

WHAT IF NOBODY ANSWERED

We talk about industry issues every week. Some are much more important than others. Many are enough to create panic even in the minds of the strongest people. This morning we are going to talk about trade associations, which few outside those folks who are truly involved really look at as something to worry about.

Many of our industry trade associations are almost out of funds which means that it might not be very long at all before you make a phone call to get information or ask a question from your state association only to find that nobody answers. Big deal you say. Who cares you might be thinking. The thought that they don't do anything for you anyway crosses your mind. Given a choice between a ball game, taking the wife out to dinner or paying ones association dues the normal choice is not paying the dues.

Let's face facts most of the industry complains about their trade associations activities. No matter what the association does a good number of the members are not happy. It is a tough game to win. Most members think their association staff is overpaid and under worked. There is a universal misunderstanding of what it takes to run an association and what the "hired help" does each day. I remember back in the 70's when the chairman of the board for ASA Michigan used to ask me why I didn't spend more time in the field. When I spent more time in the field he wanted to know why I was never in the office. No matter what I did I couldn't win. He was a real nice guy and a dedicated member, but he had no clue what went on behind the scenes. He eventually quit the association because of something I said at a meeting (at least that is what I heard). Now can you imagine members quitting each time the associations did something they didn't agree with? For heavens sake, associations wouldn't have any members after just a few weeks.

If you hire a technician for your shop that person is under constant supervision. You know when he shows up and how much work he produces. When the board of directors of an association hire their executive staff for the association they have no way of monitoring what that person is doing each day. An association executive needs to be a self-starter who can run with ideas without someone prodding him. He needs to be able to supervise staff and plan programs. He needs to "coddle" many of the members who need constant attention. He needs to be able to run the association in a fiscally sound basis. And he must be dedicated. This is a tough person to find, but all the state associations that I know have been able to find these people. They truly care about your ability to stay in business. If these people were not there to answer the phone when you needed help there would be no other place to turn. When I was head of ASA Michigan I remember many times helping a member straighten out a misunderstanding with an insurance company. If there is no association who would you turn to?

I cannot think of one professional or trade group that doesn't have a good trade association. But trade associations run on fuel just like your car. In this case the fuel is dues dollars and member support. The only people standing behind you trying to help you win your wars is your trade association. There just isn't anybody else. This is a very dangerous game the industry is playing when they withhold their support of their trade group and once you lose there is no going back.

You might wonder where all the time is spent running your trade association. There really can't be that much to do. Well I can't speak for others, but I know when I ran ASA Michigan the average day started with about 40 emails that had to be answered, followed by phone calls from members and other people in the industry. If I didn't rush through this stuff it could end up costing me almost the entire day. Putting together a simple seminar took a lot of man-hours. Finding locations, getting speakers or setting up the program, coordinating the schedule with other activities plus a number of hours having the staff copy, stuff and mail notices. When the mailing was sent the staff had to keep track of the people who called to reserve space. After all the planning in many cases the association lost money on seminars. Nationally known speakers cost big money and when you are committed by contract to pay the fees it puts a huge dent in the association pocketbook when the members (who need the info) don't show up. I understand that ASA Michigan recently found that out when they booked two great speakers, but the industry chose to stay at home thus costing the association needed dollars and depriving the members of information that they really needed to be successful.

Associations could never make it on dues alone they need extra income from seminars, raffles, golf outings, and insurance administration fees. If the members support these activities everything is rosy, but when they don't the association has no way to make up the loss. More members need to step up and use the programs offered by their association. Sometimes you save a little, sometimes it costs a little more, but every dime helps the association stay in business to represent your interest.

Most associations make it easy for you to pay your dues, some offer automatic monthly deductions from your checking account, some will accept your money quarterly, semi-annual, annual or by credit card. If a "business" can't afford to pay dues to their trade association very frankly they shouldn't be in business.....and without the association they probably won't anyway.

The associations need you to pay your dues in a timely manner, but they need something else too. They need you to help find new members. Only about 15% of all collision shops are members of their trade association. This is ridiculous. That number should be multiplied several times over then the problem of income for the associations wouldn't be an issue. WON'T YOU HELP?

To those of you who are members, do pay your dues on time, participate in association programs and attend meetings, THANK YOU. You are the backbone of an industry that really needs all the help it can get.