Strengthening Minnesota's High-Tech Identity

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Introduction

Our team volunteered to undertake the small group project titled 'Expand the MHTA's Reach into Greater Minnesota'. We approached the project with a great deal of enthusiasm, the assumption that it would be easy to achieve with the right technology and an appreciation of the project's importance.

We quickly encountered an obstacle that took us a long time to understand and overcome. Specifically: if it were as easy and straight forward as we initially assumed, why had it not been done? We started to ask ourselves some basic questions about the MHTA:

1. What is it?
2. Whom does it serve? Who are its members?
3. How does it serve its membership? Are its services of value?
4. What is the value of the MHTA to its membership?

Essentially, we were asking ourselves questions that directly speak to the MHTA's value proposition. These were questions needing answers. Our thought was that if we cannot answer these questions for members and potential members in the Twin Cities area, it would make no sense to expend resources into the rest of the state until we had a good understanding of what would attract new members in more remote areas of the state.

Approach

During the session when the small projects were assigned, we were given to understand that expansion into greater Minnesota was an effort that had been previously attempted in other forms. We discovered that the 2018 MHTA Ace Leadership Program class had what we perceived to be a tangential small group project to establish an Ambassador Program in Minnesota. We, therefore, started to gather information about the Ambassador Program, Expanding Broadband into Rural Minnesota and other previous efforts that were directed towards the same purpose, even if not expressly identified as such. Our research efforts included:

- Interviews with MHTA Staff
- Becoming familiar with the Ambassador Program and Broadband project
- Understanding the nature of associations
- Conducting a targeted survey of our class

Our project began to shift focus from expanding into Greater Minnesota to defining the MHTA's value proposition. Our efforts along those lines quickly lead us to the eventual conclusion that the words 'high-tech' did not have a clear meaning, and that determining a value proposition became a secondary requirement; we determine the primary focus to be about identity. What does 'high-tech' mean?

Findings

As we started to understand our findings, we realized that the MHTA's organizational identity is amorphous, resulting in a lack of an appreciable value proposition. If one were to ask what does the MHTA do/stand for, one can count on a lack of consistent response. Contrast that with asking the same question about the Minnesota Bankers' Association or the Minnesota Barr Associations for example, and one can quickly see the problem. The MHTA must ensure that its brand and name recognition match its mission and advocacy programs through what it does, what it says, what it does and whom it represents.

One of the main discussion points among the project team had to do with the way the MHTA defines the word 'technology' and the way it is perceived by the MHTA's members. Through the ACE Leadership Program meetings, interviews with MHTA staff and discussions with our employers, the MHTA, at present, clearly defines technology as I.T. We wanted to understand if this narrow definition of the word might be contributing to the problem. We decided to conduct a survey of our MHTA Ace Leadership Program Class to help us understand this a bit better and received the following results to the question: *Since the MHTA focuses so heavily on IT, please rank the other following technology areas based on importance for the state*. The top three responses are as follows:

1. MedTech was the first choice for 57.1% of respondents, and the second choice for 28.6%
2. AgTech was the second most popular response representing 35.7% of the class.
3. FinTech came in third place at 21.4%

14.3% responded that nothing should be changed and that the technology focus is good as it stands now. Admittedly, our sample group was very small, and may even be too small to use the results to determine directional tendencies. However, repeating a similar and more scientifically crafted survey to the entire MHTA membership would be beneficial. Associations exist for purpose of representing and advocating for their members. Creating a strong sense of community among existing and potential members by involving them in the rebase-lining efforts and exploring a method to establish and maintain a continual feedback loop, would in our opinion, not only be a good way to ascertain the correct technology focus, but also demonstrate the how the MHTA wishes to move forward.
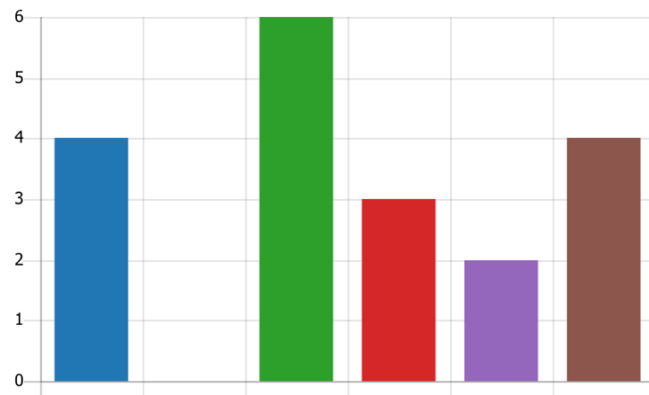
Survey Results

1. Did you know about the MHTA before you started The ACE Leadership Program?

   More Details

🔵	Yes	10
🟠	No	4
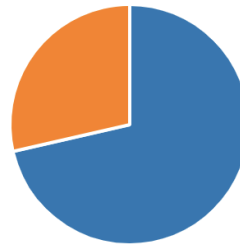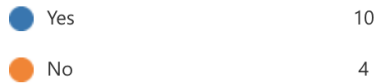
2. If you answered yes above, from what source?

