

Editorial

Why Belong to an Association?

(This article was written by John Bebeck, President of the Engineering Contractors Association. It appeared in the July, 1978 issue of Journal of Commerce.)

How many times have you been asked to join an association — or asked why you belong to an association — or what can an association “do for me?” Theodore Roosevelt put it very aptly when he said, “Every man owes a part of his time and money to the business or the industry in which he is engaged. No man has moral right to withhold his support from an organization that is striving to improve conditions within his sphere.”

Since it costs money to belong to an association, it is logical to ask “What can an association do for me?” A probable answer could be nothing! An association can do things with you (with your support, expertise, cooperation, etc.), but not for you, per se. Apply the same principles to your business — it can't do anything for you unless you do something for it.

You invest money in a business as well as your time and energy. The degree of success depends on the talents, time and energy expended, even more than the amount of money invested.

The same holds true for associations. The dues dollars represent an investment, just as it does in one's business. There are certain functions and services which the association, acting in concert with its membership, can perform — but to be successful in its efforts, the association requires the support and involvement of its members. It needs the collective thinking of all concerned to formulate plans, and it requires the physical effort of its membership to put those plans into operation.

A recent survey indicates that 85% of all economic failures were firms not connected with a trade association. It would appear also that the businessman who rebels against paying association dues is always the first to criticize and to say that an association does him no good. However, he is always on the front line to take the benefits that come his way as a result of the association and its dues-paying members. These benefits just don't happen. They are the result of a lot of hand work and effort by a great number of individuals who devote time and energy to get the tasks done.

Just as 100 individuals going their separate ways in trying to dam a river — dig a tunnel or build a highway — would result in disorganized chaos, so it is with industry aims which lack the power of an association effect. But, just as the efforts of those 100 individuals (organized under a single leadership with mutually-agreed plans and specs) can dam that river, push a tunnel through or get a highway down — so does an association function, by taking many small parts and joining them into a cohesive mass that gives the group power.

But, there is more to association membership benefits. One, which is pure bonus, is the benefit of business coming one's way simply because of membership. Given equal cost and service, association members just naturally prefer to do business with those who share the load of maintaining their trade group. Many have found that this “fringe” benefit will more than offset dues and other costs of participation. That makes it a refutation, so to speak, for the old adage, “you can't eat your cake and have it, too.”

Granted that benefits of association membership are many and varied, there still are those who fail to see how it will benefit them. My answer to this group is simply, “Come on in and find out. Get your feet wet.”

Associations, after all, are a lot like insurance. When one has no problems, he has no need for insurance. When he does have a problem, if he doesn't have insurance, it's too late for it to help.