

HOW TO CHOOSE ASSOCIATION SOFTWARE

A guide to help you select the best member management software for your organization

CONTENTS

A New Process for a New Solution	1
A History of Traditional Association Software	2
Types of Association Software	3
On-Premise	4
Hosted	4
Software as a Service (SaaS)	5
True Cloud (Multi-Tenant)	5
Tools for Gathering Requirements	6
Consultants	7
Gather Requirements	8
Request for Proposals (RFP)	9
Selection Criteria	10
1) Scalability and Platform	10
2) Company and Product Viability	10
3) Support and Training	10
4) Features and Functionality	11
5) Total Cost Of Ownership (TCO)	11
Final Vendor Selection Checklist	11
Meet the Vendors	13
Schedule a Demonstration	13



A NEW PROCESS FOR A NEW SOLUTION

Form a committee, gather lists of requirements, draft a request for proposal that highlights mandatory features, schedule demos, then select a vendor. The method seems tried and true. In fact, a quick Google search will guide you through the steps, and after exhausting your staff and your budget, you'll likely wind up with the same broken, traditional Association Management Software (AMS) you started with, perhaps with a different name.

The problem with using the tried and true method, is that it doesn't allow for innovation. It prescribes a solution, based on an organization's current method for resolving problems.

This guide is designed to break that status quo – to provide a method for selecting new software that will allow you to overcome the confines of outdated processes, grow with technological advances, and allow your organization to be innovative rather than reactive.

THIS GUIDE WILL HELP YOU FIND ASSOCIATION SOFTWARE THAT ALLOWS YOU TO ENGAGE AND SERVE YOUR MEMBERS IN THE WAY THEY NEED, NOW AND IN THE FUTURE.



A HISTORY OF TRADITIONAL ASSOCIATION SOFTWARE

According to the [2015 Association Data Management Benchmarking Survey](#), 37% of all associations surveyed have had their current association software system for more than seven years.

More than one-third of associations have an outdated software.

The lesson here is to select software that you will be happy with in seven or more years. However, the pace at which technology changes requires that software constantly updates to remain relevant. And this pace only continues to accelerate.



Progression of technology from the 1980's to today

Traditional association software was developed in the early 1980's, when computers were used to collect data with nothing but a blinking cursor and a green screen. But Microsoft revolutionized computing when they announced the release of Interface Manager or "Windows." Rather than memorizing commands to perform actions, users could use a mouse to point and click through screens, making programs easier to learn and use, and bringing computers into every-day life.



Only a few years later, the World Wide Web was released to the general public, turning technology on its head once again. The internet connected personal computers and allowed people to communicate with each other and organizations in a completely different way. When Apple released the first iPhone in 2007, people were able to bring the internet on the road — browsing , communicating , and making purchases wherever they went.

Today, nearly all of our devices have the ability to connect to the internet and collect massive amounts of information about our every move. In a short 30 years, the way we look at technology has changed multiple times, changing the way consumers behave and interact with one another, and causing technology creators to have to adapt, innovate, and change.

Unfortunately, change does not come easily. Traditional membership software can take years to code and develop, then test and install. In that time, technology has changed lanes, members have different expectations, and you are left with association software that only meets yesterday's needs

With this in mind, it is important to search for a system that is scalable, easy to upgrade, and cost effective.

TYPES OF ASSOCIATION SOFTWARE

There are many companies creating software meant to run business operations for associations, each with varying features. But for the purpose of your selection there are two main differentiators – single-tenant and multi-tenant. Association software vendors often misuse the term “cloud” to represent a system that is hosted off premise or as part of a Software as a Service (SaaS) offering. Don't fall victim to misinformation—the location of the server or the licensing agreement have nothing to do with the definition of a true cloud solution.

A true cloud solution is always multi-tenant.

In multi-tenant association software, one instance of the software and all of the supporting infrastructure serves multiple customers. In other words, each customer shares the software application and also shares a single database.



With Single tenancy (the way traditional software was developed), each customer has their own independent database and instance of the software. All data is stored in different instances, and can be unwieldy to manage.

Narrowing down association software solutions by either single-tenant or multi-tenant can greatly cut down on the time it will take to select the right fit for your organization.



ON-PREMISE

On-Premise = Single-Tenant

Historically, association software systems were hosted on one server – a single-tenant – in house with the association. The association was responsible for purchasing the hardware, hiring a dedicated and knowledgeable IT staff, and managing the system’s security, maintenance, and upgrades. While this option provides the association the most control over their data, it proves difficult to remain up-to-date on the most current technology. More often, associations are outsourcing their hosting to avoid the hassle and potential security risks of on-premise hosting.



