

Are Professional Associations Headed Toward Obsolescence?

By Professional Colleague

Before you read more, answer the yes (Y) or no (N) questions below:

- 1. Is the attendance at your association's functions increasing?
- 2. Did you attend your association's 2016 Convention?
- 3. Is lack of time the reason you haven't run for office?
- 4. Has your region planned for succession of leadership, i.e., identified and groomed young directors to lead your association in the future?
- 5. Have you personally invited another funeral director to attend an association-sponsored event in the last six months?

If you've answered three or more questions with an 'N,' read more.

Several ominous red flags have begun appearing before now, but directors across the country say their convention this year was poorly attended. Once-crowded regional meetings are attracting less than a dozen members. NFDA convention? I hear the same thing and that's worrisome...principally that the funeral service profession may be careening in this same direction.

What are obvious causes of this short-fall of interest among directors? Officers of associations around the country believe more directors aren't attending conventions because people don't want to spend the money, take time away from their families or cannot spare time away from work.

If you don't believe this trend exists, just look back to the 1950s -- when Masonic Lodges were turning away men, when Dad's once-a-week lodge meetings were a traditional part of a family's schedule, where everybody who was anybody was a Shriner...and Shriner's Hospitals were solely supported by monies from various Shrines, not through TV ad donations.

Well, most of those lodges have faded away because they became irrelevant. Fewer men are joining Masons and many long-standing civic organizations are only attracting members who want to drink with their buddies.

Many -- not all but many -- young directors say, other than networking opportunities, conventions don't offer much in the way of new information and skills they can take back home and incorporate into their daily routines immediately. Still others complain about conventions not offering enough family-centric activities.

One executive, speaking anonymously, said association leadership is not strong enough or charismatic enough to share and implement their vision with the group. "All of our officers do a good job," the exec said, "but it's evident, few are passionate enough about funeral service to be visionary. Maybe it's because we have such a small pool of candidates running for office every year...or maybe being an association officer doesn't offer enough ROI (return on investment), i.e., personal growth and development."

So, is change possible among professional associations?

Maybe, but as we all know, change is difficult, even painful...and unless execs and board members encourage members to become first adapters to innovative approaches, efforts to remain relevant may be useless.

Consider the following recommendations. Whether associations choose to act on them is yet another story:

1. Hold one-third to one-half of association board meetings via conference calls. It costs board members time and money to attend meetings and it costs the association money to host them (when you count exec and office time, food, refreshments, etc.)...much more than a reliable teleconferencing company would charge.

2. Committees don't function well because most don't meet more than once a year...and most committees are stuck in a rut, otherwise known as "comfort zone"; otherwise known as "we've always done it this way." The result is people volunteer to work on committees, year after year, because they want to be involved (or is it they want to list all their committee work on their resume?) In general, most committees fail to make a tangible difference. With more communications more often, committees could

set higher goals and get more done.

3. Sorry, Baby Boomers! Your peak years are waning and across the country, the same trends are repeating. Membership numbers are diminishing and if funeral service professional associations are going to survive past 2020, these associations should be recruiting Millennials and the board should be tweaking "we've always done it this way" programs and traditions to acknowledge the changing needs of the new generations of funeral directors and take action to revamp existing offerings to remain relevant.

4. Current and past association leadership will agree...too much in the way of time away from work and travel is expected.

Rather than barring members from the leadership experience, change the rules. In fact, having officers pick three or four regional meetings per year to attend would entice more leaders to run for office. In the not too distant past, there were several choices to vote on for each office.

5. Back in the day, many directors were all too eager to get time away from their families, go to convention, see the old gang and spend too much time in bars. Millennials already spend more time than they want away from their young families. Rearing kids has become a shared and enjoyable task, not like the last century where raising the family was regarded as woman's work. Many have said, "Have conventions in towns that offered family-centered attractions. Let us play all day and have meetings in the evening."

6. Millennials need information portability and accessibility. Offer CE's in podcast form with online tests. Presidential messages should be video-based and offered through "Members Only" files on the associations website. Use more text messaging, make more productive use of websites and ask for member suggestions to improve communications every year.

7. If a mortuary colleges is within 150 miles of your firm, include students in association board meetings. If there's no college in your area, think about funding students so they can attend meetings and/or conventions. It will benefit an association's future to bring students into active roles during school and provisional practice. This not only provides networking with strong role models but also encourages the student's valuable input and a lifelong participation in their state's professional association.

8. Offer discounted membership to new graduates who go to work for firms or funeral directors under 40 years of age who are not association members. Make it possible for these young directors to continue to take part in association activities. The new directors' enthusiasm may bring their non-member firm into the association as active members.

9. Offer webinars that can be downloaded. These do not necessarily need to be CEs, but -- instead -- an offering limited to members only that will be of value to their daily duties.

10. Continue to elect leadership who are visionaries. To survive, associations need leaders with a definite vision for the association's future. Especially with older associations, the founding members had one vision -- for a time that has come and gone. Today's leaders must have a vision that aligns with the new century of funeral service, the new generations and their attitudes toward death as well as their individual needs after the loss of a loved one.

11. Because more women are enrolling in mortuary school and are becoming directors across the country, associations need to accommodate and embrace women with the same recognition their

male counterparts have enjoyed over the decades.

12. NFDA should lead the charge in this still rather young century. For example, how many women have been NFDA president? How many woman have gone through the chairs. Are more women now serving on boards? Why has NFDA not organized an LGBTQ group similar to the Women's group? How many young leaders are setting NFDA policy? Are young people -- mortuary school students as well as young directors -- being given a voice on the national level? How many young directors are being invited to the Advocacy Summit every year? Why aren't officers mentoring new leaders into committees and boards?

Is your association stuck in the '80s or '90s? If it is, this is a short-lived luxury. Don't let too many years pass before your association has outlived its usefulness. By changing with the times, by considering the needs of younger and future directors, your professional association can remain a vibrant and relevant organization for the ever-changing funeral service profession, serving our nation's families.

Funeral service is evolving at a record-setting pace, compared to funeral service in the '70s or '80s. Cremation rates continue to climb. More firms are building pavilions or community spaces. Funeral homes are offering cremation services and many firms are excelling as event planners -- which, in most cases, create new income streams.

If this pace continues, professional associations are going to have to keep up in order to stay relevant. Otherwise, directors will invest themselves and their resources in local business groups, leadership organizations and roundtables that offer more tangible tools and experiences.