Constituent Management and Engagement Guide

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Why You Need More Than an Association Management System

A prospective member comes to your website. After taking some time to learn about your organization and programs, they decide to take the plunge. They navigate to a page where they choose a membership from several options, submit their payment information and click "Join."

Within minutes they receive a welcome email, thanking them for becoming part of your association and highlighting key pieces of information to make getting involved easy from day one, including online resources, local chapters and an upcoming annual conference with workshops specific to the areas of interest they've shared.

At the same time, your association's events manager is helping the executive team prepare for a meeting with the board. Upon logging in, an intuitive dashboard displays how the team is trending for this year's annual conference alongside a list of members who have not yet registered…including that brand-new member reading your welcome email.

Sound too good to be true? It isn't.

Organizations serve an increasingly diverse populations of members, each with their own expectations, priorities and preferences. Nonprofit professionals are busy, balancing strategic activities alongside the administrative tasks necessary to keep an organization up and running. Maintaining an ongoing, dynamic balance where the details are managed in the context of the big picture across acquisition, engagement and retention efforts presents a formidable challenge. Technology is available to help.

Constituent Management and Engagement: It's More Than an AMS

You may be familiar with an association management system (AMS), which allows you to manage your organization's data within a single platform. **A Constituent Management and Engagement (CME) solution extends beyond the capabilities of an AMS** because it empowers organizations with the data, insights and tools to work smarter and focus their resources on their mission, not their technology.

Robust in their features and functionality, CME solutions build on the traditional features and functions of membership databases and association management systems to support a more diverse, sophisticated set of needs. Some nonprofits – for example, a local arts museum or a public radio station – may leverage membership exclusively to support fundraising, with few needs outside tracking the members' dues, renewal date and some limited communications or events information.

Yet you don't *have* to be a member to visit the museum or listen to the radio station.

By contrast, other associations offer membership as a means to access a specific set of benefits. A trade association might provide critical services to beauty salons, including trade-shows, certification, group insurance rates, discounts on supplies, networking in affinity groups and more. These organizations need an integrated, data-driven solution to manage and maintain constituent relationships, track engagements and transactions and centralize action-oriented data. In addition, the CME platform should provide all stakeholders with access to the latest membership data, enabling staff to have personal and relevant interactions with constituents.

Understanding the Value of CME

As such, a good CME automates and connects both the needs of the organization with the needs of the member. As a tool, it can:

- Facilitate member self-service and administration including joining an organization and keeping key data, like contact information and preferences, updated.
- Make important member information actionable via rich profiles that can be used to automatically create directories, populate sub-groups and identify committees.
- Automate online payments including dues- and non-dues revenue, recurring payments, installment billing, donations and more.
- Support event registration, mapping and scheduling.
- Manage and track digital communications occurring via email, website, social media or online community.
- Monitor the constituent's experience throughout their journey with the organization, tracking their status, any actions required and providing reports to create macro-level visibility into organizational performance.

But, although powerful, a CME remains a tool. While technology can save your organization time and streamline operations, it exists to meet the needs of a nonprofit, its members and mission. Taking the time to understand requirements up front can help ensure you have a full picture before exploring vendors and potential options.

CME Readiness: Establishing Your Needs

Selecting a CME is a significant operational undertaking and represents a major investment of financial and human capital, both upfront and through ongoing maintenance and support expenses.

No project of this scope is completely trouble-free but following a well-thought-out process—from ensuring alignment on your strategy and understanding your existing architecture to documenting requirements and gathering feedback can help avoid unnecessary complications. Here are some steps to help you get started.

1. Understand (and Align on) Your Strategy

Putting the cart before the horse. Running before you can walk. At one point or another, all buyers have been so dazzled by an innovative feature, conversation or industry event they find themselves with a technology in search of a business problem to solve.

Yet as the cornerstone of both your operations and a constituent's experience with your organization, CMEs demand a greater degree of due diligence and pre-planning starting with a thorough, documented CME strategy.

