

**STYBEL  
PEABODY &  
ASSOCIATES, INC.**



Laurence Stybel, Ed.D., and Maryanne Peabody, MBA, founded Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc.

We Tell Our Professionals to  
“Join Associations.” They  
Complain About Lack of Time  
and Lack of Direction from Us.

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There is a fascinating paradox about U.S. culture first articulated in 1831 by French aristocrat Alixi De Tocqueville:

United States citizens verbally espouse the ideals of individualism, yet aggressively accomplish their goals through collective action.

At the political level, he observed this collective action came about through professional and trade associations. He was so impressed with the power of these associations, De Tocqueville called them the fourth branch of the American government.

Stybel Peabody works with 60% of the largest twenty law firms in Boston and three of the Big Four CPA firms. We have noticed that within these firms, business development is often described as an individual action. And yet the most effective business development often requires participation in collective organizations such as professional or trade associations.

The dilemma our clients face is as follows:

Association dues rise steadily and our professionals' ability to commit time to

these groups decreases steadily in the face of work/life pressure.

The purpose of this article is to provide firms with a framework about association management.

### **Why Join?**

People with externally oriented jobs are paid to develop business relationships. Association membership is core to this job. Classic examples would be a “Rainmaker” partner at a law firm, Director of Business Development at a CPA firm, or an insurance producer.

Many of the professionals we coach work in internally oriented jobs.

If 75% or more of your professional time is spent with people from within your own company, you have an internally oriented job.

Examples might include a project manager, HR Director, law firm administrator, division controller, social worker, university administrator, etc.

Why would you spend your time joining one or more professional associations?

- Build your brand with credible professionals outside your company who know how good you are. They can serve references and leads for opportunities.
- Learn new perspective about how problems in your company might be like or different from problems faced by other firms.
- Learn what is “cutting edge” in your profession.
- Learn industry gossip about client opportunities good for you or client companies you might wish to avoid.
- Have a confidential place to inquire about job opportunities.

In return for these personal benefits, you are expected to provide money and time.

But there are also business development benefits for your employer.

## **Join Two**

The first association you join ought to be industry focused. Examples include the California Hospital Association, Massachusetts Bankers Association, or the Austin Biotech Council.

These organizations provide exposure to a cross-functional section of colleagues with similar concerns. In some cases, your employer may already be a corporate member of an industry-focused association and you need only get permission to represent the company on a committee. Sometimes the employer hasn't taken the time to join the industry-focused association and may pay the dues if you volunteer to be the company representative.

The second association might consist of people who share similar functional responsibilities but work across industry disciplines. Examples might include the Project Management

Association, New England Association of Applied Psychology, New York Society of CPAs, the Denver Chapter of the Association of Corporate Counsels, etc.

Avoid joining two associations with overlapping membership. Join the best local associations from each category.

### **“Breaking In” Versus “Showing Up:”**

Association calendars usually are mailed to members at the end of the summer or early fall. Jot down association meeting times ten months in advance on your calendar. Once it is in your calendar be faithful about attending meetings. Saying, “I’ll go if I have free time” is the equivalent of saying, “I won’t go.”

Association meetings often involve cocktail parties followed by a dinner and a speaker. The pre-dinner activities may be the more important for you in terms of generating new contacts.

We recommend to our clients that they show up for the cocktail party twenty minutes prior to the published start of the party. In this way they can

stand in the middle of the room facing the entrance. Smile at people as they walk in.

When people arrive and see your smiling face, they will come over and start talking with you. Soon you are in the middle of the room and in the middle of a circle of people. All you had to do is “show up” and smile.

On the other hand, if you come in 20 minutes after the start of the cocktail hour, the cliques are already formed. You are the stranger who must politely “break in.”

The object in cocktail party chatter is to make 1-2 good connections.

Your goal is not to make a friend, a lover, or even a sale.

Making connections is a two-way street. You are asking questions to find out the type of work your new colleagues engage in. You are seeking to find out what on-the-job problems they have. You want to be helpful. Starting the conversation by focusing on problems related to

the topic of the evening's speech is a painless way to begin.

Try to get a business card from the two people you meet that night. Jot down some key details on the back the card. The best details are those that lend themselves to follow-up by you later that week. Do not waste time continuing to chat with an individual once you have concluded that there is little mutual benefit. One-sided relationships are not real business relationships.

One graceful way to exit a one-sided relationship: I excuse myself by saying I just got a mobile phone call and need to find a quiet spot in the hallway.

### **Committee Memberships:**

If you are raising children, you can trade off the Join Two concept. For example:

Sam has two small children in elementary school. Sam can drop membership in the functional association for membership in the school's Parent Teachers Association or Education Committee for where his children



attend Church. This provides Sam an external network while he is doing something positive for his children.

Paying dues and faithfully attending meetings is not enough. The goal is to know industry leaders well enough so that you can tap into their network of contacts when the time comes that you need assistance. Getting well known involves volunteering for committee assignments.

Look for externally focused committees that provide you with a platform to meet other people. The following committees are often found in associations and are excellent externally facing bodies: membership, program, government relations.

Be careful about being drawn into inwardly focused committees. Association politics can get nasty and time consuming.

Examples would include Committee to draft the new Constitution, Award Committee, Christmas Party Committee, etc.

## **The Association Dilemma:**

The association dilemma is about balancing rising association dues and shrinking free time. It is too easy to say “No Thanks” as a way of resolving the dilemma.

That answer is not in your interests.

**Employers: Be Strategic About Association Management.**

We ask clients to send us a list of clients by industry and also the revenue produced per industry. This information is turned into a pie chart showing contribution to total top line revenue as a function of industry.

We ask professionals in our client firms to send us a list of associations and trade groups they belong to and Committee assignments. We then create a second pie chart showing professionals’ time commitment to associations as a function of industry.

There ought to be a reasonable relationship between the two charts. For example, if 40% of total top line revenue comes from companies in the local B:C retail sector, what is the percentage of professionals' time spent with trade associations in the local retail sector.

If the firm wishes to increase its market share of companies that focus on robotics, what percentage of professionals are members of local robotics trade associations?

### **References:**

DeTocqueville. DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA. New York: Perennial Classics, 2000.

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**Stybel Peabody provides companies with  
“leadership and career success” for valued**

**senior level talent. Core services include retained search (Board members, CEOs, COOs, CFOs), leadership development coaching, and executive-level outplacement.**

**For a free 30-minute consult, contact:**

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