

# Association Marketing: Tap the Potential of Genuine Relationship-Building Opportunities

By Mark P. Buckshon, CPSM

How effective is association participation and leadership for architectural, engineering, and construction business development? How can you be more effective at association marketing? These two questions have simple, yet nuanced (and sometimes contradictory) answers because the rulebooks for metrics and determining return on investment need to give way to sincerity, commitment, and perhaps a fair bit of luck.

**A**ssociation-related marketing represents a significant, if not the most important, focus for many A/E/C industry practitioners, beyond cultivating repeat and referral business (and associations help out in these most important priorities).

The evidence of association-related marketing power may be more anecdotal than statistical. Nevertheless, when I surveyed a cross-section of 100 A/E/C businesses asking them to confirm marketing methodologies that resulted in success beyond repeat/referral initiatives in the past year, the highest number—35 percent—said “trade/community association participation and relationships” have resulted in profitable business.

Of course, association engagement also encourages and facilitates repeat and referral success, especially when you become involved and connected enough to assume multi-year leadership responsibilities. Yet the story is more complex, and we can learn something from the failures as well as successes—the seemingly ideal associations often prove to be less-than-valuable, or the perhaps obscure “sleeper” groups spin off revenue year after year. Success can be accidental, as Susan Murphy discovered when she received a call out of the blue to provide a presentation seminar for an SMPS conference. Success can also be strategic, as Tim Klabunde describes in explaining how the Timmons Group makes sure company principals are ready to assume relevant association leadership roles in a multi-year succession planning strategy.

Association relationships have saved and created careers for many industry practitioners, but they have also consumed incredible amounts of time. Committee and executive leadership roles require hours of meetings over several years and sometimes much travel, and this work generally cannot be immediately converted to billable hours. (In addition to the time cost—which includes lost opportunity risk—you need to add the membership dues and, in many cases, additional sponsorship investments.) The question is, how do you do it right? How do you figure out the associations where you should invest your time, energy, and effectiveness? Once there, how do you make the most of your opportunities?

## Start at the End

Klabunde, director of marketing at the Timmons Group, a multi-disciplined engineering and technology firm based in Richmond, VA, says he starts off with his goals.





Photo of Salt Lake Public Safety Building by Dana Sohm, Sohm Photographx, sohmphoto.com.

“Who am I trying to reach?” he asks. “What is my objective? Do people in the industry know my firm, or am I trying to target in on specific opportunities and jobs?”

Then he checks the association out by attending a few events or meetings. “Some associations you think you would like to be very actively engaged in are not always where the decision-makers are,” he says. “Oftentimes, you will find associations, such as developer groups, where three-quarters of the people work for (businesses trying to sell to) the developers. The association has been taken over by consultants, and there are no decision-makers in the room.”

Klabunde’s observation relates to one of the paradoxes of association participation. If you join a group with business development relationships in mind, and virtually everyone else does the same thing, can you really connect with the people you want to know (who might tend to run for the hills to avoid the sales pressure they encounter at association functions)?

“The real end users don’t really want to come out to some events because they get pounced on (by salespeople),” said Vern Solomon, president of the Central Canada Chapter of the International Society of Pharmaceutical Engineers (ISPE). Solomon’s business, Environmental Services Corporation (ESC), designs and builds cleanrooms for aerospace, research, electronics, pharmaceutical, and biological containment.

Clearly, many of ESC’s clients would belong to the ISPE and these relationships provide a huge part of the company’s business. Yet you need to know when and why to cool the aggressive business development processes, Solomon says.

“I’ve worked hard to understand (and try to show salespeople) that we’re here for the education. Please, don’t sell. People show up without business cards because they don’t want to be contacted by three people they have absolutely no use to know in the next week. You can try too hard. If you know the customer isn’t going to buy a product, why bother them?”

In other words, if you go to association functions looking to discover business right away, you will probably fail. If the association turns out to be full of people attempting the same business development objectives, the organization may not be a great fit.

And, yet serendipity can correlate with sincerity. Presentation skills consultant Murphy says she changed her career direction when she received an invitation to fill in for a colleague in 1998 to give a presentation skills workshop at SMPS Boston. “I had no idea what SMPS was,” she said. Now, she says “my entire career is a gift from SMPS.”

At that first presentation, she collected five clients—two of whom are still doing business with her today. She received invitations to speak at other SMPS gatherings, adding to her referral and contact network. “After that one speech, I have totally specialized in A/E/C without doing any marketing other than speaking at SMPS events.”

### **Don’t Expect Overnight Success**

Most likely, you won’t experience this sort of instant success. In fact, association leadership and participation can be a multi-year (even decade) process, where the benefits are gradual, indirect, and often quite subtle.

Consider Claude Giguere, Construction Specification Canada’s (CSC) past president, and vice president of Montreal-based engineering consulting firm Pageau Morel. (CSC is the Canadian counterpart of the Construction Specifications Institute (CSI)—and both organizations have special relevance to building products manufacturers, as well as designers and contractors, because the specifications determine a project’s characteristics well before shovels hit the ground.)

