

yourmembership<sup>®</sup>  
.com

INDUSTRY TRENDS  
**YOU ARE NOT THE CENTER  
OF THE UNIVERSE**

# You Are Not the Center of the Universe

Written by Jamie Notter

I already did an overall recap post on the ASAE Annual Meeting over on the Common Thread blog with some big picture reactions to the event. Here I wanted to dig into some of the issues a little more deeply, and there's one that I have been stewing over for a couple of days now. It's an issue that I have encountered before, but it seemed to appear several different times during this meeting, and it concerns me.

It's the idea that associations are somehow entitled to exist. That we are the center of our universe, and we deserve it.

My first encounter was during a frustrating conversation among association executives and consultants related to social media. It is 2011, yet here was a group of experienced association folks gnashing teeth and lamenting the fact that bloggers and people on Twitter could throw out ideas without any credibility. Where, they asked, were the associations in that picture? Why weren't people understanding that associations are the credible source for information and insight!? What strategies could we employ to get those external voices more in line with what we were saying. How could we control or be the perfect filters or curators?

I think there is a role for filtering and curation, but the tone of the conversation startled me. Scared me even. Given the revolutionary changes we've seen through social media—where the consumers of information, news, entertainment, and knowledge have suddenly become the producers of all that—how is it possible that we would place our associations at the center of that universe, wondering how to control what's happening at the periphery?

I can certainly understand some teeth gnashing—I don't have simple answers about how to move forward in today's rapidly changing world. But I know we'll move forward in a way that acknowledges the more decentralized nature of the system. I assume, quite frankly, that the role I had yesterday is not going to be the role I will have moving forward. Not when so much is changing.

But the association community does not seem to be comfortable with that. Too often, I feel like we're framing the problem as "The world has changed and my association isn't being as successful as it was before, so we need to do our job better so we can get back in control". We need to redefine our value proposition, we need to do our marketing better, we need to do our events better, we need to do our strategic planning more effectively, we need to define our markets more clearly, we need to change our governance.

Maybe, but what about this one: maybe we need to close our doors. Seriously, why is it a given that your association must exist? All of those suggestions above presume that your association's continued existence is in the best interest of all involved. Maybe it is, but maybe it isn't, and we'd be able to determine that if we understood our systems better. Within our systems, what change is needed? What impact are we really seeking? What will growth and development really look like? Because maybe that impact could be achieved with some radical transformation of our organization (including dissolution). Maybe we need to phase out our tax exemption. Maybe we need to compete directly with our members. Maybe we should give away the things we used to sell. Maybe we need to invest in other people's credibility, rather than our own. Maybe not, of course, but these days we won't even entertain thoughts like that, because our default position is that associations, as we know them, are valuable by default.

I'm not convinced. Of course I love the association community, I think we collectively do amazing things, and I am not advocating for our demise. But I have no illusions that we are somehow more important than the system itself. In that regard, I embrace our lack of importance, because it frees me up to focus on what is needed to advance the system. It frees me up to change in ways that the system needs me to change.

Until we pull ourselves out of the conversations we're having about relevance, and control, and strategic planning, etc., I think we're going to continue falling further and further behind. We mean well, but we end up squandering our resources on effort that doesn't matter enough. Let's not do that any more.

INDUSTRY  
TRENDS

# You Are Not the Center of the Universe

Written by Jamie Notter

---

## About the Author

Jamie Notter is a Vice President at Management Solutions Plus, Inc. in Rockville, MD, where he leads the consulting division. He brings 20 years of experience in conflict resolution, diversity, and nonprofit and association management, including seven years running his own consulting practice. Jamie is an accomplished speaker and author of three books, including *Humanize: How People-Centric Organizations Succeed in a Social World*, released in September 2011. Follow Jamie on Twitter [@jamiemotter](#) or on his blog.

INDUSTRY  
TRENDS