

# CREATING DISTINCTIVE VALUE BEYOND MEMBERSHIP:

## THREE LESSONS FROM THE 2017 FSAE FOUNDATION THINK TANK



BY JEFF DE CAGNA FRSA  
FSAE

In a brief article promoting the FSAE Foundation Think Tank published in the July/August 2017 issue of *Source Magazine*, I encouraged readers like you to “close your eyes and try to imagine what’s next for

your association, as well as the field and stakeholders it serves.” Although that may seem like an unusual request to make at the beginning of a magazine article, I’m going to do something similar in this piece.

*Close your eyes and try to imagine you’re a native-born Floridian who is moving back to the state to care for your aging parents after thirty years living and working elsewhere. Or try to imagine you’re a 65-year old man who has been working for the same company for your entire career who now must consider the next phase of your life. Or try to imagine you’re only the second person in your family to graduate college and you’re more interested in serving your local community than making money. Or try to imagine you’re the daughter of a police officer and a teacher who is a political activist and a thriving gig economy worker.*

I challenged this year’s FSAE Foundation Think Tank participants to imagine how they would create value experiments for the benefit of these four personas and I gave them a very important constraint that they had to follow: ***their value creation experiments could not include an offer of membership or assume either explicitly or implicitly that these stakeholders eventually will become members.*** Observing this constraint required our small teams to approach their work in a different way. Here are three key lessons from the Think Tank experience that you can apply to your association’s work:

### 1. BUILD AN EMPATHIC UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR STAKEHOLDERS’ PROBLEMS, NEEDS & OUTCOMES

Each of the personas provided to Think Tank teams was trying to solve a short-term (less than 12 months) **problem**, while working to meet an intermediate-term (24-48 months) **need** and striving to achieve a longer-term (60 months and beyond) **outcome**. For association value creators, **building a deep and empathic understanding of stakeholders’ problems, needs and outcomes (PNOs), and how they connect to each other to create a value pathway, is a critical first step in the value creation process.**

CONTINUED PAGE 26

2017 THINK TANK PARTICIPANTS



**WHAT IS THINK TANK?** The FSAE Foundation hosts a bi-annual Think Tank to contribute to the association management knowledge base. The meeting gathers a small group of association decision makers to contemplate an issue, concern, topic, or idea concerning the operation of associations and/or the association management profession. The group, with the assistance of our informed facilitator, draws conclusions and drafts a report to contribute to the association community.

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**2. DEVELOP SIMPLE AND LOW-COST EXPERIMENTS FOCUSED ON LEARNING**

Association value creators can use their empathic understanding of stakeholder PNOs to **develop simple and low-cost experiments that help them learn more about what’s most important to those they want to serve.** It is important to remember that these experiments are not finished products, programs or initiatives. They should not be that complicated since it is unlikely they will be delivered in their initial form. The purpose of conducting experiments is to learn as much as possible as quickly as possible.

**3. CO-CREATE WITH STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR EXISTING NETWORK RELATIONSHIPS**

Once they launch an initial experiment, association value creators should collaborate more closely with their stakeholders to refine their concepts. This work will benefit from the participation of other contributors who are a part of the primary stakeholders’ existing networks.

Capitalizing on those relationships can help create stronger value concepts, make it easier to connect with hidden assets, such as intellectual capital and financial resources, which can be helpful going forward and open access to new markets.

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“Serious value creators will recognize the future for what it is: a huge opportunity to think differently, to nurture a strong reputation as a genuine innovator and, most importantly, to make an enduring impact on the lives of the stakeholders they serve.”

In the closing paragraph of my summer article, I wrote, “serious value creators...will recognize the future for what it is: a huge opportunity to think differently, to nurture a strong reputation as a genuine innovator and, most importantly, to make an enduring impact on the lives of the stakeholders they serve.” During the 2017 FSAE Foundation Think Tank, it was my great pleasure to work with a group of talented association professionals who took this message to heart, worked to expand their zones of comfort to embrace a different approach to value creation and demonstrated great imagination in thinking about how to create distinctive value beyond membership. ◆

# HOW WILL YOU INNOVATE FOR YOUR 2021 STAKEHOLDERS? FSAE FOUNDATION THINK TANK, PART II



BY JEFF DE CAGNA

If your association is going to innovate for (and with) its 2021 stakeholders, it needs to bring considerable empathy to understanding who they are as people - outside of their careers. During the 2017 FSAE Foundation Think Tank, participants were challenged to consider how a fictional association could create distinctive value for these four 2021 stakeholder personas, beyond membership in the organization.

*The full persona profiles are available from FSAE.*

**Marina Hernandez** was born in Miami, the youngest child in a large Cuban American family. Marina's parents came to the United States after Castro took power. Rina grew up in Florida, attended college in Michigan, business school in Massachusetts and settled in Northern California.

In 2021, more than thirty years after she moved away for school, Rina is again living in Florida. Her parents can no longer live on their own and have joined Marina and her husband, Steven Lawrence, their three children and two dogs near Orlando.

Marina is happy to be back in Florida yet anxious about the future. Staring her 50th birthday in the face, she needs to answer a new set of complicated questions.

**John Alberts (JA)** spent 40 years working for the same Tampa company and now he's looking ahead to the next phase of his life. It won't be the life John imagined, but he's confident it can be a good one.

