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They buy, but they don't join

If conventional wisdom has anything going for it, then it's likely that a fair proportion of ALIA members are association junkies and are members of several associations, charities or other voluntary groupings. I wonder what are we looking for when we fill in an application form for an association? No doubt, each of us has different expectations of each organisation, but it is a very important question for us to address in regard to ALIA as we move into the very different social and cultural environment of the new century.

I have been looking at the literature on the role of professional associations generally to see if I can identify the essentials of a professional association — the non-negotiables in terms of what an association should do for its members. One message that comes across, loud and clear, is that there are enormous generational differences — the baby boomers and generation X'ers are poles apart, for example, on their reasons for joining associations — which may account for the aging profile of our Association which I commented on in a recent Frontline.

The American experience is that the younger groups 'buy but don't join' as the executive director of the American Society for Information Science recently put it. The younger folks are prepared to pay for association benefits, particularly if a benefit is one that saves their time or advances their individual careers. They have less interest in the concept of 'giving back' to their professional grouping in any general sense.

Leaving generational expectations aside however, what is it that associations do? How typical is ALIA as an association within the world of associations? The American Society for Association Executives is a very successful Association entirely devoted to supporting trade and professional associations. That Association regularly surveys its member organisations to identify the broad range of services being provided. Here are some of the findings of the most recent survey on the range and balance of activities undertaken by associations:

- education on technical, professional, ethical and other matters (ninety per cent of associations do this);
- dissemination of information to the broad community — such as policy makers, journalists, consumer groups (seventy-one per cent);
- conduct of research on the profession or industry (sixty-five per cent);
- setting standards for performance and ethical practice (thirty-nine per cent).

Obviously, ALIA would not want to use findings such as these as the only basis for setting priorities for the Association, but it has given me pause for thought to see the emphasis in these figures — even allowing for the fact that they include trade associations.

Clearly, education of members is a key activity. One of the questions this raises is — are we placing enough priority on the continuing education of our members? Should we be doing more in continuing education? We now have an excellent framework for encouraging members to engage in continuing professional development — thanks largely to the Board of Education. Perhaps we should be bringing more focus to ensuring very wide application of the CPD initiative? And as a corollary, perhaps we need to do a bit less on the course recognition or standards of entry side of education?

The new Board of Directors will have a lot to do in its first year, especially developing a method for working with the membership at large. But the Board will also need to consider the balance of what the Association does with, and for, its members and at the ways it can sustain its activities. The educational role is only one we need to put into the equation when we look at the future directions of ALIA. This, and both existing and new areas, will need to be looked at in consultation with the membership. Our goal must be to provide what you as members value so that we can meet your expectations. ■

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