

When the Going Gets Tough, the Tough Turn to Professional Associations

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By Kim Douglas

When the economy is in a slump, most of us look for ways to reduce spending, ruthlessly slashing every expenditure that doesn't deliver direct bottom-line benefit. But sometimes well-intended cost-cutting can fall victim to the law of unintended consequences.

Take professional organization membership, for example. You might think your annual dues, event fees and other association costs are fat that can be trimmed until the economy picks up. In fact, your association membership should be one of the last items cut from a tight budget because its value actually increases during tough times. Here's why:

Association membership lends credibility.

In challenging times, potential customers and clients will seek extra assurance that they are dealing with a competent and careful practitioner before committing to a project. Your membership signals to them your high professional standards and standing within a group of your peers.

Association membership gives visibility.

Becoming an active member, attending events, serving on committees and task forces, and participating in special projects give you visibility not only within your profession but within the community as well. As you gain stature within the organization, you are more likely to be viewed as an expert in your field, with potential opportunity to shape policy as well as secure new business. Gail Barry, president and principal in Land Mark Design, Inc., noted that "reinforcing the importance of one's profession is particularly important when work is slow. Being involved with my professional group, the Colorado Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects

(CCASLA), means my voice can be heard and I can influence what is happening in a way that might help us all."

Association membership opens doors.

Networking is one of the most valuable benefits your professional association can provide. At meetings and events you can gain insights and learn about trends from talking with fellow members and become known to leaders in your profession. Effective networking can definitely increase marketability, Barry said. "My involvement with CCASLA and other organizations has provided me connections not only to people within my own profession but also to those in allied professions and the public. One never knows when the most casual contacts might result in a job possibility."

Association membership builds careers.

If your career is just getting off the ground, make joining a professional association a top priority. Many professional groups even have college chapters for undergraduates who want to get a jump start on their new careers. Association membership puts young professionals in front of many potential employers, and volunteering for activities within the group will develop and showcase your leadership abilities. Be sure to participate on national committees and work groups to expand your visibility beyond the local scene and gain exposure to different kinds of projects than may be available locally. And don't forget to add your association membership and responsibilities to your résumé - employers value initiative and know your achievements in the group will reflect favorably on their business.

Association membership develops skills.

Almost every professional and trade organization offers continuing education programs that will develop their members' skills and enhance their marketability. Such programs can

improve your technical know-how, help you become a better negotiator, learn leadership skills, develop marketing savvy and much more. If you have special expertise in one facet of your profession, you can also teach a course and become a recognized expert in that area. In short, a business downturn can be an excellent time to invest in your future.

Association membership cements relationships.

Joining and participating in your professional organization puts you shoulder to shoulder with your profession's leaders, both locally and nationally. "Serving on the [CCASLA] executive committee has given me the opportunity to guide and mold the future of our profession and to grow professionally through regular interaction with the leaders of our profession," commented Dennis Brookie, a senior associate at Wenk Associates, Inc. "This in turn promotes my own and my firm's marketability throughout our sphere of influence and among industry partners."

Association membership provides exposure to new ideas and practices.

Whether it's casual conversation at a professional get-together or a formal presentation at a national meeting, your professional association is a virtual petri dish for innovative thinking. Your fellow members can be a rich source of ideas, information and even inspiration.

To sum up, if you want to rise to the top of your profession, you need your professional organization. Through that membership, you'll become better at your work and better at your business. And because of the benefits your active participation provides, you may very well make more money - even in these tough times.

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