   More Details

🔵	Previous participant	4
🟠	Website	0
🟢	A Co-worker	6
🔴	WLiT	3
🟣	TekNe	2
🟤	Other	4
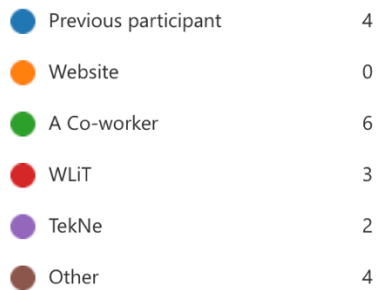
3. How relevant will the MHTA be to you after you finish the ACE Leadership program? (1 being not relevant at all and 10 being extremely relevant)
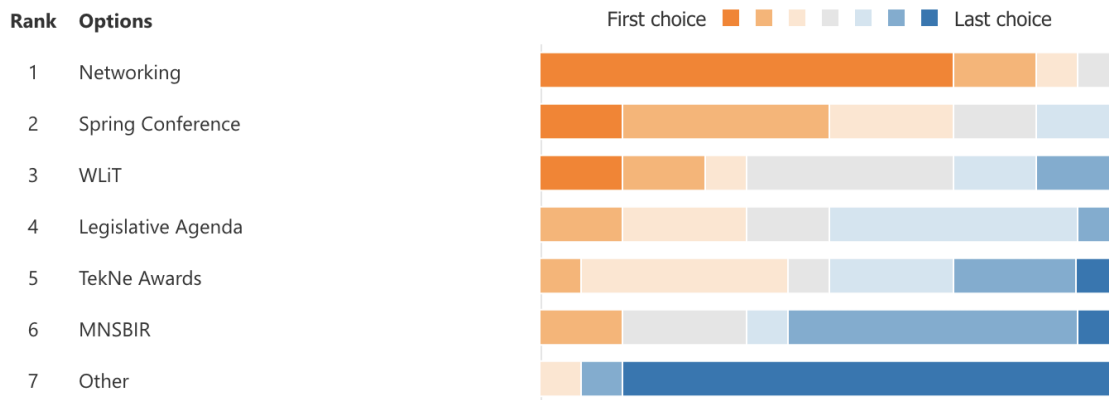
More Details

14	5.79
Responses	Average Number

4. Please rank the following based on what you find most valuable about the MHTA

More Details

First choice ▮ ▮ ▮ ▮ ▮ ▮ ▮ Last choice

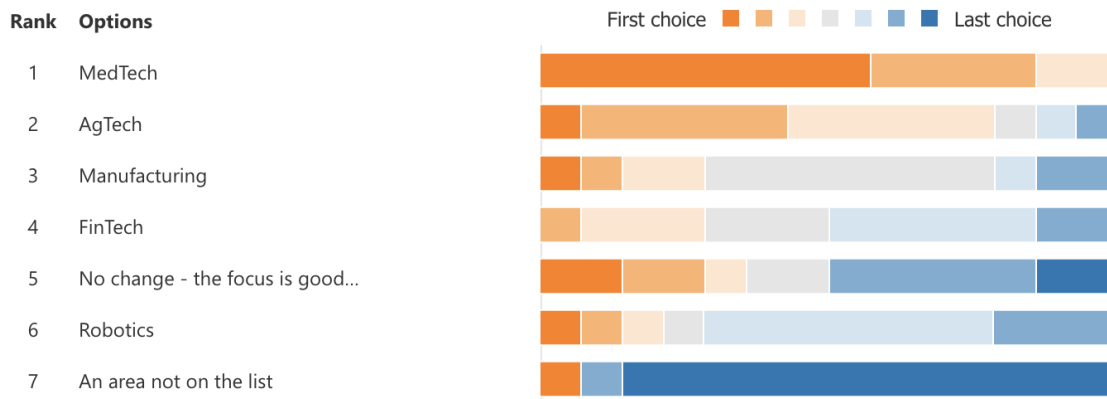| Rank	Options
1	Networking
2	Spring Conference
3	WLiT
4	Legislative Agenda
5	TekNe Awards
6	MNSBIR
7	Other

5. If you answered other above, please provide a brief description about what you find most valuable about the MHTA.

3 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	ACE training Agenda: Negotiations, Insights Workshop
2	anonymous	Networking, the news and information exchange via their communications, outreach about member opportunities, visibility opportunities, promoting a healthy tech environment in Twin Cities
3	anonymous	Networking with other IT professionals in Twin cities area and understanding issues that leaders face in their respective jobs.

