If Your Association Isn’t Speaking Up, It’s Still Sending a Message

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Jonny Kaldor says associations pursuing a digital strategy are capitalizing on connections and discovering people are willing to pay for their content.

BY CARLA KALOGERIDIS
While association publishers aren’t often the first ones in the water, there’s no reason for them to lag behind media trends either. Andrew Clurman, CEO of Active Interest Media (AIM), says associations already have most of the critical success ingredients baked in — it’s primarily a matter of constantly evolving and diversifying.

AIM is a consumer enthusiast media company that produces magazines, consumer and trade events, films, and TV shows reaching 40 million readers, fans, and attendees in 85 countries. Before launching AIM with chairman Skip Zimbalist III in 2003, Clurman served as senior vice president of Time4Media, a division of Time Warner/AOL, where he served as president and publisher of Mountain Sports Media and TransWorld Publications. Under his leadership, the two divisions grew to 15 consumer and trade magazines and an award-winning film and TV production unit, as well as market-leading businesses in books, videos/DVDs, and events.

Much like associations, in many of the markets AIM serves, events are the cornerstone of the revenue model. With five divisions — the Equine Network, Home Group, Healthy Living Group, Marine Group, and Outdoor Group — its publication brands include Yoga Journal, Oxygen, Clean Eating, Yachts International, Practical Horseman, EQUUS, Old House Journal, Cabin Living, Garden Gate, and more.

Here Clurman shares ideas and strategies for association publishers looking to innovate and remain relevant.
Where can you borrow brilliance from consumer media publishers?

**signature:** It looks like diversification is key to your media strategy. Can you share some insights on that?

**Clurman:** We focused on diversification long before 2020, when the pandemic pushed many publishers into a radical acceleration of that trend. Our watchword for the last 10 years has been diversification.

For one thing, we’ve moved away from an ad-driven to a consumer-driven model. We constantly challenge ourselves with how we can repackaging, re-present, and repricing our content. It’s about delivering great content and experiences across a wide range of interests that people are passionate about.

**signature:** Much of what’s working for you mirrors what associations do — events and online education, for example.

**Clurman:** We have live events and tradeshows, several B2B platforms, online universities, and some retail events. Our online education started five years ago, and often, like associations, it supports a certification in the field we’re serving. We’ve published magazines and journals in some of our markets for years, but we’re finding that the new learning management systems are most cost effective in educating people in a certain field.

For example, one of our universities is branded AIM HealthyU (AIMHealthyU.com). Users access the course materials via any device and at their own pace. Once they buy the course, it’s theirs forever, and they can revisit the content whenever they want. We stand behind the courses with a money-back guarantee. It’s information and teaching from the experts they already know and trust from our magazines in the space.

**signature:** What other aspects of your business are similar to the association model?

**Clurman:** We have hierarchies of users, from casual users to super users. The website content can be accessed by people with no commitment. Then,
the casual user might sign up for a free e-newsletter — which shows they have some level of commitment — with the e-newsletter serving as a gateway to them paying for stuff that interests them. The super user is someone who is committed to the space, driven by content, accesses our online education, and attends our events. Our mantra is turn subscribers into members.

**signature:** What does a member receive?

**Clurman:** Access to a suite of products and services. For example, we sell health and liability insurance to yoga teachers and fitness trainers. We sell roadside assistance to horse enthusiasts in case their truck and trailer break down on the side of the road with horses in it. The horse insurance product was an advertiser of ours, and they had 8,000 insurance members. We bought the company because it was a great service we could offer — with a little promotion, it’s now over 40,000 members.

We keep adding products to our offerings. If you give people more for their money, then they are willing to spend more money with you. And now, we are offering our insurance products to associations in our space.

We continually challenge ourselves to come up with new products and services our subscribers need. Customers buy the insurance because of our brand.

**signature:** What role do your magazines play in all this?

**Clurman:** The magazines are the beacon, the authority, the brand. The magazines bring the authenticity and credibility. They are the foundation of the brand and the audience. But the magazines are not the economic drivers.

**signature:** What trends are you seeing in advertising?

**Clurman:** There’s print attrition that you can’t ignore. Some categories are better than others. Some of our markets — like workout, training, and yoga — we serve more easily through digital content.

But we are definitely keeping print because the customers want it. We have a group of advertisers who understand the value of print, and print works for advertisers. But it’s not growing. If a monthly magazine is getting flimsy, sometimes we’ll switch to four journal-quality issues a year that are bigger and better. Sometimes that’s all it takes to stabilize that part of the business equation.

We used to sell print on its own merits. Now, we’re selling a suite of marketing services including print, research, SEO studies, custom content, lead generation, and even video production through our own in-house agency. It’s hard to sell print today in isolation.

Traditional, classic marketers know print drives online actions from offline. Print is part of that continuum. But the shorter distance between the ad and the sale is often at the detriment of print.

**signature:** How typical is your company of what’s going on in the consumer media world?

**Clurman:** When we compare notes with our peers, we are more diversified than other consumer publishers. For one thing, we are committed to making events a core of our business. We produce the largest equestrian team roping event in the world, also boating shows, our IDEA Health & Fitness events, as well as film tours in areas like action sports and fly fishing.

**signature:** What’s a film tour?

**Clurman:** We hold live screenings worldwide where enthusiasts gather to watch films about their sport and engage with others who share the same passion. A typical tour includes 400 nights of showing films internationally. Our action sports film tour, for example, kicks off the snow sports season each year. *SnoWorld Magazine* gives readers a behind-the-
Pay particular attention to education. How do you look online? Do you offer online courses? How competitive are you compared to what others are offering online? What’s an adjacent need to a need you are already fulfilling? What else do your members need? What else can you offer? We are always asking ourselves: What else? What else? What else can we do?

You know, many associations sold off their trade shows to B2B companies, so now they’re soul-searching for what they want to do next. Associations have the audience, and now it’s just a question of how to continue serving them.

How do you decide which new products and services to move ahead with?

We ask ourselves: Does it build out our reputation in the field? If so, that’s a defensible, strong position. In one of the markets we serve, the advertisers said they needed editorial coverage of their products. So, we started a group within our company that does product reviews. If brands like the review we write, they can license it from us. Brands love product reviews because they drive e-commerce. A brand with a good consumer review sells more.

The initial review we do of a product is free. We write the review with no strings attached on either side. Then, if the review is a positive one and they like it, they can pay a licensing fee. They can license it for as long as they are selling the same SKU. We usually ask for a one-year commitment, but they can license it for up to 15 years. They agree to publish it, and so do we.

It’s doing very well because the ecosystem of e-commerce has blown up in this stay-at-home world.

Thanks for sharing your strategies with our readers. I guess you don’t mind if we borrow some of your brilliance?

I actually picked up a lot of ideas going to a variety of publishing conferences, including B2B and association events. In publishing, there are no competitors — just codependents and survivors.