

## What Do I Do? What I Do Shapes America

By Trish Hudson, MPsSc and Jim Hudson, Ph.D.

**Y**ou have one of the most extraordinary jobs in America.

You do.

It might not feel that way, especially when asked, "What do you do?"

Nothing generates more angst than trying to answer that! How does one describe the remarkable work that *association professionals* do when so few understand the role and contributions made by their remarkable organizations?

The work you do is purposeful from shaping the direction of a single member's career to advancing the future of an entire profession, trade, or personal avocation. You may not feel as though your efforts "make waves." Rest assured that at minimum you "make the ripples" necessary to affect change. Furthermore, you are not alone. Hundreds of thousands of professionals like you in a great many associations nationwide work tirelessly to advance every sector of our society.

Such an undertaking can only occur in a society where citizens are free to mobilize to advance their collective interests. What you do doesn't just make a difference it helps shape and influence decisions that produce social change.

How extraordinary is that?

### Reflections of Contributions Made

For many years association professionals have faithfully mentored one another in an effort to perfect their craft. These collective efforts to build and shape the association management profession – member to member – generally go unnoticed because the impact on the individual is generally personal; the collective changes evolutionary.

Anniversary celebrations within societies of association professionals often prompt their members to reflect on how the organization contributes to a member's professional advancement and how this profession plays an integral role in shaping and advancing a complex and sophisticated society.

Associations are vital to the future of our democracy.

Their emergence and development in America was not simply the result of centuries of emulation from other cultures. Nor did they proliferate because of Alexis de Tocqueville's astute observations upon visiting the newly formed Republic. The story that needs to be told about associations is how their inherent roots were established within the framework of the New Republic.

### Membership-based Organizations (MBOs): A Truly American Phenomenon

Our founders came to these shores believing that individuals were endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights and moral responsibilities.

They drew upon these inherent values to establish a society where *nearly* everyone could be the architect of his or her "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness." While not all were given the same freedoms at the same time, they built a governance system flexible enough to adapt; enable the nation to evolve into a better union.

No one understood this better than John Adams, America's second president. As a revolutionary, he saw first-hand that more could be accomplished collectively than individually. He recognized that a nation founded on democratic principles and a representational form of governance would generate challenges. Some would seek to gain influence. He suspected that some would be more adept at mobilizing their voices to secure government support over others, especially individual citizens. But he believed in collective action. He incorporated this concept into the nation's system of governance.

Laws and norms since have been created to serve and protect the common good. And with that the freedom for people to mobilize to redress their government. We often take-for-granted the freedom we have to mobilize as citizens when threatened or challenged. We fail to recognize the significant risk the Founding Fathers took in establishing this principle. Their foresight, courage and conviction



embedded opportunities in American society for the emergence, development and proliferation of associations.

The freedom of assembly created an unusual laboratory where ideas could be shared, exchanged and advanced. The Founding Fathers were well aware of how these channels could be blocked or compromised. They embedded into the constitution a framework of governance and in the first ten amendments a set of principles that protected the individuals' rights and liberties. These empowering concepts and principles were incorporated into the governance documents and organizational values that guide associations to this today. In a world filled with monarchies and dictatorships, consider how unprecedented this kind of governance was. It was mocked by Old World leaders as folly with little chance to survive. They afforded our Founding Fathers little respect.

Adams also believed with this freedom came personal responsibility - a social compact in which the "whole people covenants with each citizen and each citizen with the whole people." The people could organize to petition their government. They could also mobilize to advance their own collective interests. He advocated for education because a well-educated citizenry would to make more informed decisions.

The steps taken by our Founding Fathers created an environment and framework for voluntary associations - more specifically - **membership-based organizations (MBOs)** to emerge to advance a "special interest."

MBOs differ from other voluntary nonprofit organizations. They are established when a group of like-minded people mobilize willingly to *advance their interests by organizing to promote and protect a specific domain*. Only a few such organizations existed in the early days of the Republic; approximately 5,000 just before World War II. Since then, they have proliferated in response to the growing sophistication and complexity of our society. Their exact numbers are unknown but current estimates in the U.S. range between 125,000-150,000.

When you think about it this way, all of us have a *special interest*. Instead of being disparaged, it should be recognized as a means to contribute to a vibrant democracy.

Many believe that MBOs emerged in America in response to a governmental threat or challenge. Rarely true. The vast majority of the over 400 published histories reviewed at the Melos Institute revealed that almost all were established as a means to build credibility and legitimacy for an emergent trade, profession or personal avocation.