Giguere volunteered for Montreal chapter activities, became the chapter vice chair, started attending national directors’ meetings and, after four years, was invited to join the national executive track—requiring more than a decade of commitment before he became the association’s national leader. He says the association leadership has “benefits for the business and career. The first point is the visibility for myself and the company. We’re more a Quebec-based company and this has helped us achieve better business across the country.”

The association has provided “lots of opportunity to talk with peers and learn things,” Giguere said. “I bring things I learn about specifications writing back to the office so people learn about standard practices and all that.”

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Photo of Salt Lake Public Safety Building (drone shot) by Dana Sohm, Sohm Fotografx, sohmphoto.com.

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But how much business has Pageau Morel received from Giguere's CSC leadership? "We have not measured that," he acknowledges. "I know we have received some business that is not necessarily the big projects. We get some business. People who already know you meet around CSC. You get a better relationship, and more business. Is it because of your CSC involvement or because of you? It's not easy to say." In other words, the association relationships may support your branding (trust) but you may not always be able to track specific work from your association connections.

However, the association networks can help you transcend geography and, when you become involved at a national level, open some seemingly surprising doors.

Mary Jo Mrochinski, senior proposal manager, business development at CH2M Hill's Anchorage, AK, office, says she was able to check with SMPS colleagues to verify that the move to Alaska from Los Angeles would be a wise one when she received a call from a recruiting headhunter.

She has made it her business to belong to relevant client-focused associations, as well, such as the Society of American Military Engineers.

"In deciding to participate in a professional organization, I tend to assess worth based on the colleagues I know who are already members and the educational/networking opportunities," she says. "I also weigh the costs of membership, events, participation, and sponsorships in prioritizing because I may have reimbursement options available, particularly if [my firm supports] personal professional development or business development for the firm. Thirdly, if it is an association that caters to a market sector that I am actively mining for business, I want to at least have the option of networking with their members and making valuable connections for my firm."

There are some related risks and costs, Mrochinski acknowledges. "There is always a trade-off in time and energy if you make a real effort to be in a professional association. Sometimes it can be very demanding, and require outreach to get assistance in committees, volunteerism, and giving back to the organization."

"But I think the benefits outweigh the demands considerably, because I am surrounded by admirable men and women that I learn from every day, who cheer me on in my victories and console me in my losses, and contribute to my overall growth as a professional and a friend with a wide (range of) acquaintances all over the country."

Meanwhile, Klabunde, Solomon, and others encourage colleagues, employees, and principals to become involved in relevant associations. Solomon says he is happy to pay the association dues for any of his company's employees "as long as there is a commitment to be active." Klabunde says, as Timmons Group's leaders move through association executive ranks, the company strategically encourages other employees to volunteer, ultimately to become part of the association's executive track, thus ensuring continuity in the relationships between the relevant associations and the engineering/design practice.

Sometimes you want to travel the less-common paths. "You want to be where other people are not," Klabunde says. "Some of our best successes have happened when we have been able to get on boards or join associations where we have no competitors."

These are the paradoxes of association marketing. You need to be able to commit time and energy—often requiring years—and you need to build relationships without worrying about immediate business development results or selling opportunities. Yet, you can discover opportunities, sometimes under your nose, by moving great distances or by discovering an untapped group that has the decision-makers you really want to reach. You may even, as Murphy discovered, redefine your career and business through your association marketing. The opportunities are there when you focus your energies and prepare for long-term, sincere commitments. ■



Photo of Frank L. Lippert, FSMPS, CPSM, and Carla D. Thompson, FSMPS, at 2012 Build Business: Take Action, San Francisco. Photo by Dana Sohm, Sohm Photograph, sohmphoto.com.

## The Ground Rules for Effective Association Marketing

### Determine If the Association Makes Sense for You

You should attend a few association events and functions to find out for yourself. Matt Handal at Trauner Consulting Services in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, says, "The litmus test I use is: Is this an audience that can say 'Yes' to our services or an audience that could introduce me to someone who can say 'Yes'?"

### Don't Go Looking to Sell (Though Many May Buy)

If you are insincere, or fail to give your best efforts to the association without worrying about return, you'll likely encounter a less-than-positive reception. The goal is to build your relationships and reputation first. Of course, you can have some luck and develop new business right away, as presentation coach Susan Murphy experienced.

### Look Where Others Aren't Going

Your ideal association will have plenty of potential client decision-makers, and not too many direct business development competitors. However, even if you cannot escape the competition, you can (through effort and commitment) be accepted for an association directorship, executive or other leadership role, and thus outplay your competitors. But if the competitors are already in these positions, you may find they are well-entrenched with a succession plan of their own.

### Contribute, Speak, "Do," Rather than Just Attend Meetings

If you passively attend some association functions, you'll probably achieve limited results. One idea: Volunteer for committees or activities that reflect your interests, passions, and values. You may be able to suggest programs and ideas that both appeal to you personally and allow you to make many new association friends. For example, one of my colleagues doesn't golf, but he volunteers to help out with the registration and after-golf programs at the association's golf tournaments, which allows him to meet and connect with all of the participants in the process.

### Think Long Term

If you are satisfied, the association will connect you with the right people, prepare for a long-term relationship. In this regard, successful association marketing reflects your overall business. Associations, in fact, provide the ideal environment to develop and maintain lasting relationships, even between projects. ■