HOSTED

Hosted = Single-Tenant

Traditional association software vendors may offer a hosted option for associations. Vendors often refer to this as a “cloud offering”. It is important to note that this is different from a true cloud solution, and it is still a single-tenant installation. Hosting software with a vendor or third party still means that it must be installed for each instance—just at a different location, and accessed through a virtual private network (VPN). This option was more appealing than on-premise hosting for associations who did not have a team that could be dedicated to their system.



Some AMS vendors still offer this option. They advertise 24-hour support and ensure that your data is secure and recoverable. However, this model is expensive. It requires maintenance fees, and any installed software must be manually updated, requiring costly fees and interrupting normal business.



SOFTWARE AS A SERVICE (SAAS)

SaaS = Single or Multi-Tenant

A SaaS offering can be either single-tenant or multi-tenant. The term “SaaS” refers to a software licensing and delivery model where customers purchase a subscription, rather than purchasing the software outright and paying maintenance fees. A SaaS product is usually accessed using a web browser.

Many association software vendors refer to their single-tenant SaaS product as a cloud offering as well. But, just because software is available over the internet via a subscription model does not make it a true cloud solution.

A single-tenant SaaS offering provides associations with better total cost of ownership (TCO) protection and generally lower fees, but still requires manual and costly upgrades, and can lead to outdated software.



TRUE CLOUD (MULTI-TENANT)

Multi-Tenant = SaaS

A true cloud system has a multi-tenant architecture and is always a SaaS offering. New association software providers are building multi-tenant applications because they are scalable, easy (and free) to upgrade, and incredibly flexible. Occasionally associations express concern about data security when opting for a multi-tenant - true cloud solution, however large cloud services providers like [Salesforce](#), [Amazon](#), [Google](#), and [Dropbox](#) have developed complex security measures to satisfy the most stringent security requirements of even the US federal government.



We need to beware of the false cloud. Because the false cloud, ladies and gentleman, is not efficient! It is not democratic! It is not economical! It is not environmental! It is not the future.”

— Marc Benioff, Chairman and CEO of Salesforce, the World’s #1 CRM Platform

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE SELECTING A TYPE OF ASSOCIATION SOFTWARE

- Does my organization have a knowledgeable IT staff with the time to support, update, and secure an on-premise solution?
- Can we afford the up-front costs and maintenance fees associated with a hosted solution?
- How important are up-to-date features and functionality to my staff and members?
- How much data will we require our new solution to store?
- Does my organization want to pay for every module of a solution, or have the flexibility to select modules?
- Would my organization benefit most from a true cloud multi-tenant solution, or a single-tenant software in a hosted delivery model?

**THE BOTTOM LINE: DECIDE IF YOUR ORGANIZATION WOULD BENEFIT
FROM A TRADITIONAL AMS OR A TRUE CLOUD SOLUTION.**



TOOLS FOR GATHERING REQUIREMENTS

After you have selected the type of AMS that will best serve your organization, you can determine the best method for gathering your system requirements. Because this process is difficult and time consuming, many associations elect to hire a consultant.

CONSULTANTS

A consultant can help to evaluate your current processes, both those that are working and those that could use some re-thinking. They assemble your business requirements and can make recommendations for the software that will provide the best fit for your association. But it is important to hire a consultant with experience in both your type of organization, and in emerging cloud technologies.

A consultant should challenge conventions. He/she should first look at your business processes and identify areas of change that can be made outside of the software. But they should also look for ways to challenge the status quo. He/she should be familiar with the new technologies available for associations, and understand that it often takes a trailblazer to be truly innovative. If your organization decides to hire a consultant, there are a few questions you should ask, to make sure your consultant will help you find an AMS that will meet your needs now and in the future.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE HIRING A CONSULTANT

- What were your last five software recommendations and how were they hosted (single or multi-tenant)?
- What problems did the organization have and how did your recommended solution solve them?
- How (if at all) did the organization change their business practices to work with the new software?
- Will you assist in the implementation as an agent of the organization?

The Bottom Line:

Make sure you select a consultant who is evolving their processes with changing technology, not just recommending providers who meet historic needs of an association.



