



# Is It Time For You To Go International?

*There are many simple ways to add a global dimension to your organization. And the rewards can be immense.*

BY BONNIE KOENIG

**H**ave you ever felt that your organization could benefit from a more global perspective? Perhaps you'd like to exchange experiences with colleagues from other countries. Or maybe you'd like to attract some overseas participants to your annual meeting—or even hold your meeting overseas. Or you may just want to explore a more global focus for your programs. Where do you begin? Here are suggestions to help you move your organization into today's global environment.

## WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO ACCOMPLISH?

First, clarify your options. You don't need to plunge right in and form a full-scale international program. There are many other ways to add an international dimension to your organization. From simple to complex, here are a few of a spectrum of possibilities:


1. **Exchange information** with colleagues in other countries. This option is helpful if you want to increase your organization's knowledge base. It's also useful for keeping up to date on technology in your field. This increase in information, in addition to helping your organization, may also be a member benefit, helping members in their professional careers.
2. **Invite colleagues** in other countries to attend your organization's conference or seminar. If you believe you have expertise worth sharing, if your

work has brought you in contact with the work of colleagues in other countries, or if you'd like to expand or add a "new twist" to your organization's conference, this may be an option to consider. You can target potential attendees in different ways—through professional networks, personal contacts, sister organizations in other countries, and so on. (Be aware that if your meeting does attract attendees from other countries, you'll need to do some extra planning to be sure your overseas guests have a positive experience.)

3. **Develop a joint project** with a sister organization. If you're interested in holding a seminar or meeting in another country, a local partner can help insure its success. Or you may know an organization in another country with which you want to share information and a joint seminar would be the best way to do so. Other joint projects might include developing a professional exchange program or exchanging publications.
4. **Affiliate with a sister organization** in another country. This option is worth considering if you feel there may be benefits to a sustained relationship with a sister organization in another country for joint meetings, cooperative publication exchanges, joint lobbying on international issues of concern to your organization, and so on.
5. **If you're a membership organization**, offer overseas membership.

This is one of the most difficult stages of an international program. While your international activity may lead you in this direction, you would be well advised to think through the implications. Overseas members will need "servicing" just as local members do, but their needs will most likely be different. You may quickly lose your overseas members if you don't put some effort into understanding their expectations.

6. **Hire an international staff member**, or create an international department. This obviously takes additional resources to accomplish. But if you know you're ready to add a sustained international component, dedicating the resources to see that it happens may provide the best chance of success.
7. **Integrate a commitment** to global perspectives into your organization's goals. This stage can be the most difficult to reach, but in the long run it may be the most effective. Hiring a staff member or creating a department may appear to be a more significant commitment, but if "international" is just tacked on as an unrelated program, its life may be short and ineffective. You may find it more productive to integrate a global perspective into your daily operations. Begin by assessing your existing resources. For instance, do you have board or staff members who have traveled or



lived overseas or have international connections? Tap these resources to build global thinking into your plans.

## WHERE TO BEGIN?

- 1. Choose geographic locations strategically.** Don't connect with a country simply because someone in your organization has a tie to it. Instead, set criteria at the very start of your globalization process. Then search out regions that match your goals. Do some preliminary research before settling on specific countries. There are many good sources of information, including:
  - colleagues who travel in other countries
  - foreign embassies (in Washington, D.C.) and consulates located throughout the country
  - the Internet, where many foreign governments have home pages with valuable introductory information.
  - international association directories and Web sites (see box in the upper right).
- 2. Intensify your research.** Once you've decided on a region, find out as much as possible about it. With so much information available in today's technology age, international partners have higher expectations that you know about their country, culture, and concerns.
- 3. Choose potential partners.** Ask yourself not only what these overseas partners can offer you but what you can offer them. If you see opportunities for joint benefit, there is a good chance that the collaboration will work.
- 4. Make your initial connection** with a potential partner. If possible, make it a contact between two people who know each other. Ask your board, staff, and other stakeholders if they belong to international societies or have attended international conferences. If so, they may be able to make the first contact.
- 5. Remember that first impressions** are important. Many countries are more formal than America. It's best, therefore, to make your contacts for-

## SAMPLE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION DIRECTORIES AND WEBSITES

Action without Borders  
<http://www.idealists.org>

Union of International Associations  
Encyclopedia of International Associations or  
<http://www.uia.org>

European Foundation Centre Profiles  
(can be found through the U.S. Foundation Center  
at <http://www.fdncenter.org>) or  
directly at <http://www.poptel.org.UK/aries/efc>

mally. It's always easy to become less formal, but it's hard to reverse a negative impression if you start too informally.

