
Your Bottom Line

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Members make the association

Photographers sometimes complain that they don't belong to professional associations—local, state, regional, or national—because such groups are run by “cliques” that don't represent the interests of all members or potential members.

While no organization can possibly be all things to all people, membership in a professional organization is extremely important—both for individual members and for the profession as a whole. In fact, one of the criteria that separates a “profession” from an “occupation” is that the former fosters professional associations to represent its members.

Professional associations, unlike labor unions, do not consider as their primary objective the improvement of working conditions and pay. Instead, associations actively promote the welfare of professions through a variety of activities—publishing a professional journal, researching new areas, assisting in marketing, monitoring the behavior and ethics of association members, and giving the members a unified voice in political matters.

This is precisely the role of the Professional Photographers of America. The PP of A is to photography what the American Medical Association is to medicine, the American Dental Association is to dentistry, and the National Education Association is to teaching.

Although the PP of A has more than 17,500 active members, nearly 80 percent of the professional photographers in the United States do not belong. To illustrate this point, compare the number of members in *Who's Who in Professional Photography*, the PP of A directory, for any given city with the number of listings for photographers in the same city's phone book. While everyone benefits from the work of PP of A, the organization is limited in what it accomplishes as compared to what it could do if a greater percentage of professional photographers joined.

The structure of PP of A and its regional, state, and local affiliates is such that it encourages membership by all legitimate professional photographers. Many

of those who do join, however, stop at basic membership. Yet it takes a great deal of effort and time to operate a professional association, most of which is offered on a volunteer basis.

As a result, the most active members tend to rise to positions of leadership. As is typical in any group, whether PP of A, Kiwanis or Rotary, some individuals start to do more than simply attending an occasional meeting. They help out in various activities and as they become recognized, move up the ladder to positions of greater responsibility. Individuals in leadership positions often hold those positions for long periods of time, but usually this is due to a lack of willing replacements, rather than a tendency toward cliquishness.

In the past, PP of A has been criticized for being too conservative—not stepping forward to rally for each new idea that comes along. But actually, a professional organization's role is to maintain stability, moving ahead cautiously. Splinter groups, on the other hand, have the luxury of diving full speed into the unknown, although this can wreak havoc when the unknown becomes inhospitable. A major professional association cannot run that risk, both for its own sake and for its members' well-being. Note how cautiously the American Medical Association deliberates before endorsing a new product or idea.

Furthermore, while members are responsible to take an active part in guiding their professional association, no particular faction should ever be permitted to take over—the results can be disastrous.

I recently attended a national meeting of photographic educators, not a PP of A-related group, and was more than shocked at the program. It featured an address titled, “How To Be Promiscuous In The Midst Of An Epidemic.” No, this was no play on words; the program covered the title topic. Surprisingly, this program was sponsored by a major supplier that probably didn't know what their sponsorship donation was used for. Another program

examined high-heeled-shoe fetishes!

This is a classic example of what can happen when a splinter group successfully takes over an organization. The group that evolved differed considerably from the original one. More than likely, a lack of active involvement by the majority of members allowed an active minority to gain control. When that happens, members who don't agree with the organization's new direction may drop out. And yet if more of the regular members were active, the minority would never have gained control.

Unfortunately, an organization that goes too far astray dies or comes close to death before it returns to normality, or it becomes a vehicle for a sole splinter group. For this reason, successful professional associations remain middle-of-the-road.

Any professional association exists to serve the needs of its members: if it fails to do this, it will disappear. Fortunately, PP of A provides members with a wide variety of services, not the least of which is *Professional Photographer* magazine. This journal is one of the association's vehicles for presenting differing points of view. Of course, numerous other services include educational programs, insurance, trade shows, awards, degree programs, and certification.

Professional photography would certainly not be what it is today if not for the foresighted PP of A founders and for those thousands who have devoted so much time and energy to continue the association's existence.

Whether you are a PP of A member or not, your year-end bottom line is a little healthier because your professional organization exists. In some cases, it is the reason you exist in this business at all. As a professional, it is your responsibility to become involved in your professional association. ■