Whether doctors, lawyers or accountants – home builders, automakers, or paper manufacturers – romance writers, fancy mouse breeders or quilters, the founding members knew they had to advance their emergent field by establishing common ground and building a "body of knowledge" with their peers. This required defining the boundaries, establishing a lexicon, setting standards of practice, and more. Imagine getting health advice from doctors using different terminology for the same condition, looking for auto parts when no standards existed, or having indoor plumbing installed by someone who didn't understand the fundamentals of sanitation.

The founders knew the only way to secure their much desired respect was to take steps to define, promote and then protect their craft. That required mobilizing those within it. They recognized the expertise that existed within the potential membership. They realized their future depended upon their members doing two things:

- (1) sharing and exchanging information, and
- (2) building meaningful relationships.

These remain members' primary expectations today.

MBOs have made major contributions and provided essential services that we unknowingly rely upon. You may know those that your association has achieved but not of others (*see Table 1*). Learning more about them deepens our appreciation for how consequential these institutions are to advancing our nation. No modern democratic society can function without MBOs. Government could never replace the work they do for every sector and segment of our society.

The role you play in all this is pivotal. Much of your work is focused on helping members make the right connections with information and people. Your work helps members establish bonds with others. You help them build a vibrant and purposeful community where new ideas, creativity and innovation flourish. Their discoveries are disseminated widely to all in their domain and often the larger society.

This enables social change to occur. Who else can make such a claim?

### What of the Future?

In an uncertain world, one thing is certain.

American democracy will prevail - so will MBOs.

They will continue to adapt to align with expected and unexpected social changes, norms and expectations. They will proliferate with the introduction, specialization, and expansion of knowledge and new technologies. Soon after a new field emerges, an MBO will follow.

Those association professionals that realize their MBO is more than a business and a nonprofit will abandon the more traditional "transactional" management practices and embrace more "relation-centered" ones in order to deliver more meaningful experiences to their members. Their organizations will enjoy a higher degree of member engagement. When that happens, members will take a much more active role in mentoring peers. And members will remain the content experts – the source that is shaping the advancement of their domain.

Technology will expand the access to and dissemination of information, knowledge and human connection. You remain the process specialists who help convert members' information and knowledge into a wide range of programs, products and services all designed to affect systemic change. You are the pivotal link.

What began in America as a leap of faith that people could govern themselves democratically has shaped a nation emulated by others. Our Founding Founders could never have anticipated how sophisticated and complex our society would become. They could hardly envision the specialization, the new technologies, and the innovations that would result from the free-flow of information and the opportunity for collective action.

You may work in an office setting, conduct a range of events in public and digital spaces, and communicate with your respective members in seemingly simple ways. But in truth, these actions – when done well – inspire and enable members to collectively create, invent, and innovate the changes necessary to advance their respective field of endeavor; changes that ultimately benefit the larger society. You contribute to advancing our nation's democratic principles and as a result fulfill our Founding Fathers' aspirations.

Every time you attend an event with your peers pause, reflect and remember how extraordinary your job is because...you help shape America.

### Table 1 Association Contributions That Produced Social Change

Just how much do you know about how associations have shaped America? Challenge your knowledge. Match the contribution to the association responsible!

- A. Established and continues to produce the highly-respected report evaluating the condition of America's infrastructure.
- B. Established standard-sized boxes for distributing fruits and vegetables safely.
- C. Established road signage identifying road conditions and distances between communities.
- D. Convinced society of the health impact of adding fluorides to drinking water.
- E. Developed standards for safe, effective pediatric dosing of medications in general pediatric, intensive care, and emergency care settings.
- F. Demonstrated positive health and financial impact of drug regimen reviews for senior citizens.
- G. Established standards for the viscosity of engine oil.
- H. Established a system for cataloging books.
- I. Worked with the government to establish standards for packing and repacking parachutes.
- J. Established recommendations that reduced cases of sudden infant death syndrome.

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**Answers:** A. American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE); B. Western Fruit Jobbers Association (WJFA); C. League of American Bicyclists (LAB); D. American Dental Association (ADA); E. Pediatric Pharmacy Advocacy Group (PPAG) (Tennessee-based); F. American Society of Consultant Pharmacists (ASCP); G. Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE); H. American Library Association (ALA); I. United States Parachute Association (USPA); J. American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)

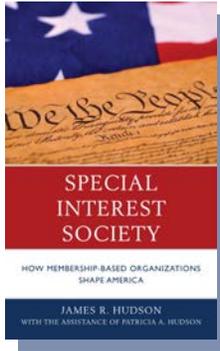
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**Learn More**



More information regarding the emergence and development of associations can be found in:

*Special Interest Society:  
How Membership-based  
Organizations Shape America.*

For 30% discount use code:  
LEX30AUTH14 at  
Lexington Books or

<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780739177983>

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