

CASE STUDY:

PREMIUM CIGAR ASSOCIATION

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE PREMIUM CIGAR ASSOCIATION

Thanks to MemberSuite's configurability, the Premium Cigar Association launched a new revenue-generating program during the pandemic. Their new e-store allows associate members (exhibitors) to sell exclusive member-only products and helps PCA generate royalty revenue and goodwill.

"We have to keep adapting and trying new things, and now we have technology that can shift with us. MemberSuite is very malleable... it opens up revenue-building possibilities for the future."



Greg Vickers, Retail Membership Director
Premium Cigar Association

ABOUT THE PREMIUM CIGAR ASSOCIATION



The Premium Cigar Association is the largest, most active, and longest-running trade association representing and assisting premium tobacco retailers, manufacturers, and industry partners. They strive to protect their members' businesses from unfair regulations while providing education and business development resources to help them grow and succeed.

FREE TO JETTISON A LIMITING AND FRUSTRATING AMS, PCA IMPLEMENTS MEMBERSUITE IN ITS PLACE

With a staff of seven, the Premium Cigar Association (PCA) must constantly find ways to efficiently manage their limited resources. For several years, they used association management software (AMS) that hosted their website as well.

When PCA activated its old AMS several years ago, they needed a database that would serve as the administrative backend of their website. Greg Vickers, PCA's retail membership director, said, *"The old AMS filled that need but had many inherent limitations and frustration points. When we decided to replace our old website with a WordPress-based one, that freed us up to jettison the old AMS."*

They vetted around five AMS companies and selected MemberSuite. PCA's executive director liked MemberSuite's reporting and financial functions. *"They were better than anything we could do with the old AMS,"* said Greg.

PCA outsources its accounting but, with MemberSuite in place, they plan to bring accounting back in-house in the near future.

Greg also liked the configuration options provided by MemberSuite. *"You can make the screens show what you want them to show. With our old AMS, we were limited to one standard view for everyone."*

NO PRESSURE: JUST 2 WEEKS FROM MEMBERSUITE LAUNCH TO PCA'S ANNUAL DUES RENEWAL

On November 18, PCA turned on MemberSuite—just in time for members to start renewing on December 1. PCA has a calendar-year dues cycle so all memberships expire on December 31.

"We don't have an IT person on staff, so it was great to work with our MemberSuite implementation consultant," said Greg. The MemberSuite implementation team suggested collecting member feedback during implementation. *"We got feedback from board members we used to guinea pig the system."*

Some of their suggestions were implemented before we went live."

The MemberSuite implementation consultant also helped Greg develop an instruction sheet to walk members through the dues payment process. Logging into a member portal and paying dues by credit card is a new concept for many PCA members, a lot of whom Greg described as *"not the most digitally savvy group."* The first day MemberSuite was live, Greg coached a member on the phone through the process to see how it worked in real life—and it was a success!

SAVING TIME WITH MEMBERSUITE

Since they've only been on MemberSuite for seven months, Greg is still cleaning up the membership roster from the days of their old AMS. But he pointed out several ways that MemberSuite saves him time.

- Members don't forget their username because it's their email address, but if they forget their password, they just have to click "forgot password" and fix it themselves. *"They don't have to call me,"* he said. *"Otherwise 75% of the members would be calling."*
- Drop boxes self-populate when you start typing.
- Mailing addresses self-validate. You don't have to enter the full address. Just type in the street address and zip code, and the rest is filled in.
- Their old AMS captured phone numbers as the member typed them, so PCA ended up with all kinds of formats in that field.

Other fields caused problems in the old AMS too. *"We ask, 'How many stores do you own?' Members typed in 'one' instead of '1.' Guess what? You just messed up my reports."* MemberSuite enforces standards, so there's only one way to enter a phone number and other data.

"I can't tell you how much time MemberSuite has saved me because these fields self-populate or are standardized," said Greg. *"This process was antiquated in our old AMS and they were never going to fix it."*

What Greg wants to fix next is PCA's membership and registration structures.