What should that strategy look like? An effective CME strategy prioritizes an organization's resources on technologies to support its vision and organizational objectives. Asking the simple question, "What processes drive our success?" can quickly help identify the tools (technologies) that are needed to support those processes. For example:

- What information do we need to capture about our constituents? What information would we like to be capturing? How will the information be used?
- What transactions fund our organizations? Fundraising? Dues? Event fees? How are they received and managed today?
- How are we engaging with the different types of constituents within our organization? How do we communicate with our members, inspire volunteers and enable collaboration?
- Who is using our membership technology? Is it a few internal staff members with control or do numerous stakeholders each maintain individual responsibility for specific areas? How do members manage their data and activities?

The answers may include essential administrative and operational capabilities, specialty applications important to different areas and functions and/or required integrations between systems. The answers to the questions above will also provide visibility into your needs and define, at a high level, the requirements the new system must meet.

2. Create a Use Case-Driven List of Required Features

Take this opportunity to seek input from internal stakeholders (e.g., membership, marketing, operations), as well as from members, and incorporate their input. Outline the goals and objectives of the CME initiative to help stakeholders identify the business issues that must be addressed. Understand their unique use cases, or a list of actions or event steps typically defining the interactions between a user and a system to achieve a goal. Examples may include:

Membership

- Streamline new member acquisition, with ability to properly follow-up on and convert new members
- Provide greater visibility into constituent needs and trends
- Support complex membership and event types
- Deliver efficiencies to maximize staff time

Marketing

- Manage increasingly personalized communications including the ability to leverage targeted email, member-specific content alerts, event calendars, event management platforms, surveys and more
- Integrate with best-in-class marketing tools without sacrificing data integrity
- Include deep reporting and analytics to help understand what's working…and what's not.

Operations

- Provide ROI and data to support the organization's initiatives and illustrate quick, fast results
- Accommodate custom reporting, data intelligence, workflow-based budgets and clear audit trails are just a few of the great tools used for managing budget and finances.

While the final list of features will vary depending on the unique needs of your organization, your next CME will likely include:

- Constituent database with robust profile information and the capability for self service
- Administration tools to support streamlined access to, and editing of, constituent information including updates to account type
- Automation of key organizational activities including onboarding and renewal
- Global and segmented e-mail and mailing lists
- Multiple user access and administrative accounts
- Online payment and tracking for dues- and non-dues revenue
- Event registration and administration capabilities
- Online access and record-keeping

3. Recognize the Strengths and Weaknesses of the Status Quo

Today's technology landscape is dynamic and evolving at a pace few could have anticipated even a few short years ago. Monolithic solutions that became static after implementation have given way to more flexible options such as:

- A single-source vendor solution with all features within a single package
- An integrated mix of technologies with a CME at its center as a system of record
- A suite of specialized applications

Much of the decision will be guided by your resources and risk tolerance but it's helpful to understand your current environment, when it's worked well and when it's fallen short of expectations. Have you struggled with reliability issues? Does a changing workforce or membership necessitate different accessibility options? What has performance been like?

4. Understand your Budget and Preferred Terms

As with any large software purchase, the cost of a CME depends on multiple factors. There is the cost of the software, which may depend on the modules most important to your organization and/or the number of users requiring access.

Beyond the price of the software are the costs associated with ensuring it works the way you need it to. Understand the scope of your project up front. Are you replacing a highly-customized on-premise solution? Is the CME an upgrade from a homegrown system your organization has pieced together over the years? Accurately scoping, and budgeting for, your implementation is critical for success.

Many organizations also see their CME projects run out of funding during the implementation phase due to the scope of desired customizations. The result? You may move forward with a solution, but not one that ultimately works for the specific needs of your organization – leaving your team unsatisfied and users frustrated. Understand which customizations or special configurations your organization can't live without and aren't represented as out-of-the-box functionality in the solutions under consideration.

Be sure to budget appropriately for implementation and services costs.

