

## THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS IN ACHIEVING SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION SUCCESS

*Ben Northcutt*

Executive Director, International Erosion Control Association, Steamboat Springs, Colorado USA

### **Abstract**

Organized groups of people who share a common interest have been in existence since the ancient times of China and Egypt. These groups, which in this paper are referred to as associations, serve many purposes, the most fundamental of which is to provide information. The value and influence of an association lies in the collective strength of its individual members. This fact is important to remember when we identify the roles that international organizations can and should play in the arena of soil and water conservation. In order for any organization to be effective at achieving its mission, it must have a solid foundation of individuals, know and meet their needs and continue to adapt to the dynamics of today's information systems as well as globalization.

For international associations to see expedient improvements in soil and water conservation, they must recognize that their roles embrace far more than merely publishing papers or newsletters. They must provide knowledge-based resources that satisfy the needs of their members. Since information has become essentially a commodity with the advent of the internet, associations who fail to provide real action/solution based knowledge may face declining memberships, thereby reducing their ability to effect environmental change.

This paper describes five major roles that provide the framework for consistent association value and growth, which is the necessary requirement for achieving sustained soil and water conservation success. The roles are fundamental, yet vital objectives that ultimately lead to environmental benefits. The paper concludes by identifying four factors that associations must address to remain relevant, viable and effective as agents of change.

### **Introduction**

Historians believe that since the days of ancient China and Egypt, organized groups of people have convened to share a common interest. Trade groups maintained protective regulations in Roman times, while sailing merchants of ancient Phoenicia often banded together to form mutual-aid societies. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, organizations began to emerge as true associations. Throughout much of western Europe, merchants and artisans joined together in powerful guilds that governed production, monitored sales, maintained training programs, reviewed wages, and inspected finished products. The first professional society, the Academia Secretorum Naturae of Naples, was formed to collect and disseminate knowledge.

Associations as we know them today exist for a variety of reasons that include dissemination of information, education, advocacy, events, and government lobbying. In essence, associations connect people who share a common interest, activity or purpose. This connection serves to make the whole (the association) greater than the sum of its parts (the members) by pooling resources and expertise. Herein lies a fundamental value of an association – its collective strength is far greater than that of any individual member.

Despite the abundance and proliferation of associations, their continued existence is by no means guaranteed. With the relatively recent advent of the internet and the steady globalization of business, today's association must stay alert to the needs of its members and be innovative enough to sustain value so that its mission can be fulfilled. There are several international organizations represented at ISCO 2004 whose missions are similar, which is conserving and protecting our soil and water resources. The focus of this paper is to examine the roles that these and other similar organizations play in the overall quest to protect and improve our environment's soil and water. What is their role in the big picture? How can they be effective vehicles for measurable success? How must they adapt to insure viability?

### **The Five Roles**

This paper will describe a list of roles that provide the framework to achieve sustained soil and water conservation success. Though relatively general in nature, these roles represent fundamental, yet vital association objectives that can produce significant benefits to the environment. The five roles are:

1. To provide education that improves skills and knowledge
2. To create a community that is rich in government, business, knowledge and people connections

3. To represent member interests to government officials and to shape public policy through advocacy and political involvement
4. To advance the mission and cause of the association
5. To establish credibility to the profession and members

How are these roles brought into play and what benefit do they offer? A brief discussion of each role will provide some answers.

### *Education*

One of the traditional roles that associations have played, and played well, is the ability to provide members with information that can't be found anywhere else. From market surveys to business tips to technological advances, associations have long attracted members for their ability to provide exclusive information. But in today's age of the internet and other high tech communication systems, you can find information, and vast quantities of it, on almost any topic you can think of. The volume of information, which has grown essentially into a commodity, can be overwhelming.

Once a valuable domain for associations, information is no longer a unique selling point to attract members. And without members, associations will wither away. Therefore, today's association must adapt to an exponentially greater inventory of non-association information while delivering enough value from other sources to maintain the integrity of the organization.

For example, a traditional product of many associations is a proceedings, a publication that compiles papers presented at a conference. Now that information has literally become a commodity, a simple proceedings of one event is not enough to garner the sustained loyalty of a member. Today's successful association needs to produce more than a collection of technical papers. It needs to provide knowledge-based resources that facilitate learning specific to the individual needs of the member and in the most time efficient manner. New delivery methods, more powerful search tools and easier ways to discuss issues are essential ingredients for providing value-based knowledge. The more effective an association is at this goal, the more attractive it becomes to potential and existing members and the better the members will be at solving soil and water problems.