John started out in a relatively junior position at his company in 1981. He considered changing jobs on a couple of occasions over the years, including one serious job search in the early 90s, but decided to stay where he was. Not

long after this flirtation, JA was promoted, which was a source of pride for a man who grew up in rural Florida, served his country but never attended college.

In 2011, Eileen, JA's wife of 25 years passed away. Eileen became sick without any warning and her death hit him very hard, and altered the dreams they had for their retirement years. Now, JA is

wondering whether he will ever retire.

In May 2021, **Nelson Calderon** graduated at the top of his class from Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. Nelson is an only child, and only the second member of his extended family to graduate college.

Born in Pensacola in 1997, Nelson moved to Broward County in early 2002. After the 9/11 attacks, the entire Calderon

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## 2021 STAKEHOLDERS CONTINUED

from Page 16

JEFF DE CAGNA

family in Florida decided to gather in one part of the state so all ten young cousins would be close. Nelson's parents felt strongly that this nurturing environment was important for Nelson since he has no siblings.

Following two years of community service work around South Florida, Nelson entered FAU in 2017. He graduated summa cum laude this spring with a B.A. in social work and a minor in digital marketing. Now he wants to build stronger local communities using social and mobile technology tools.

**Shaniqua Rogers-Jackson** grew up in a middle-class family in Jacksonville. Her father is a retired police officer and her mother still teaches at the same elementary school Shaniqua attended as a little girl. Shaniqua and her two siblings all continued their education after high school at the local community college.

In early 2012, Shaniqua connected with Maya Jackson on SheMeetsHer.com and, by the end of the year, they were living together. They got married in 2015. Inspired by Maya's activism, Shaniqua got involved in the LGBTQ movement and, with her father's support, in Black Lives Matter as well.

Shaniqua is a person of considerable talent. Her virtual assistant gig is her primary job, but she spends far more time working on other ventures, including web design, mobile app coding and driving for Lyft. She is learning about artificial intelligence applications and thinks that could be her next big side hustle.

**As you reflect on these brief personas, please consider the following questions and discuss them with others in your association:**

**How many of your association's current stakeholders do you know this well?**

**What value would you offer to these stakeholders if you knew they didn't want a membership?**

**How would you and your association collaborate with these stakeholders on innovation? ♦**

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# WHY ASSOCIATIONS NEED TO THINK & ACT BEYOND MEMBERSHIP

## FSAE FOUNDATION THINK TANK, PART III



BY JEFF DE CAGNA

If you have read my two previous reports of the 2017 FSAE Foundation Think Tank in *Source*, you may be asking yourself a fundamental question:

### ***Why does my association need to think and act beyond membership?***

After all, membership is something with which associations have had considerable success with over many decades. The membership focus may not be working quite as well today as it did 15 or 20 years ago, but we can just keep on tweaking it until we get it to work better. Why do we need to make a complete mindset shift? This is not an unreasonable line of thinking and it deserves a thoughtful response, which I have tried to provide below.

#### **MEMBERSHIP IS AN ORTHODOX BELIEF**

Orthodox beliefs are the deep-seated assumptions we make about how the world works, and membership is arguably the association management field's most sacrosanct orthodoxy. Boards, staff and voluntary contributors typically view membership as central to organizational identity, i.e., it is not something **we do**, but an essential element of **who we are**. This mindset has led associations to build membership-centric business models and prioritize the membership implications of just about every organizational decision over

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other important considerations. Unfortunately, one of the most detrimental aspects of orthodox beliefs is how they can deeply influence decision-makers, in mostly invisible ways, to focus their attention on the past instead of the future.

#### **MEMBERSHIP IS MORE BENEFICIAL TO ASSOCIATIONS THAN STAKEHOLDERS**

When associations add members, they derive an immediate benefit in the form of improved membership and revenue numbers, as well as more potential buyers for other offerings. When stakeholders join the association, however, their benefits don't necessarily have the same kind of rapid impact on the unique problems, needs and outcomes they are working to address. Moreover, the specific forms of membership value offered by associations frequently do not connect on either a substantive basis or in terms of their literal availability with what matters most at any given moment to the stakeholders being served.

CONTINUED PAGE 33

### MEMBERSHIP IS NO LONGER THE ONLY OPTION

Today's stakeholders have abundant access to the full range of value they seek from a wide variety of formal and informal providers, and most of that value can be conveniently delivered in digital form to smartphone, tablets or wearable devices. Stakeholders who are not fully satisfied with these preset options can easily access the raw materials they need to create value on their own or in collaboration with others. For the most part, stakeholder access to value in any form does not require the same kind of traditional membership relationship that associations have offered for decades.

To put it in the simplest possible terms, **associations must think and act beyond membership because the world in which their current and future stakeholders live demands it.** It is important to remember that adopting a different mindset and acting on that basis does not imply the "death of membership" as some have suggested. Instead of being alarmed by the need to rethink their orthodox commitment to membership, association decision-makers should view it as an enormously powerful opportunity to innovate by imagining distinctive ways to expand the surface area of attraction with their organizations and nurturing different kinds of stakeholder relationships, including updated forms of membership for those who want that specific type of connection. ♦

The collection of the 2017 Think Tank articles are available to download at [www.fsae.org/think-tank](http://www.fsae.org/think-tank)

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