

Your association, advocacy group, or consortium is one of a kind. You are poised to represent a brand new market segment, to promote a grassroots campaign, to sway policymakers, or to tackle emerging questions about interoperability/technical standards—all very distinct goals.

But that doesn't mean every aspect of your launch needs to be completely original.

Association management companies (AMCs) supply proven methodologies so you can hit the ground running and ultimately achieve long-term success. By borrowing on the experience and best practices of an accredited AMC, you can easily answer crucial start-up questions, while dodging the early operational pitfalls that defeat so many of today's newcomer NPOs.

Don't overcomplicate your launch process. As you're working your way through the blueprint stage, here are some primary considerations that should inform your association kickoff, along with 24 advantages of partnering with an established AMC:

Accounting & Finance

From high-level financial planning to everyday bookkeeping, it's much easier to talk strategy when you've established fiscal bearings. Association management companies let you offload your bank and merchant accounts, as well as the handling of other accounting functions (general ledger, billing, A/R, A/P, financial reports, filings, etc.). Most associations find that it pays to outsource these time-consuming tasks—particularly in the early stages, when permanent staffing decisions are still fluid.

Board Member Support

Capable governance sets the tone for your association and ensures your main mission is always in focus. From day one, you need a Board that represents all relevant industry segments, geographies, and ideally all of your member profiles. You need to balance the value of big name leadership with the ideals of passionate experts. Board members should also understand the substantial time commitment and office terms involved. While you're in the process of creating an executive leadership team or vetting candidates, an AMC can provide comprehensive Board support so your programs and initiatives continue moving forward.

Critical Mass

Establishing critical mass is about gathering enough supporters—including the right mix of "doers" and marquee players—to substantiate your new association, right from the start. Without a sizeable following, too many of your early days may be consumed by validation efforts. On the other hand, if there's already a key body in place serving a similar purpose, your group will need to differentiate itself and determine viability. An AMC can help you gauge the ideal numbers and outset capabilities necessary for achieving critical mass.

Dues Decisions

How should you establish your membership dues pricing, billing style, and structure? In terms of pricing, a good rule of thumb is to divide your first-year expenses by your anticipated start-up membership count. This means, of course, you'll need to establish an operating budget first. Accredited AMCs are equipped to advise you on billing, renewals, and more, to ensure your group is building the necessary cash reserves.

Executive Directors

A good ED is hard to find, especially when you don't quite know who you're targeting. Depending on its goals, your group may be looking toward an executive director to oversee major technical initiatives and provide subject matter expertise; to act as public spokesperson; to spearhead recruitment; and/or manage the overall agenda. Since industry expertise often comes at a premium, most new associations are better off delaying high-level staff decisions. Meanwhile, a qualified AMC can fill the ED role and handle your Board support, PR and marketing activities.

Founding Members

You can't expect to woo new members or warrant big press unless your founding team includes powerful, influential leaders. Take time to cultivate a noteworthy group. A good AMC has the skills to grow your core membership exponentially.



Goals

Even though many association leaders come from the private sector, a surprising number of organizations fail to outline measurable goals, priority metrics, and accountability measures. All three should appear in your strategic plan, which warrants regular review and refinement—as often as every quarter. AMCs are well-suited to facilitate formal goal-setting in accordance with your mission, and can even advise your group when the mission itself may need to be revisited.

HR Outsourcing & Employee Hosting

If hiring any association employees is on your to-do list, you'll need a plan in place for benefits administration, training, development, and compliance with U.S. employment laws. But most payroll services and human capital management solutions won't work with single-digit employee counts. An AMC like Virtual, on the other hand, can "host" your employees through its partner network, ensuring highly competitive benefits, and helping you attract world-class candidates. Stay tuned for our upcoming informational guide on HR outsourcing, which will include a free analysis of your staff needs and benefit offerings.

Incorporation Documents

Setting up your association as an incorporated entity is a smart move in terms of budget and efficiency. Incorporation simplifies your group's taxes, finances, third-party contracts, insurance policies, and ownership of intellectual property. Ultimately, it's also cheaper for AMCs and partner law firms to address these issues with standard templates versus the custom drafted documents that would otherwise be required for ad hoc working groups.