"What we're trying to do with our registration is way more complex than it has any right to be." Although he appreciates MemberSuite's ability to handle complex membership structures, he wants to take advantage of the software's flexibility and simplify these processes—as soon as the PCA board approves it.

WHEN THE PANDEMIC CANCELED THEIR TRADE SHOW, PCA LAUNCHED AN ONLINE STORE FOR EXHIBITORS

PCA had to cancel their trade show because of the pandemic, but despite having used MemberSuite for only a few months, they leveraged it to take on an unanticipated project. With the help of their MemberSuite Customer Success Manager (CSM), the PCA team found a way to help exhibitors recoup some of the brand awareness and leads they would have lost due to the canceled show—and to help PCA earn some revenue.

Roughly 2,000 member cigar store owners and managers come to PCA's trade show to figure out how they're going to stock their shelves for the coming year. More than 200 PCA associate members exhibit at the show, where they take orders for show specials, for example, a special deal on boxes of cigars, cutters, and/or lighters that members can only get at the show.

The exhibitors already had these goods and promo materials ready to go when the show was canceled. A few of them approached PCA's executive director to ask if there was some way to get the word out about these show specials so they wouldn't take a loss on them.

Greg got his MemberSuite CSM on the phone and described what they wanted to do. The CSM explained how to set up a members-only PCA Exclusives e-store where exhibitors can sell their show specials right from the member portal.

In the PCA Exclusives e-store, exhibitors advertise their show specials. Members log into the member portal, go to the e-store, and make commitments to purchase. Since PCA is not a licensed tobacco distributor, it can't handle transactions. Instead, they compile and send order information to the exhibitors. The exhibitors then reach out to members and close the sales. Everyone wins.

- Member buyers get significant member discounts on show specials.
- Exhibitors get sales, leads, and brand awareness.
- PCA gets royalty payments and goodwill from exhibitors.

Greg said, *"We have to keep adapting and trying new things, and now we have technology that can shift with us. MemberSuite is very malleable. It gives you the capability of rethinking what you've normally done."*

POTENTIAL REVENUE OPPORTUNITIES FOR AMS-POWERED E-COMMERCE

Associations have traditionally used their MemberSuite e-commerce solution to sell association branded merchandise, online learning programs, recordings, books, publications, and benchmark reports. But you can also use an online store to track inventory for other association promotions. Instead of just giving something away, track its “sale” as if a price were attached.

For example, you could track samples of resources or publications given away during marketing campaigns, or products sent to contest winners, award winners, scholarship recipients (such as textbooks), and conference attendees (such as a keynote speaker’s book).

Provide a personalized onboarding experience by introducing new members to your online store and letting them pick the orientation resources they want, instead of sending them irrelevant information.

Greg created PCA Exclusives as a warehouse since it doesn’t involve any cash transactions. He said it’s a small program now but *“it opens up revenue-building possibilities for the future.”*

“If members and associate members like this idea, we can do it anytime, irrespective of when the trade show is scheduled,” said Greg. He imagines selling PCA merchandise like cigar cutters, lighters, and pipe cleaners—or shirts, hats, umbrellas, and thermoses. He also foresees using an online store to sell trade show passes, certification testing, and e-learning programs.

“We’re going to have to rethink our revenue streams in the coming years so making the e-store work is a big part of that,” said Greg.

CONCLUSION

It only took two weeks to go from the MemberSuite go-live date to the start of PCA's annual dues renewal cycle. MemberSuite's implementation team helped PCA prepare its members for the new dues payment process.

PCA staff saves time with MemberSuite workflows since fields are auto-populated, addresses are validated, and standard formatting is enforced.

Because of MemberSuite's configurability, PCA launched a new goodwill- and revenue-generating e-store to help exhibitors sell exclusive products to members, and help PCA earn royalty revenue.



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your staff and engage your constituents?

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