



# In a Volatile World, Associations Must Prove Their Value

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## Associations are Increasingly Optional in an Environment Dominated by Uncertainty

Association Laboratory's Looking Forward® research is the association sector's leading environmental scan – assessing input from hundreds of association CEOs each year. The most recent Looking Forward® Impact data doesn't point to "collapse." It points to a persistent constraint—and the strategic risk that comes with it: *brittleness*.

Even with strong macroeconomic signals (Q3 2025 GDP growth reported at 4.4 percent annualized) and upbeat forecasts (Atlanta Fed GDP Now estimating 5.3 percent real GDP growth for Q4 2025 as of Jan. 14, 2026), association leaders still describe a flat-to-worse outlook because:

- GDP is an average; members live in segments. Winners and losers can coexist inside "good" GDP.
- Associations feel discretionary spending first. Dues, travel, training and sponsorship are early to tighten.
- Policy change can raise uncertainty even when it's "pro-growth." The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) materially changes tax rules and other provisions; implementation and distribution can create uneven impacts across industries and professions.

The strategic threat to association leaders isn't a single dramatic shock. It's the gradual erosion of revenue, durability, relevance and influence—often before you can point to a single "competitor" or "event" as the cause.

Most association CEOs aren't looking for inspiration right now. They're looking for clarity, something they can say in a boardroom that helps people understand what's happening without turning every meeting into a reaction to the latest headline.

The Looking Forward® 2025 data (from CEOs across professional and trade associations) offers a structural diagnosis of constraints on strategy. It's a tight, persistent constraint that not only slows growth—it makes organizations brittle.

Brittleness shows up as:

- A revenue model that cannot tolerate shocks
- A value proposition that isn't clearly differentiated
- A governance system that can't prioritize at speed under ambiguity
- An advocacy posture that loses standing slowly, then suddenly

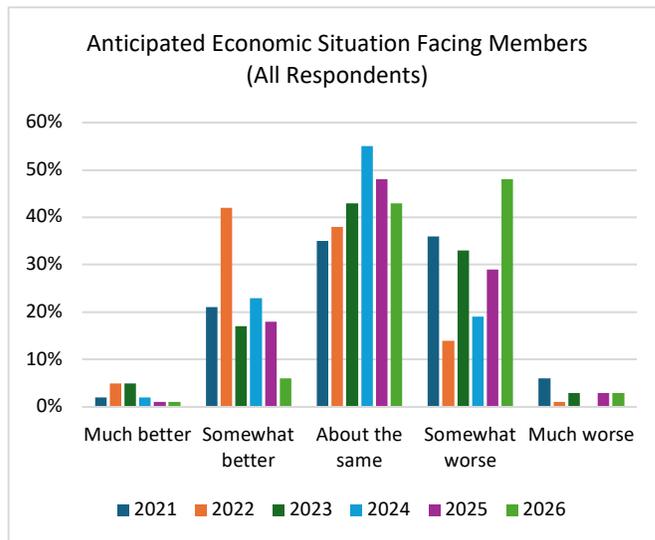
Here's what the data suggests—and how Association Laboratory translates it for association leaders.

## 1) The 12-month outlook: “about the same” isn’t comfort—it’s a reaction to uncertainty.

Across both professional and trade association CEOs, the outlook for the next 12 months is roughly the same or slightly worse than in previous years.

That matters because it's the operating condition for everything downstream:

- Members scrutinize ROI harder
- Attendance and purchases become more selective
- Boards become more risk-sensitive
- Staff capacity gets stretched as they try to protect legacy programs while adapting



One trade CEO captured the lived reality: “Engagement and eyeballs. We receive very cyclical attention from our members.” If that’s familiar, it’s not a local problem. It’s a market condition.

## 2) Economic pressure is the shared headline—but the mechanics differ

Eighty-one percent of respondents identify general economic pressures and financial uncertainty as the dominant factors over the next 12 months. What’s more useful is what comes right behind it.

Trade CEOs emphasize:

- M&A and consolidation
- price and supply uncertainty
- customer buying preference shifts

A trade respondent put it plainly:

“Consolidation – threatens the current membership model.” That’s not just an industry story. It changes who the member *is*, who holds decision authority, and how value gets assessed.

Professional CEOs emphasize:

- demographic shifts in who they serve
- interdependence across sectors
- competitive dynamics tied to employers and alternative pathways

Different mechanics. Same implication: CEOs are operating in a market that tightens decision-making—even when macro indicators look strong.

### 3) Why can Looking Forward® data look more pessimistic than the GDP headlines

The disparity between recent economic pronouncements and association CEO sentiment regarding their members' economic future is substantial. This is where many boards get stuck: “If GDP is strong, why does our member outlook feel so cautious?”

Because GDP is not a member sentiment index.