In addition to up-front costs, consider the terms of any agreement. Are you prepared to support the project long-term or do you need a more flexible solution with an "out"? Map out the total cost of your system. Does your governing body—the group that approves your annual budget—fully grasp the cost and all of the implications? Understanding and documenting your budget and terms up front will enable your organization heading into the search and give governing bodies the confidence necessary to dedicate budget to the project.

Which CME is right for you?

While an CME can be a wise use of resources, common-sense planning can go a long way toward ensuring the introduction and implementation of your new technology is carried out with a minimum amount of risk and that it achieves the maximum return on investment.

The Request for Proposals

Once you've established your requirements, the next step is to draft a request for proposal (RFP) describing your objectives, specific requirements and vendor questions. A carefully written RFP:

- Establishes a baseline against which you will measure all submitted proposals
- Clearly establishes the project scope for vendors, providing them a frame of reference in which to present how their solution (and features) resolves the most critical use cases for your organization
- Creates transparency around how the bids are to be received and evaluated, and sets the initial framework for the contractual relationship between the association and your selected vendor

A well-drafted RFP should include:

1. DETAILED FUNCTIONAL AND SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

Presenting vague requirements in an RFP creates unnecessary ambiguity in the procurement process and elevates the risk of contract disputes down the road. Clearly drafted requirements in the RFP can go a long way toward minimizing "scope creep," the single greatest cause of failure for any project.

2. STATEMENT OF WORK (SOW)

The SOW clearly defines exactly what the association expects the CME vendor to do. Ensure that the presented SOW addresses the functional and system requirements outlined and accounts for critical project dates, important milestones, deliverables and how other expectations for your vendor, such as project updates, documentation and training.

3. INSTRUCTIONS FOR SUBMITTAL

Straightforward instructions regarding what an interested vendor must do to submit a proposal and what format the proposal should take eliminate last minute phone calls and meetings – saving your organization valuable time! Qualify vendors by requiring information regarding their corporate history, qualifications and resources. Validate the quality of their work by requesting references for projects of similar size and scope.

4. EVALUATION AND SELECTION

Provide vendors with a description of how you will evaluate the proposals with a summary of assessment factors and their relative importance.

Vendor Selection

Your hard work has paid off and now you're presented with multiple options for review. Which will be the best fit for your organization? To create an effective process for selecting your CME vendor, we recommend that you:

- Assemble a cross-departmental team of subject-matter experts to ensure the needs of all departments—not just membership—are met.
- Review each proposal and any proposals that do not meet the requirements outlined in your RFP; for the remaining proposals, evaluate each on its merits by following the evaluation scheme set out in the RFP.
- Consider whether demonstrations or in-person presentations would be helpful in the evaluation process, offering the opportunity to each vendor still under consideration.
- Understand your vendor's long-term plans. In some instances, you may find yourself working with a completely different company than the one you originally contracted with. Make sure you know going in whether your vendor has enough market share to be financially viable for years to come.
- Finally, based on your evaluations of each vendor's technical offering and proposed price, information obtained during due diligence, and any presentations or demonstrations, rank the proposals and then select the one that provides the best value to the association.

Wrapping Up

Not all CME solutions are equal! Understand the needs of all stakeholders in your organizations to get a clear picture of what the new technology will need to do. Identifying the right fit is immeasurably easier (and more effective) if you know in advance exactly what you expect from your CME and which features are most important to your organization.

While implementing a CME may seem daunting, your organization and constituents will benefit from the ever-expanding capabilities of today's newest technology. Enter the process with an open mind and prepare to take your organization to new levels of member engagement.

About Personify

Personify is the market-leading Constituent Management and Engagement (CME) platform that empowers nonprofit organizations to better engage their constituents, maximize revenue and optimize operations. For over 20 years, Personify has served as the technology foundation for organizations of all sizes from the largest associations, charities, YMCAs and JCCs to emerging nonprofits. Nearly 25 percent of the U.S. population interacts with Personify through their involvement in nonprofit organizations. For additional information, visit www.personifycorp.com.

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