

FROM THE FIELD

Return on relationships: Getting the most from industry organizations

BY DAN FOLEY CONTRIBUTING WRITER

At the end of every year, I write membership renewal checks to the myriad alphabet soup of trade associations and groups I belong to: ACCA, RHC, PHCC, PMPV, NCI, RPA, ASES and ASHRAE are among the ones that come to mind. The total adds up quickly, and I reflect on how each organization benefits my company and whether it's worth the cost to belong.

I participate more in some organizations than in others, and I serve on the boards of my local ACCA chapter and state PHCC chapter. I'm also past officer of RPA and PMPV (Plumbing and Mechanical Professionals of Virginia) and current chair of ACCA's RHC (Radiant & Hydronics Council).

In my ongoing communications with fellow contractors locally and nationally, I often encourage them to join and participate in trade associations that I believe will benefit them. I'm often asked, "What will it do for me?"

An analogous question would be to ask what your gym membership will do for you. The answer is, "Nothing," if you don't show up and participate. You get out of it what you put into it. No trade association or affinity group will magically create value for you and your company. There's no cruise control when it comes to association membership and participation.

While these organizations can and do provide tremendous benefit to members, they are not a magic panacea that will automatically improve your business. I've found that the dues are only a fraction of the "cost" of membership. The key is to capitalize on the investment to maximize your return by becoming involved and participating. By this, I mean having a presence at membership meetings, attending educational seminars and classes, serving on committees and eventually chairing committees and serving in leadership positions within the association.

I look back at all the time I've spent in various organizations going to board meetings, membership meetings, trade shows and conferences, seminars and workshops, and also presenting seminars. I've made lasting friendships, and the social aspects alone have been worth the price of membership. I've enjoyed the satisfaction of contributing my own thought leadership, and I've also benefitted greatly by learning from others.

By far, the single biggest benefit has been networking; meeting key industry contacts who have supported my business. When I attend an event such as the AHR show in Chicago, it's not all fun and games. Sure, there are plenty of social gatherings with industry friends. But I also schedule meetings with key suppliers and the trade press and meet with prospective suppliers. If I am having problems with a certain product, I will schedule time with that manufacturer so that we can meet face-to-face. I've found this to be the best way to resolve issues quickly to mutual satisfaction.

There simply is no substitute for this one-on-one time

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with your industry partners. Phone calls, emails and other written communications cannot replace this. It is so very important for your partners to know you, know what you are about and understand what you do.

I also take the time to meet with the marketing staff of key suppliers. I let them know what I am doing and what upcoming projects we have that showcase their products. The goal is to get our projects featured in case studies and project stories in the trade press and other publications. This publicity is an extremely valuable marketing tool when trying to close future deals with prospective clients.

I have found committee work to be among not only the most challenging volunteer positions but also the most rewarding. I have also found that committee work is rarely done by committee. Usually, it is done by just one or two individuals who roll up their sleeves and get the job done.

Case in point: Our ACCA chapter recently hosted my friend and mentor Dan Holohan for a one-day "Lost Art of Steam" seminar. As chair of the education committee, it was my responsibility to coordinate the event, along with the chapter executive director. Two weeks before the seminar, I was informed that there were still 20 spots available. I reached out to Jeff Riley, vice president at Thos. Somerville Co., to request his help.

I knew Jeff would deliver, and he did. Through his sales staff, contacts, customers and email list, he put the word out, and within a few days the event was sold out. I will remember Jeff's tireless efforts as I make purchasing decisions for my company.

So, just as with that gym membership, you really do get out of it what you put into it. In my experience, the networking and one-on-one time and relationship building is an invaluable investment. ●

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