- Associations are “*discretionary spend sensitive*.” They feel tightening first in due diligence, travel approvals, education budgets, sponsorships and engagement—often before the macro story turns.
- GDP is aggregate and backward-looking. A strong quarter (e.g., Q3 2025 reported at 4.4 percent annualized) can coexist with sector pain, margin compression and uneven affordability.
- Forecasts are not certain. GDP is useful, but it’s a model estimate and can swing with incoming data.

In short, macro growth can be real, and member caution can still be rational, especially when leaders are weighing risk rather than celebrating averages.

### 4) Policy changes: “pro-growth” doesn’t mean “low uncertainty.”

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (Public Law 119-21) significantly changes federal taxes, credits and deductions, with provisions taking effect in 2025. The legislative text is extensive, and implementation details matter.

From a CEO standpoint, big policy shifts can increase caution even when parts are favorable, because they introduce:

- transition risk (timing, interpretation, compliance)
- uneven impacts across member audiences
- planning volatility

The practical point for associations is to acknowledge that member economics will not move in one direction uniformly, and your value and pricing assumptions will break if you treat them as uniform.

### 5) Regulation and policy volatility are being felt as planning volatility

One of the most consistent cross-source signals is not simply “regulation is hard.” It’s that political/regulatory conditions reduce the ability to forecast, plan and assess risk. A trade CSO bluntly said, “Massive over-regulation by government continues to crush small, medium and large businesses...”

Even if that's not your language, the operational reality is recognizable:

- harder to set multi-year investment priorities
- boards become more conservative
- staff time shifts from building to reacting

This is where advocacy becomes more than “wins.” It's also about access, credibility and timing, especially in volatile environments.

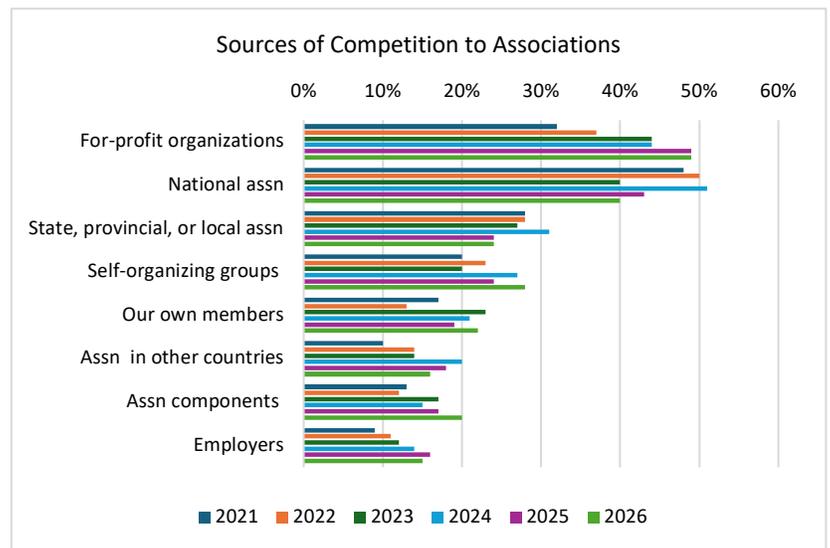
### 5) If you define competition too narrowly, you'll miss it

Boards often hear “competition” and picture peer associations. The Looking Forward® data suggests that it's too small a frame.

The competitive set includes:

- For-profit organizations
- Platform-enabled self-organizing groups (*Facebook, LinkedIn*)
- Internal fragmentation - components competing for attention/resources

Your association is operating in a more contested environment—often without a single clear competitor you can point to. That's why erosion is easy to miss until it shows up in renewals, event performance or advocacy leverage.



### Five Moves to Adapt (without pretending you can control the economy)

Association CEOs and Boards of Directors should consider the following.

1. Name the operating condition: persistent member constraint and uncertainty
2. Redefine your competitive set beyond associations
3. Treat consolidation as a membership model change (trade especially)
4. Make policy volatility a planning input, not a complaint
5. Re-earn ROI language, especially for advocacy

## Closing

Uncertainty is unavoidable. Being surprised by slow erosion is not. This isn't about predicting the future. It's about building a shared narrative your board can govern against:

- The market is constrained
- Competition is broader than we would like
- Policy volatility reduces planning capacity
- And the real risk is brittleness—relevance, revenue durability and influence eroding quietly

If your board can agree on that, you can make clearer choices about what to protect, what to adapt and what to stop doing.

### *About the Data*

This article draws on Looking Forward® 2026 Impact survey data from 124 chief staff officers (CEOs) of U.S.-based trade and professional associations, including the Ohio Society of Association Professionals (OSAP). Data was collected from mid-November 2025 through mid-January 2026. Analysis prioritizes the most recent year of findings and interprets results through Domain 1: Market Conditions & Competitive Dynamics.

### *About Association Laboratory*

Association Laboratory helps association leaders make smarter decisions through research, strategy support and executive education. The Looking Forward® tracking studies examine how market conditions, member realities and organizational constraints evolve over time. If you need guidance answering a strategic question, please do not hesitate to [contact the company and let them know you're an OSAP member](#).