## HOW TO INCREASE THE CHANCE OF SUCCESS?

- 1. Set specific, tangible goals.** You won't know if you're successful if you don't know what you're trying to accomplish. Conversely, pointing to targets effectively met will help persuade skeptical board members and justify additional resources if needed.
- 2. Don't try to do too much at once.** Starting slowly will let you show achievements along the way. It will also lessen setbacks which may sour the organization on continued international activity.
- 3. Build in successes.** Set some "easy" targets along with tougher ones. Success with the easy ones will build morale and help you achieve the greater challenges. For example, if your goal is to hold your annual meeting overseas, start with a board or committee meeting to test your "systems" for organizing such an event.
- 4. Assess your organization's strong and weak points.** Then choose goals to match your strengths. If you're struggling for members in the U.S., think twice about expanding membership overseas. However, if you have successful conferences and strong programs, a joint conference may be a good option for you.
- 5. Set a budget.** It needn't be large (there are ways to economize, even when dealing with global expenses) but it does need to be realistic. Itemize all costs. International activity is an area ripe for charges of "boondoggles" and "waste of money" from critics, so you want to be meticulous.
- 6. Identify "champions" and skeptics.** Who supports the move to internationalism, and who is skeptical? As in initiating any new program, you'll need your allies to help persuade the skeptics.
- 7. Keep key players vested.** Since internationalism can seem to some an "exotic exercise" or waste of money, it's vital that your leaders, members, and staff feel they have a stake in the idea of going global.
- 8. Orient your staff and members** to an international environment. You can do so in many simple ways:
  - Include "U.S.A." as part of your address on all outgoing correspondence.
  - Publish internationally-oriented articles in your organization's newsletters or other forms of communication.
  - Identify foreign-language speakers on your staff who can be utilized as the need arises.



**9. Develop a strategic plan** before going international. Ask yourself: What resources can the organization allocate to an international program? Can current staff be reassigned or is new staff needed? How can we best achieve our global goals?

**10. Periodically assess and reevaluate your goals.** Is this still the direction the organization wants to go? Have you learned lessons that should be applied to the process or your goals? Surveys are a good tool to keep in touch with members or partners. Don't be complacent!

**11. Understand the difference between multiculturalism and multinationalism.** Multiculturalism exists within one country. Although people have different cultural perspectives, these views are modified by receiving the same political messages, reading the same newspapers, and watching the same television programs. The context in which decisions are made thus has similarities. In multinationalism, this common context does not exist. Hence, cultural differences are more pronounced.

**12. Anticipate the consequences of meeting your goals.** For example, overseas attendees at your meetings will call for a different type of meeting planning. Overseas members may look for different membership benefits than your domestic members. To keep the benefits you gain from reaching your international goals, you must adapt to new expectations.

**13. Recognize when *not* to go international.** Not all organizations will benefit from starting an international program. Or the timing may not be right. If an international orientation doesn't flow logically from your organization's mission statement or strategic plan, it may be a mistake to force it. Part of your initial analysis should include the option of *not* developing an international program.

But by all means, do give your organization's place in the changing world some consideration. There are many potential benefits to broadening your international perspectives. If you do your homework in advance, your efforts will have a good chance for success. ■

**Selected References**

Lauer, Larry, "Nonprofits Going Global: Opportunities and Problems from a Communicator's Perspective" *Nonprofit World*, November-December 1995.

Levchenko, Yelena, "Journey into a New Nonprofit Sector: Notes from Belarus," *Nonprofit World*, January-February 1997.

"Three Ways to Strengthen Nonprofits: Lessons from Abroad," *Nonprofit World*, January-February 1998.

Wilder Foundation, *Collaboration: What Makes It Work*.

These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. To order, see the Society's *Resource Center*

*Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (608-274-9777).

*Bonnie Koenig is president of the consulting practice Going International (11344 S. Lothair Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60643), which works with nonprofit organizations in developing or expanding their international programs. Before starting her consulting practice, she was the executive director of two nonprofit organizations, including one which has members in 65 countries. Ms. Koenig can be reached by phone at 773-233-5755 or by e-mail at <gointl@jumo.com>.*