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The Future of Associations

Recently I attended an industry-related

conference, where one of the discussion groups offered was "The Future of Associations: what will they look like and what services will they provide?"

Here are a few of the questions we discussed:

1. Have any of you rebranded your association? In other words, have you become an "energy association," including other forms of energy such as propane, natural gas, renewable fuels, etc.? This is a very serious question to consider. Before changing the name or brand of a company that has been established for a long period of time, there are several factors to consider:

- a) By changing your name would you lose your reputation, or identity? WPMA has been around since 1953, sixty-four years. Everyone in our industry identifies us as "WPMA." Would we lose our identity if we changed our name?
- b) What is the Charter or Mission Statement for the group/members you represent? Does your organization still represent this mission statement? We first need to ask the right questions to our membership to make sure their needs are being met.
- c) Is your organization still a going concern, with member volunteers willing to work for the greater good of the industry?

I believe these hard questions need to be answered accurately and concisely before you let someone who has no background in your trade association make changes.

2. Have you looked to other funding sources outside of the usual dues, royalty income, trade show and convention, for profit service corporations, etc.? Here again these questions need to be discussed with your "Volunteer Board of Directors" to make sure the funding sources fit within your mission statement.

3. Are you spending more time and money trying to do things you are not efficient at, when the open market can do it more efficiently? Should we try outsourcing those types of duties? As an association, we need to go back to the basics, know our mission, see the vision, and accomplish the

goals we have set. Do not waste a lot of time stopping to pick up dimes and let dollars fly past you.

4. Would you benefit to look at combining with another convention and trade show? While reviewing this option, both groups should not only make sure it is a good fit for each participant, but they should make sure their mission statements and the identity of their members are in harmony. The members' needs should come first, and the association's mission statement should be the guiding factor.

5. How do associations survive consolidations and mergers? We must learn to grow and adapt to the needs of the new members. If we do not know who we are serving and they do not know who we are, we are bound to come up with useless ideas that hinder the process. Know your members and their needs as they change and grow.

6. How do you fund your association? Most associations rely on dues, trade show income, advertising, and investments. We cannot find funding sources that differ from our Mission Statement - to serve our members. To keep the association solvent, dues may have to increase, and some members may not think their association membership is worth the dues they are being charged. This is where we must sell the association's services - to show our members what the association has done for them. Being able to quantify the value of the association to the members can keep them satisfied with the cost of their membership.

7. How do you deal with larger members who have their own lobbyist? In a coordinated effort. Ten to one your state association executive and/or lobbyist is going to know the issues better than the hired gun, so work together with them. They can be a valuable resource for opening closed doors.

8. Will trade associations become advocacy only groups, no longer holding conventions, trade shows, or meetings of any sort? This is where I am an optimist. I believe humans are social and enjoy one another's company, getting together to catch up or discuss the latest in the industry. Advocacy is very important to our members, and this is what gets them to send in their dues each year. When polling our convention and trade show attendees, the number one reason given for attending is "Networking." Without a doubt, networking is a key to helping our members become more profitable and efficient, by teaching or learning from others. I hate to think the face-to-face component will ever be lost, because open conversation is basic human nature, and helps all who actively participate.

As we carefully consider these questions and determine our responses to them, we can keep our association a viable and worthwhile part of our industry for many years to come. A bright future can be assured as we design our association to meet our members' needs, pay attention to our mission statement, and adhere to industry standards.