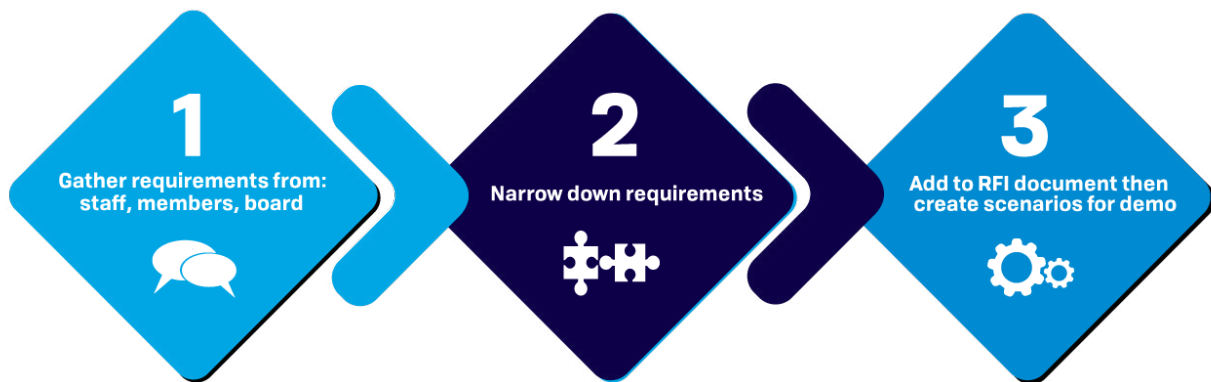
GATHER REQUIREMENTS

With or without a consultant, you'll need to gather requirements for your new system. This process will help you to identify the problems your new system will solve, and help you to better identify which vendor will work best. Your board, staff, and even members should have input into this process. They should provide insight into what they need the system to do, how they are currently using the system, and any pain-points that should be resolved.

Your members are likely the focus of your organization and day-to-day business. So make sure to incorporate feedback from your members into your criteria. A member survey on how they engage with your organization might offer some valuable insights.

While members are the priority of your organization, staff needs to be considered in any big change that will involve their daily activities. Too often, new software is installed and new processes created, but staff had no say in the process. Those who are not fully on-board with the new system will be reluctant to embrace the changes and may turn to alternate methods.

After meeting with all of the stakeholders, you'll likely have an unwieldy list of some imperative, nice-to-have, and even some improbable requirements for your new system. If you provide this entire list to vendors, you may receive a quote that doesn't accurately represent your project. Identify all of the must-have requirements to submit to a vendor.



Good to have about 15-20 requirements but not mandatory



REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS (RFP)

Whether you choose to hire a consultant or not, many organizations employ a Request for Proposal (RFP) process to evaluate software vendors. The next step is to identify which vendors will meet the needs of your organization. At this point, it may be tempting to put together an RFP and send it to every vendor in the industry. But if you don't limit the vendors you send an RFP to, you may complicate the process and create extra work for yourself.

First, through the help of a consultant or on your own, conduct some preliminary research. Association consultants and industry organizations have lists of vendors for your inquiry. You can research information online, and even call an organization to make the first step to developing a relationship. Then send a condensed Request for Information (RFI) to the vendors you'd like to pursue. You might consider an RFI as an advertisement for a job. You'll receive a number of resumes in response, then you can select the candidates you'd prefer to interview.

Any final RFP should have clearly defined goals, requirements, selection criteria and success factors. Vendors need to understand your organization and your goals, they should have a clear concept of the project and why your organization has decided to select a new AMS. You should define your timeline and budget, and let the vendor know if there are any key systems that their solution will need to integrate with, and most importantly, an RFP should only be sent to 3-5 qualified vendor candidates.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER ON AN RFP

- What is your selection criteria?
- What makes your organization unique? Include staff/member size, mission, current technology, types of members, etc.
- What problems do you need this product to solve?
- What is the scope of this project? Identify the must-have requirements your stakeholders defined.
- What is the budget for your project?
- What is the timeline for your project?



SELECTION CRITERIA

Before you meet the vendors and schedule demonstrations, it is time to define your selection criteria. The following is a prioritized list of some of the selection criteria you should think about. Note that functionality and price comes in last. Both are, in fact, a huge concern, but without a viable company or scalable platform, the price will be through the roof with limited capabilities and difficult upgrades.

1) SCALABILITY AND PLATFORM

We've covered the difference between single and multi-tenant solutions already, but make sure that the software you purchase is flexible and built on a platform that can be scaled for your future needs. Many traditional AMSs are built on a proprietary platform that is difficult to maintain and keep up with industry standards. This makes it nearly impossible for those legacy AMS vendors to adapt with technology.

2) COMPANY AND PRODUCT VIABILITY

If you're making a decision you'll have to live with for years to come, make sure the company you are purchasing from will be with you for the duration. Reach out to any references provided by the organization and make sure to find measurable results—rather than anecdotes.

Take note of any financial issues or a vendor who is in line to be purchased by another organization. These purchases can affect the goals of the organization, and result in unsupported software versions down the road.

3) SUPPORT AND TRAINING

An AMS can have all the features and functionality your organization needs to operate business, but if your staff can't use it, or no one answers the phone when you call customer support, it's useless. Make sure the company has multiple channels for training, not only in the implementation stages, but throughout the life cycle of the product relationship. Ask about a user guide, user groups, and any other on-going training opportunities.