Key Association Metrics

Are you prepared to assign a grade to your new association's financial or operational performance? What will success look like? And how will you communicate progress in objective terms? The easiest way to pursue and promote your association wins is to establish clearly-defined performance metrics, like those outlined in the ASAE's Operating Ratio Report. Working with an AMC helps you isolate the appropriate benchmarks.

Legal Help

How do you know if you're working with the right legal team? Start by inquiring about other professional associations or standard-setting organizations the firm has represented. Your legal partner should have experience drafting IPR policies, bylaws, and incorporation documents, so you don't wind up footing the bill for its first stab at the process. Another advantage of working with an AMC is legal referral help that always points you toward quality representation.

Membership Class Structure

Many associations create greater value by offering membership tiers or class levels. Different membership classes may afford different rights, while requiring more obligations and higher dues. An AMC can explain the structural options that will drive participation and best serve your different member communities.

News Coverage

Take full advantage of your launch as an opportunity to engage with the press. One suggestion: make yourself available to reporters via a series of launch-related webcasts, which your AMC can help to coordinate. It's critically important that your message be polished and attention-grabbing, since it may be quite a while before media outlets are willing to give you their coverage again.

Online Engagement

Do you have a plan in place for unifying dispersed members and connecting with prospects in far-flung locales? Annual and even semi-annual events are great. But you'll need to employ online tools—like webinars and webcasts—to keep the association conversation going. AMCs can show you how.

Paperless Operations

Think cloud-powered collaboration, hosted document sharing, online agendas, e-newsletters, mobile apps for association events, electronic ballot systems for voting... An AMC can facilitate dozens of paper-free opportunities, which all add up to cash savings, productivity gains, and member approval.

Questions

Who's going to manage your day-to-day inquiries, follow up on fax requests, or track invoices? As a professional association, you need professional administration services to support your recruiting efforts and connect with your valued members. Hiring a full-time administrator doesn't always make sense for today's small to midsized organizations; AMCs offer a practical alternative.



Recruitment

Working with an AMC can help you plan and execute a strong sales strategy that leverages your ground-floor members, helping them communicate key benefits to target audiences. Many groups underestimate the amount of time it takes to build membership momentum. A big question to answer in the pre-launch stage is, "what will motivate prospective members to join?" AMCs understand sales messaging to engage companies, vendors, individual professionals, end users, and other unique membership demographics.

Social Media

You should design a social media strategy that makes sense for your goals and your audience. AMCs are well-versed in the conventions of LinkedIn, Twitter, Quora, Facebook—even visual platforms like Pinterest and Instagram.

Taxes

Offload your state and federal filings, along with your IRS application for non-profit status to an accredited AMC.

Updates

Expect to disseminate group updates early and often. With AMC-provided web and technology management services, you can rest assured that your web presence is optimized and your sites are always conveying the most current information.

Virtual Office Services

As you prepare to address prospective members and release your launch announcement to the media, you'll need to reference a physical presence and contact details, even if your association is entirely virtual. An association management company can help you secure a legal address, along with all the other HQ tools (email, call routing, filing and document management) that an office team would need.

Website Management

Your association simply cannot launch with an unfinished website. Your members will rely on your site for news and information—not to mention the role your digital presence plays in PR and marketing. If you're lacking the bandwidth or expertise to develop your group's site, AMC partnership is a cost-effective, efficient solution.

XYZ Obstacles

It's impossible to predict every specific challenge you will face in the course of your association launch. In addition to so many targeted services, an experienced association management company will be ready to jump in and lead you through the unforeseen obstacles—with strategic guidance from its senior leadership.

Keep in mind: the first 100 days often determine an organization's fate. With proper planning and strategic counsel, you can crush the traditional benchmarks and quite literally change the world for your professional members and constituents.

Start tackling the ABCs of your association launch with an accredited, established AMC that will actively support you—today and tomorrow.

Contact the world-class team at Virtual. Ask us about our practice areas, our solutions, and our proven track record of success.

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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.