Here are just a few examples of knowledge-oriented tools that go well beyond the traditional proceedings and newsletters:

- Email list serves that target specific interest groups – if your specialty is water quality, a list serve that reaches all other water quality experts in your group facilitates discussion and solutions from the best people in the association for water quality.
- Meetings that offer a format and time frame most desirable to the attendees – presentations come in many types from highly technical, research based papers to discussion forums to full day courses. The right mix for the audience maximizes their ability to learn in the time they can afford to take.
- Combining traditional classroom training with hands-on field demonstrations. There's no better way to transform classroom information into useful knowledge than adding a field demonstration where the realities of actual field applications reinforce or challenge textbook theory.
- Desk-based learning – the personal computer offers convenience, flexibility and affordability. Any learning that can be provided to an individual via the computer is likely to be embraced as a viable alternative to more expensive and time consuming meetings. IECA's digital education is a notable example of bringing classroom training to the desktop. This format captures the presentation via video and combines it on one screen in synchronization with the presenter's PowerPoint slides.
- On-line bookstores – websites can provide detailed and searchable descriptions of current publications as well as convenient ordering processes.

Whatever the tool, it should be focused on maximizing the member's ability to learn. As the learning increases, so does the value of the association and the success rate its members enjoy when solving soil and water conservation problems. But a word of caution. It takes frequent efforts to determine what the membership of an association truly needs in terms of knowledge based resources. Without understanding their needs, much time and money can be wasted in providing tools that may seem like a good idea, but are not embraced by the end user.

### *Community*

The concept of community within an association may not be inherently understood or appreciated, but its value is significant. The association community consists of a complex set of interactions, similar to the community you live in. It can combine business, social, political, environmental, educational and even cultural elements that enrich your professional life. As a member of an association, you become a “resident” of a community that offers many doors of opportunity, depending on the elements you participate in.

It is the community that associations represent that has the power to accomplish great things. The smart association is one that creates a community that embraces, among other things, ethnic diversity, broad geographical representation, gender balance, variability of skills and affordable convenience. If associations can foster a tangible sense of community among its members, they can accommodate a wider range of individual interests, thereby helping sustain the association’s existence and expanding its range of influence. Simple things such as multiple language options or recognition programs (e.g. awards) can enhance an individual’s sense of belonging and desire for further participation in the association community.

Most communities that we live in have a fairly predictable distribution of age classes, ranging from infants to senior citizens. Associations that consist of only one or just a few age classes limit the richness of their community and the ability for inter-generational discourse. Therefore, another important role that associations should play is to educate and involve as many different age classes as possible. Blending the energy and inquisitiveness of youth with the seasoned experience of veterans provides a win-win situation for all ages.

An association’s diverse community offers problem solvers multiple avenues to explore for successful solutions. But diversity does not necessarily come easily or quickly. It takes a conscious and sustained effort to develop an association’s community of expertise. But when achieved, the association then becomes a far more versatile and credible entity.

### *Representing member interests to government*

A primary role of many associations is to help shape public policy and influence voting decisions. Associations are vital sources of research, data and trends and often provide valuable background for legislation, testimony, campaigning and media. Furthermore, the right of a citizen to petition his government is basic to our democratic way of life, and associations are among the most effective vehicles for promoting citizen participation in legislative processes.

Representing members’ interests to governments is a way in which associations can realize greater achievements with respect to their mission. By connecting members with their government, associations establish a dual gateway – members can express their opinions to elected officials who in turn can utilize any number of association venues (meetings, publications, web sites) to communicate with the constituents they serve. To begin the process, though, an association must frequently query its membership to determine what issues are important and at what level of government (local, regional, national). Subsequently, associations need to identify the appropriate government offices and officials who are best positioned to address the issues and who is most appropriate to represent the members (the members themselves, committees, Board members or lobbyists). Finally, it is helpful to educate members as to the process by which public policy is forged so that members’ expectations and time frames are realistic.

Since soil and water conservation is typically supported and impacted by government, it is reasonable that related associations strive to facilitate regular and sustained member involvement with government entities from local to national levels. Lacking this relationship, associations diminish their value proposition to members and ability to effect sound soil and water management.

### *Mission and cause*

Besides the knowledge that associations inherently provide, members are often attracted to an association because of the cause that is being championed. In the environmental arena, there are many organizations whose cause can inspire impressive levels of passion, dedication and action. An association that has clearly defined mission and vision statements offers members and other interested parties a concise description of the association’s purpose and its future direction. These two statements make it easier for potential members to assess the alignment between their individual beliefs and those of the association.

