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BUILDING A STRONG ASSOCIATION

Over the last few years in my involvement with the launch of the International Golf Course Equipment Managers Association, I've gained a lot of experience regarding association work. When founding the IGCEMA I sought the advice of peers, manufacturers and other associations to set up a strong foundation that could be built upon. Much of what I learned about leadership and brand building I gained from my current employer. Let's face it, no one is going to join an association they've never heard of, so it must be advertised and promoted. Associations need to be built strong to weather the tough times. The economy is not helping, as is people's unwillingness and/or ability to donate their time. So how do you combat these issues?

Almost everyone reading this column belongs to some sort of association, whether they're superintendents, technicians or the editors looking over this article.

I've learned some people want to be involved in organizations, but most of them would rather be a member without responsibility or commitment. This is fine, but what's going to make them attend a meeting or pay their dues next year?

Associations have to be creative in their offerings to the membership to keep their interest, and they have to be willing to change from the norm while remaining focused on the core objectives.

If you want your members to be active within the association, you have to keep them engaged and the only way to do that is to provide something appealing to them. It's easy to go out and find a speaker, but find someone no one has heard before so it's not the same presentation everyone heard last year. Look for topics that are relevant

to today's tasks. Look for ways to "wow" members and you'll keep them coming back.

It's great to have all the insurance programs, shirts and bumper stickers, but many members just want to be kept up to date on the industry, whether it's with the Web site, newsletter or just simple e-mails.

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They want to know what's happening with their association, other associations, manufacturers, suppliers and members; they want industry news (and gossip maybe), and they want forums where they can air opinions, exchange ideas and chat about problems. Communication is the key; if someone sends you an e-mail regarding an idea or a question, make it a standard practice to reply right away.

It's challenging to keep an association going much less continue to add programs. However, managing those programs and not letting the programs manage you is how to stay ahead.

Create focus groups and committees to help remove some of the workload, be trusting and delegate where you can; you'll find there are individuals out there who are leaders and want to take on projects, but you have to be willing to give them the chance. Where else will you find other association leaders if there are no opportunities for newcomers to serve or gain experience?

If you're having a tough time getting people involved, then you need to explain the benefits to the industry as well as the personal benefits of stepping up and getting involved. Post the success stories of where leaders were before they got involved and where they are now.

Many associations struggle from either the lack of or too much leadership. If you make the decision to lead an association you're making the commitment not only for yourself, but also for those hundreds or thousands of members who are depending on you for their professional growth.

There are many personalities involved in association work and adapting to each one will make you more successful in leading your team and membership. Many people who get involved in the administration of associations are leaders themselves, so it's important that you work together as a team.

Good leaders with vision and the diligence to see projects through make an association succeed. Remember, members are looking for a place to network with their industry peers and stay educated on issues. Don't lose focus of these objectives.

The brand you build with your association – the dependability, vision, financial responsibility and dedication that you provide to your membership – will improve the marketability of your association and encourage companies to advertise, members to join and your board members to remain open to future direction.

No one said it's easy to step up as a leader of an association and put your head above the parapet, but the satisfaction you get from your service reaches way beyond the time you spend in office. **GCI**