

Associations – You belong here!

by Rene Young

What does it say about you when you belong to your regional or provincial trades association? What does it say about you if you choose not to belong?

As a member, you can tap into these resources and keep up to date, which can help you make good business decisions. Otherwise, you may end up “learning the hard way.”

If you don't like something and want to change it, you must work from the inside. If you don't, you really have no right to complain, do you?

Simply put, it says whether or not you care. It answers the question; do you care about the industry in which you've decided to make a living? You know – the very thing that determines what kind of lifestyle you and your family will have, what your retirement will look like and what your legacy will be.

Being a member of the association that serves as the collective voice for your industry is like a confirmation that you are a bona fide member of that industry. Without that, those in the industry who *are* members may look upon you as an imposter.

It's not snobbery. They have made the effort and the investment required to facilitate the industry having a say in its own destiny. In the case of the association leaders, the investment in volunteered time can be substantial, yet you will never hear them complain. They do it for the common good. And yet, for every trade association member there are probably one or more non-members who ride on the coattails of the association's achievements.

Joining your trade association is voluntary. It is the voluntary nature of membership that sets members apart from non-members. It says a great deal more about you than a business license. While they are not legally bound to attain membership status, there is a moral obligation felt by those who truly care. And publicly demonstrating that you care can only result in positives.

It's not about qualifying for discounts on products and services, although most trade associations do also act as a buyers' group and offer members some financial benefits that may in themselves offset membership fees.

They're not social clubs, although most trade associations do host social events throughout the year, like golf tournaments and banquets. These are great opportunities to rub shoulders with peers and learn a thing or two. Many lasting and fulfilling friendships and business relationships have their beginnings at association gatherings.

Trade associations are not the same as trade unions, although many trade associations represent industry in negotiations and collective bargaining agreements. This is particularly true of collision repair associations in the three western provinces with public

insurance, where this is the only way to match the bargaining power of the dominant corporations.

All levels of government, be it federal, provincial or municipal, make decisions that affect business. In many cases they invite input from stakeholders before finalizing a new regulation or law. Let's face it, politicians and bureaucrats are not experts in every field and sometimes can't see the trees for the forest when they decide to support a cause or initiative. So they need guidance from those who *are* experts in the applicable fields affected by proposed changes in front of them. This too is where your trade association represents your interests. Through the association's participation in liaison and advisory committees, your message is delivered to those who need to hear it. The governments appreciate the assistance this gives them as they try to do what is best for the greater majority. That is a relationship you, as an individual businessman, simply don't have the opportunity to develop on your own.

Information about all of these things and more flows through your association. They are usually the first to know about anything that may affect your business. As a member, you can tap into these resources and keep up to date, which can help you make good business decisions. Otherwise, you may end up "learning the hard way."

And speaking of learning, you will find that your association can connect you to the training you and your employees need in order to keep up with advances in automotive technology. Keeping ahead of that curve will ultimately prevent costly mistakes and perhaps even injuries. To quote an article from one of last year's issues of Collision Quarterly, if you think education is expensive, try ignorance!

With all of the above, you'd think there are enough compelling reasons for all businesses in a given industry to be members of their association. In some industries, most businesses do belong to their associations. In the automotive sector, this is not always the case.

So what is it? Apathy? Denial? Ignorance? If any of those three are the prevailing reason a business is not a member, then that business owner must not be paying attention, and that does not bode well for his future. Maybe they don't agree with something the association is doing. Well, that's why associations hold regular meetings and elect directors from within the membership. The members decide what the association should do and the paid staff executes it. If you don't like something and want to change it, you must work from the inside. If you don't, you really have no right to complain, do you?

If you are a member of your association, you are a part owner. And as an owner, you have a vested interest in the association's success. The more businesses the association represents, the more clout it has. So you are a direct beneficiary when your association grows. How can you help it grow? Refer new members. Go and talk to the non-member competitor down the road. Working together on issues of common interest will not interfere with your ability to compete with each other. But maybe those common issues are holding you both back from the success you should be enjoying.

The bottom line is, for more than enough reasons, you belong here!