

To Stay Relevant, Professional Associations Must Rebrand



You might be surprised to learn that the Consumer Electronics Association is now called the Consumer Technology Association (CTA). The organization behind the popular Consumer Electronics Show (CES) announced the rebrand last November in a move that garnered little attention. Although the CTA produces the world's largest trade show, drawing more than 170,000 people in 2015, its new name has attracted little comment.

Perhaps people inside the industry were too busy preparing for CES, which is being held this week. Or perhaps the rebrand seemed to lack any real news value because the association chose to retain the name “CES” for its annual show, which enjoys greater awareness and salience than the organization itself.

More likely, the lack of any substantive reaction to the rebrand was because it's a change that seems a little too little, a little too late. Like so many other professional associations and industry organizations, the CTA followed the conventions of association branding: update the terms, but keep the words and the acronym fairly close to the previous version. This understated-but-safe approach was also used by the American Society of Training & Development (ASTD) when it rebranded to the Association for Talent Development (ATD) in 2014.

But this strategy misses an important opportunity for associations – many of which are in trouble.

[According to the American Society of Association Executives](#) – yes, there's an association for associations – association membership is declining across the board. The recession certainly didn't help, but cost-cutting isn't the only reason for the decrease. Social networks now provide easy and convenient ways for industry members to find each other and network, and the proliferation of online content has led to vast and often free access to the types of information, insights, and training that professionals used to be able to access only through association membership and industry conferences. Plus, the ASAE [has had to address](#) Millennial workers who place less value on formal and

traditional means of networking, preferring to establish their own relationships in their own ways.

So associations would do well to rethink their roles as well as their names, and consider how a new name might help advance a different purpose and achieve a different impact. They could unleash the full potential of a rebrand and use it as a catalyst to reposition the association itself. They could present a bold vision for the future of their industries and position themselves as instrumental to getting to that future.

Consumer-facing brands offer useful lessons here. For instance, instead of conceiving of themselves as pseudo-clubs with an annual meeting, perhaps associations should consider themselves communities that organize year-round around common values and goals – like Dove did with its Campaign for Real Beauty. Dove's focus on values and community sparked a change in the conversation around women and beauty in advertising and in the wider culture. Associations, which currently serve as industry advocates in the political and regulatory circles in some cases, might consider how they might play a similar role with consumers and advance a cultural agenda.

Or they could adopt a different approach, one drawn more from product strategy than from marketing. Associations could focus develop new offerings, services, and versions as their industries and members evolve – as Google has done since 1998. Google is an exemplar of flexibility and evolution in its products – just imagine how different our digital experiences would be today if it had just stuck with search. And, it uses different brands when appropriate — creating new names such as Gmail and Google+ and keeping acquired brands like Waze and Nest. Associations could adopt a similarly creative and expansive stance.

I recognize that seizing these opportunities won't be easy. Most associations have many, diverse stakeholder groups. The CTA, for example, includes different member segments ranging from entrepreneurs to enterprise organizations, from software to robotics to health care services.

It's difficult to adopt a mission and a name that will appeal to and resonate with such diverse and numerous groups with differing, and perhaps at times conflicting priorities — so, a generic name and a broad mission is a safe choice. Associations that buck the trend risk the wrath of their members: when the National Speakers Association tried to rebrand itself as PLATFORM, the change was so harshly criticized by so many members, that it eventually reverted back to the NSA. Despite the risks of change, though, there's still room for associations to select more evocative or influential names that help articulate what they can *do* for their members.

Associations have the opportunity to become the kinds of leaders and visionaries that attract people to them and advance their industries. Better names are only the start.