Many associations, despite a well articulated cause, may not realize the growth nor influence it desires due to a number of factors. Even if the association's purpose for existence is politically dynamic or notably relevant to contemporary environmental issues, such relevance may not guarantee substantial achievement. One of the biggest obstacles an association can face in achieving its true potential is a lack of public, government and industry awareness. A key factor in this situation is a lack of money and/or expertise to properly market the association and maintain steady public relations efforts. This is unfortunate as there are many worthy organizations, especially in the environmental field, that could realize stronger growth and influence if only they could improve their awareness factor. Not an easy problem to solve, but when it is, it can literally launch an association into the forefront of its profession, thereby attracting more potential members as well as important media and government attention.

To implement a successful awareness campaign, an association must first clearly define its audience by asking the question "Who needs to hear our message?" The difficult part is securing the resources to properly disseminate the message, not to mention creating a message that is clear and compelling. Nevertheless, just like in any for-profit, commercial venture, regular and consistent exposure to the association's brand, name and message helps insure growth and opportunities.

### *Credibility*

Associations offer credibility to a profession or cause as well as to individual members. Peer-reviewed publications, conferences, training courses, market studies, research, out reach programs, partnerships with other organizations, student scholarships, government involvement and recognition programs all contribute to establishing credibility for the association and for those who participate. Since associations consist of people who share a common interest and seek common knowledge, they serve to collect the best information and knowledge available regarding the common interest. This generates credibility because few other sources can match the focused resource base of the association.

In addition, association sponsored certification programs add yet another level of credibility. These programs typically require a demonstrated level of knowledge, education and/or professional experience to obtain certification. Those who obtain certification can be called upon as credible resources because their knowledge and skills have been essentially pre-qualified.

How does credibility relate to soil and water conservation success? First, it identifies a viable resource of specialists who can quickly assess and solve problems. Second, it strengthens the ability of the association to effect change for better soil and water conservation policies. And third, it helps grow the association and profession by attracting new players, those who want to tap new opportunities and associate with success. By growing the association, credibility helps sustain the strength in numbers concept, which in turns generates more influence for the association and, ultimately, more benefits for the environment.

### **Conclusion**

Since there is no single worldwide association or organization whose mission is to conserve soil and water resources, we must depend on a variety of existing (and future) organizations to play this role. Despite limited resources, the international organizations represented at ISCO are helping in this worldwide cause. However, success doesn't happen without action and action comes from individuals. If international organizations are to sustain success, measurable in terms of improved environmental quality, then they need to meet the needs of their individual members. To emphasize an earlier statement, the power of an association (in this case to achieve soil and water conservation success) resides in the collective strength of its members. And if the membership withers, the association's effectiveness diminishes and success will occur at unacceptably slow rates or not at all.

The roles described in this paper are valid and will produce successful results. But while playing these roles, associations must not be content with their operating status quo. There are four factors, that if overlooked or ignored, could reduce association's ability to sustain success. First, associations will thrive if they deliver application driven knowledge, not mere information. Second, associations must anticipate and be prepared for competition. Commercial (for profit) businesses are stepping into arenas formerly held by associations. With greater resources, the for profit businesses can provide equal or greater value, thereby siphoning off members and diluting the strength of the association. Third, associations must embrace different expectations and needs of upcoming generations. Failure in this regard can deprive an association of valuable skills, perspectives and opportunities. Finally, associations need to regularly evaluate their business and governance models. Globalization, for example, demands an understanding of cultural differences. Does the association conduct its

business in only one currency or one language? Is the leadership representative of the geographical distribution of its members? Are there barriers for participation in one part of the world that are absent in another? Some of these are formidable challenges, but ignoring them will only weaken an association's value.

Associations have long been recognized as integral elements of change. In the case of ISCO 2004, the change we seek is better management of soil so that it is not lost or degraded. We seek better tools to keep water clean and biologically healthy. The international soil and water conservation organizations represented at this conference and elsewhere will only be as effective in achieving their missions as their ability to play the roles outlined above. The roles are fundamental, but absolutely essential for sustaining the value of the association, building strength through numbers, and creating action that accomplishes goals and solve problems. The ultimate role, though, goes further yet. This is the role that fuels the spirit and mind of the individual, who, in concert with his association peers, sees no limits to what can be accomplished.