



THE FIVE KEYS TO ADOPTING INNOVATION

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It is common knowledge that making innovation happen in associations is absolutely critical to their continued vitality and enduring success. The challenge for associations is to bring new innovations, new technology and new solutions to our members and customers. A different challenge altogether is getting our members and customers to use them. After all, if the increased efficiency of an innovation was the only thing determining whether or not it was ultimately adopted, then chances are I would be writing this using a Dvorak keyboard (I'm not) and you would be reading a full digital version of this article, artwork and all, on your computer or PDA (you're not).

What are the reasons why some new benefits or products are quickly adopted, while others are not?



THE DIFFUSION OF INNOVATIONS

Arguably, the most influential book written about the adoption rates of new innovations is *The Diffusion of Innovations*,

written by Everett M. Rogers in 1962 (though revised as recently as 2003). Research by Rogers and many others — typically using decidedly low-tech case studies such as water boiling in a Peruvian village and agricultural technology among farmers in Iowa — suggests that 49 to 87 percent of the variance in the rate of adoption of new innovations or products can be explained by five factors. Association professionals who understand the role of these five factors can better anticipate the likely adoption of a new benefit, product or innovation, and can craft their marketing campaigns to take advantage of those factors on which the innovation does well and overcome those factors on which the innovation does poorly (Gourville, 2006).



1. RELATIVE ADVANTAGE

Relative advantage is the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being better than the idea, benefit or technology that it replaces. Relative advantage is usually measured in economic terms: Those innovations that are more efficient,

yield better results or cost less are perceived to have a higher relative advantage, and are more likely to be adopted. Relative advantage also can be measured more subjectively, in the form of social status or prestige.

The association community often uses incentives to increase the relative advantage, and thus the adoption rate, of a new product or benefit. For example, member-get-a-member campaigns are a classic example of diffuser incentives, in which members are rewarded when they persuade others to join the association. It also is common for associations to use a negative incentive; that is, to impose a penalty for not adopting an innovation. For example, charging a fee for a printed version of the membership directory when it's available free online.



2. COMPATIBILITY

Compatibility is the degree to which the new innovation, benefit or product is perceived as being consistent with existing values, past experiences and the

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needs of potential users. In general, an innovation that is compatible with existing concepts and expectations is less threatening to potential users and is more likely to be adopted.

For associations, a potential consequence of low compatibility is the failure of electronic publications. In his 2000 marketingpros.com article "The Problems with E-Books," Alan Weiss used the issue of compatibility to argue that e-books would probably not be more than a small niche technology for a long time. Seven years later, his prediction has proven to be correct. E-books have some degree of relative advantage in their convenience, but the experience of reading long articles or books on a computer screen is just not relaxing or comfortable.

Nonetheless, there is a place in the association community for carefully planned electronic publications. This year, the Giving USA Foundation successfully released an online version of *Giving USA*, the annual report on charitable giving in the United States. The online version features several relative advantages over the printed version of the books, such as search features and portability. Just as important, however, the online version is compatible with the experiences and needs of existing and potential customers.

"We knew that for the most part existing users of the book did not sit down and read the book cover to cover," says Sharon Bond, senior marketing manager of the Giving USA Foundation. "It was more typical for our users to

search the book for specific data patterns or trends. Also, users of the book were familiar with other searchable online publications that were data-oriented."



3. COMPLEXITY

Complexity is the degree to which an innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use. Innovations, benefits and products that are simple to understand and use will be adopted more often than those that are difficult to understand or use. Anyone remember using PCs before Windows? The adoption rate of personal computers increased dramatically when user interfaces became more visual and easier to use.

A major way associations can overcome this barrier is education — demonstrating a new tool or benefit at a conference or trade show, for example. Several associations also offer webinars for new and continuing members to decrease the complexity associated with their benefits, products and membership experience.



4. TRIALABILITY

Trialability is the degree to which an innovation may be experimented on a

limited basis. Research has shown that those new products or innovations that can be used first on a trial basis are generally adopted more rapidly than products or innovations that are not available on a trial basis. Trial versions of software, GPS navigation systems in rental cars, and demonstration of new benefits at trade shows all are designed to increase trialability and rates of adoption. Many associations also use trial memberships to get new members in the door.



5. OBSERVABILITY

Observability is the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others. Many people are more likely to adopt highly visible new products such as SUVs or satellite televisions if they observe their neighbors using them. Associations have used observability for years at conferences and trade shows in the form of buttons or ribbons proclaiming someone is a new member, has just tried a new product, or has just visited a specific booth on the show floor.

Association professionals who understand the role of these five factors will be well-positioned to bring innovation to their organizations. Most importantly, they can make sure these innovative new products and services ultimately are adopted and used. ■

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