product of both the inherent needs of the target population and their perception of what the organization is intended to provide. This introduces an essential strategic element. The resulting profile is designed to yield the measurement of the needs that members have in common in relation to what they perceive the organization is intended to provide. In other words, the analysis uncovers the latent potential within the current market position of the organization. By large, the value of the member needs analysis in this context is the fact that it presents member needs within the perception of the membership (be it current, prospective or lapsed), so quick deployment advances can be easily pinpointed, and the larger market position strengths and weaknesses can be assessed.

Performance Relative to Member Needs

Assessing product/service performance in light of the dimensions served offers valuable insight. In the same way that an overall organization can be evaluated relative to the set of needs, each key product/service can be evaluated. The graphic below illustrates an example of an analysis of several various member services. Examining the entire portfolio of services in light of the rating of the predominant need versus member satisfaction with each service allows for strategic allocation of resources and priorities, decisions regarding introduction of new services, and or the elimination or restructuring of those that are either not aligned with member needs or not performing well.
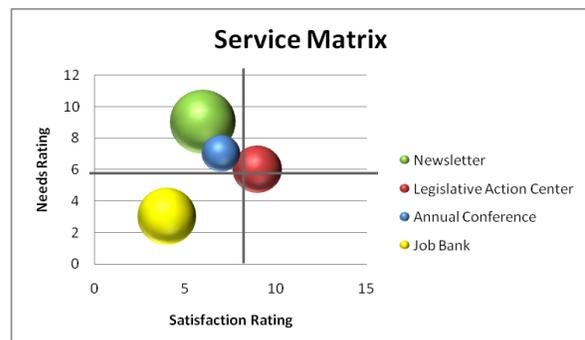
Maximize Value with a General Needs Profile Plus Needs-based Segmentation

Furthermore, because increasingly fragmented markets have created opportunities for association niche players to carve away market from large associations, the assessment of needs to be fulfilled should not stay at a general level. In addition to developing the overall framework for affiliation and service offerings, a segmented approach is necessary so that each niche can be effectively covered. In Figure 2 (above) the areas that have high standard deviations offer the potential for exploring segmented offers such as membership categories, tiered membership structures or other tactics to optimize value and revenue.

Extracting Meaning Beyond the Typical Needs Assessment

The model described above carries two important benefits. Because the assessment of needs is conducted within a systematic approach, the outcome of the analysis presents clear direction

and insight in the strategic market and offer planning. At the same time, because the measures provide information on categories of needs, the findings of this analysis provide contextual information that can be used to support decisions on new service offerings and offer guidance that goes beyond the immediate services measured by a traditional membership satisfaction survey.

About the Author

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