6. Since the MHTA focuses so heavily on IT, please rank the other following technology areas based on importance for the state.

More Details

Rank	Options	First choice ▮ ▮ ▯ ▯ ▯ ▮ ▮ Last choice
1	MedTech	
2	AgTech	
3	Manufacturing	
4	FinTech	
5	No change - the focus is good...	
6	Robotics	
7	An area not on the list	

7. In a few words, please describe the value that the MHTA provides to you.

11 Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	A great chance to network and learn from others. Great exposure to new ideas.
2	anonymous	Networking within the industry
3	anonymous	Networking,
4	anonymous	Outside of the networking MHTA has not brought value to me personally. I also do not think that it has brought much value to my company. Since our focus does not really align with the MHTA focus.
5	anonymous	MHTA sits at the intersection of government, higher education (STEM) and entrepreneurship in MN and I feel like I get valuable information in all 3 areas when I attend MHTA events.
6	anonymous	Networking, the news and information exchange via their communications, outreach about member opportunities
7	anonymous	Networking and exploring potential career opportunities.
8	anonymous	Exposure to other organizations within my field, understanding of the legal changes affecting small business and IT in the state.

8. Please provide any additional comments

5   Responses

ID ↑	Name	Responses
1	anonymous	Focus more on Leadership
2	anonymous	I was hoping the leadership course was more focused on leadership aspects.
3	anonymous	I would like to see more focus on the innovation/entrepreneurship side of the equation going forward. MHTA has a lot of members with great ideas but those people don't necessarily know how to promote themselves or consider themselves innovators/startups, etc. MHTA has a great opportunity to provide services and/or links to other people/resources who can help.
4	anonymous	Hard to get in involved at an individual level- to work on initiatives, pilots, etc. This would be of interest. More volunteer projects that make an impact and connect you to other tech leaders.
5	anonymous	MHTA could provide help for local startups to help find their way navigating legislation, funding and other resources that they need.

Additionally, we researched the MHTA's membership renewal trends. Our research showed that 21 multi-year corporate members declined to renew their memberships, of which six had been members for nine years.

Moving Forward

1. Our team feels strongly that the first step before the Minnesota High-Tech Association is to define the term 'high-tech'. We strongly recommend conducting a more encompassing survey to better understand how the MHTA's members define this important term.
2. The MHTA has as a significant membership base that spans the governmental branch and fortune 500 companies.   It should leverage this vast base of talent to spread the word of what the MHTA does and what its value is. There is no reason why every single person in the IT departments of MHTA member organizations shouldn't know what the MHTA is and what their value is.
3. Partner with other associations where practical and lead where necessary. There are a number of existing, well organized and supported associations in Minnesota with whom the MHTA can partner such as Medical Alley and Minne Analytics for example. However, other areas such as AgTech and FinTech seem under-represented. This is an immediate opportunity for the MHTA to complete the picture of being a full-spectrum high-tech association.
4. Build an online community and platform that serves all divisions of the MHTA using tools such as 'Workplace by Facebook' or 'Mobilize'

5. Reinvigorate the Ambassador Program starting in the following geographies with a university presence:
   o Duluth
   o Rochester
   o St. Cloud
   o Mankato

The MHTA needs to commit and make a bold investment now. "No money, no mission." should be a motto for the staff to live by. Money comes in the form of members. Members need to see value in what they're paying for. It really is that simple. Given the declining trend in membership renewals, this is the time to start to focus on reversing it.

Summary

The journey our small project team took to accomplish our original assignment to provide a path for the MHTA to extend its presence into the larger Minnesota area and live up to its name the ***Minnesota High-Tech*** *Association* uncovered some foundational elements that are not in full alignment with the organization's stated and perceived objectives. Specifically:

1. The Minnesota High Tech Association behaves as it were the Twin Cities I.T. Association. Its focus, messaging and activities are very centralized on the Minneapolis and St. Paul areas and its focus seems to be on Information Technology, not on what one would consider to be 'high-tech'.
2. The scope of what is considered to be 'high-tech' should be expanded to include already established technology realms such as MedTech, AgTech, FinTech to name a few. An additional focus such on emerging technologies such as AI and 3D printing would also help the MHTA live up to its name.
3. The need to build a sense of community through the use of off software services such as Workplace by Facebook, Mobilize or a similar solution is critical to help build and maintain interest and provide value to the MHTA's members. An important success criterium is for it to be regularly moderated by an MHTA staff member or members as well as curating the content with relevant input that speaks to a wide range of technologies.
4. Finally, the MHTA must sustain this effort with proper staffing and funding.