4) FEATURES AND FUNCTIONALITY

It is important to know if the software will meet the vast majority of your organization's needs out of the box. You will want to know if the solution easily integrates to a marketplace of apps that can extend the platform, or if you will have to pay for these customizations. Does the solution have open APIs, offering easy integrations to other third-party systems? Make sure to focus on your top requirements.

5) TOTAL COST OF OWNERSHIP (TCO)

Clearly cost is a huge prohibiting factor. The fact is that an AMS purchase is the second costliest purchase an association can make, behind the cost for property. But there are a lot of price points that go into your AMS purchase. It is important to get a clear view of what this product will cost you over the duration of the time you use it, including regular upgrades.

FINAL VENDOR SELECTION CHECKLIST

SCALABILITY & PLATFORM

- Do you provide a true cloud or a single-tenant solution?
- Is your solution built on a common platform (like Salesforce) or a proprietary platform?
- Independent from your company, are there specialists who know how to implement and customize your platform?
- What kind of ecosystem exists for add-on applications, should I need to extend your solution?
- Who manages the infrastructure and security of my data?
- What percentage of your customers are on the most recent version of your software?

COMPANY VIABILITY

- How many new customers have you acquired in the past year?
- What was your attrition rate over the past three years?
- Has your company experienced any shifts in ownership in the past three years?
- Can we speak to three of your customers?



SUPPORT & TRAINING

- Do you have a dedicated support team?
- What are the average years of association experience in your implementation and customer service teams?
- Do you offer regular training options?
- Do you offer self-service online support and training options?
- What is the cost of ongoing support; is it included in the price?

FEATURES & FUNCTIONALITY

- Does your development team work from an agile product roadmap?
- How many major releases have you delivered in the past two years and what features were included in each?
- When I go-live on your software, can you ensure I will be on the most up-to-date version?

TOTAL COST OF OWNERSHIP (TCO)

- Can you provide a 5-year TCO estimate including hosting and upgrades?
- How often are upgrades released, how much does an average upgrade cost, and how long does an average upgrade take? How many major releases have you delivered in the past two years and what features were included in each?



MEET THE VENDORS

Then it is time to schedule a meeting. This is the stage in your search where you begin to eliminate vendors, and identify potential partners. Remember, this investment should last you a minimum of 7 years so look for a software company that you can develop a relationship with.

Nearly any time of year in locations all across the United States and beyond, there is a tradeshow that will allow you to pre-schedule your meetings with association software vendors including [ASAE Annual](#), [ASAE Technology Conference & Expo](#), [Association Forum of Chicagoland's Forum Forward](#), and [Digital Now](#). Any of these events offer a great opportunity to meet many different organizations personally, see the product, and ask specific questions to help you make a better decision.

When you meet with vendors, it's important to be transparent about your budget, the selection criteria, as well as any other vendors competing for your bid. Many vendors have relationships with other vendors. If, during the information gather stage, you find that the solution doesn't have the options you're looking for, or is too expensive, the vendor can recommend another AMS provider that is scaled to your needs. Also, it is important for a vendor to know who they are competing against. You can research the pros and cons of specific vendors, but the information published online about a vendor is usually created by the vendor and can be biased. Also, knowing who is competing for your business will change the content of the demo slightly. Vendors will spend less time highlighting the features they have in common, and will be able to reveal areas in which they stand out.

SCHEDULE A DEMONSTRATION

Most association management software companies will craft a personalized demo for your organization based on the criteria you specify. Once you have narrowed your search to 3-4 potential partners, invite them to demonstrate their product. Fewer vendors, and a more thorough demo, are recommended.

By this time, you have an understanding of the capabilities and features the AMS provides, so guide the vendors to demonstrate how their product will resolve your issues. Write your script to ensure that each presentation stays on topic and addresses all of your questions.



Develop scenario-based questions with each group of key stakeholders and provide them to the vendors. Use this as a way to see if your processes can evolve. Note the importance of a specific feature, ask if there are any risks in implementing the system, and find out how the software can adapt to changing technologies. Provide the script to each vendor at least two weeks before the scheduled demonstration.

CONCLUSION

So ditch the tried and true. In the past 30 years, technology has been revolutionized time and time again. And the way associations interact with their members has changed too. The truth is, traditional association management software was not built to handle such a drastic transformation of member needs. So while you are looking for an association software replacement, the first step is to throw out the steps you've taken before. Why would you use the same methods that helped you select the system you are replacing?

If you are interested in learning more about how Fonteva can help your organization, call us at **844-NO CODING (662-6346)** to speak to a solutions consultant.

LEARN WITH US

[Resource Library](#)

1-844-NO CODING (662-6346)

CONTACT FONTEVA

info@fonteva.com

www.fonteva.com