

in the final analysis

“There’s no business like show business, like no business I know.”

—Irving Berlin

Who doesn’t know that there is no business like show business? Like many Irving Berlin compositions, the song is part of our cultural DNA, and there have been countless movies and plays with a show business backdrop to prove his point. Just off the top of my head: *Singin’ in the Rain*, *Gypsy*, *Funny Girl*, *Cabaret*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *8½*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Almost Famous*, *Broadway Danny Rose*, *The Producers*, and *A Star Is Born*. Show business is one of those professions that the artistic community just loves to portray—like law enforcement, journalism, jurisprudence, medicine, sports, the military, and science and engineering. Alas, the profession that no producer wants to touch is the one to which I have dedicated my career—association management. It, too, is like no business that I know.

Is association management so boring that no one could possibly be entertained by it? Not on my beat, and I’m pretty sure that I’ve accumulated enough experiences, recollections, and first-hand stories to fill a couple or three scripts. The good, the bad, and the unusual: Association management has got it all—except public awareness as to what it is.

The quick primer: As articulated by the American Society of Association Executives, or ASAE, an association is “an organization or group of individuals affiliated with one another who share a common purpose, interest, or mission and exist for the mutual enrichment and advancement of their membership.” So, what is “association management”? According to Wikipedia (in an entry that I suspect was drafted by ASAE), “Association management is a distinct field of management because of the unique environment of associations. Associations are unique in that the ‘owners’ are dues-paying members. Members also govern their association through an elected board or other governing body, along with association committees, commissions, task forces, councils, and other units.”

One of the more unique aspects of association management is that we practitioners operate the associations like businesses even though associations are not conventional businesses. They are nonprofits. They issue no dividends, are not publicly traded, have no stockholders, and enrich no sole proprietor. Those of us with leadership roles in an association are constantly challenged to successfully navigate the narrow pathway of sustainability that exists between solid business management and advancing the good of our community. You can opportunistically lean a little to one side or the other as you walk the path, but veer too much to the business side and you risk your members being disenfranchised as they perceive themselves as customers or commodities and not members of a community. Veer too much to the mission side and you risk having your lofty ambitions consume all of your assets and fast-tracking the association to oblivion.

How do we maintain balance at TMS? Pragmatically, we have to make enough money to pay the bills. We also try to annually add to our reserves to safeguard the Society against rainy days and to give the Board flexibility to fund costly new or strategic initiatives. Tidy financials aside, the bulk of our energy goes to enabling networking and cultivating a professional family community. We bridge science with engineering and promote the transfer of technology. We recognize accomplishment, and work to advance the good of the order. We celebrate grassroots ideation over top-down-ism. We view collaboration and platforms from which to provide informed input as important. We believe the Annual Meeting & Exhibition tagline that “the world comes here.” We like what we do, and we value that what we do has meaningful impact.

For today’s TMS and its antecedents, this is an approach that has worked for going on 150 years. We have just not inspired a movie in the process. Joel and Ethan Coen, give me a call. How do the titles *O Association Manager*, *Where Art Thou?* or *No Country for Old Association Managers* strike you?

JOM

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