

Membership: The benefits you receive are priceless

BY RICHARD D. ARLINGTON III, CSP

As I reflect on business decisions I have made over the past 20 years, I realize that of all the equipment, real estate, advertising literature and trucks I have purchased, the expenditure that has made the most impact on my success is membership dues paid to trade organizations.

Why do some companies fail while others succeed? Some people get into landscape maintenance or snow removal because it is "easy." You don't need much experience to plow snow, right? Wrong. You need business experience, sales experience, mechanical abilities, people skills. Not everyone comes into the business with all of these skills. Most of us are missing parts to the puzzle.

So how did we make it? By taking advantage of our association memberships. I find it humorous that business owners spend thousands of dollars on advertising but won't spend hundreds to join an association. What did you spend last year on advertising? What did you spend in dues, subscriptions and professional education? Most companies will see a huge difference. Yet, dollar for dollar you will receive a bigger, more permanent return on your investment in education.

Why join?

Networking: I know company presidents who spend thousands on consultants, yet pay their membership dues late. Every question you ask at a trade show is free consulting. Find someone who has done what you want to do and ask how they did it. Sounds simple. So why don't we do it? Because we don't want to look stupid. I ask questions all the time. The one thing I have learned is the only stupid question is the one you don't ask.

Membership benefits: SIMA's mentoring program pairs you with a successful snow contractor, usually a certified snow professional (CSP), who will guide you, answer questions and share the so-called "secrets" to success. SIMA's website offers contracts to download and a certification program that will set you apart from your competition. When I was just starting out, I would have loved to have this organization as a resource.

Education: On the landscape side, PLANET has so much business knowledge in book and in CD form that its like going to college—and it won't cost you \$20,000 a semester. Industry-specific online training and education is available. Try going to your local college and getting a snow or landscape contractor-specific course in human resources or OSHA regulations. Access to this information is a must have if you're serious about running your business.

Magazines: The trade magazines I receive are full of stories from people just like me. They have the same problems and rewarding experiences. There is always something to be learned in each issue.

Safety: We have won safety awards, and I use them in all my marketing information. Customers want to know you operate a safe company. Show them by attaining this award from the trade organizations. It may be the difference that sets you apart and wins you the job.

Certification: How important can that be? If you work in my market, I will make it the deciding factor whenever possible. I tell my clients: Your doctor is certified. Your child's teacher is certified. Your lawyer is certified. Your property manager is certified. Why would you hire a landscaper that was not a certified landscape professional (CLP) or a snow contractor

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who was not a CSP? I raise these important issues for the customer to consider when looking at my company's bid versus my competition's.

It only takes one new customer to recoup the investment you made in attaining these certifications. We complain that customers don't see value in our services. They hire whoever is cheaper, right? Wrong. They hire the company that gives them the best value for their dollar. If you can add value to your company, more customers will hire you.

Trade shows: Just like the SIMA Snow & Ice Symposium, the PLANET trade shows are full of free seminars. You and your staff can spend time learning information specific to your business. When you're at the trade shows, you are networking with people from all over the country, who share information freely because there is no threat—you're not competitors.

What questions would you ask the president of a \$20 million company over lunch with no interruptions? I have sat with owners of \$100,000 companies and \$20 million companies, and the information that flows naturally during normal conversation is unbelievable. How would you like to have lunch with a highly sought-after business consultant? Go to trade functions, and this will happen. I

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have had conversations with people from Vander Kooi & Associates, Franklin Covey and many others. I have asked business questions, and they have given me answers. If we talk freely and openly, together we can come up with answers.

I have been in business 20 years, but I have only been involved with trade organizations for the past five. In that time, my business has become more profitable, more organized, and I have become a better person. I owe it all to the people and functions that trade organizations bring together. I am privileged to speak at trade show functions, where I pass on information I have learned.

Don't sit wishing you could afford to do this. From personal experience, you cannot afford *not* to do it. Just come to one, get involved with the seminars, go to the "snack & chats," ask questions, network. You won't leave without a business- or life-changing piece of information.

Be involved: Do you complain that the organization just doesn't understand your business or that the information is great but it won't work in your market? *All* business systems and information work in *all* markets. The problem is no one showed you how to use it. Get more involved. When I realized that the information would not work until someone taught me how to use it, my thought process changed drastically. I started to ask more questions and became more involved in conversation with people who were using the systems. This changed everything.

Do you wish your organization did more for you? Join a committee. You will collaborate with some of the best people in the industry, on subjects you think are important. The conversations that happen at committee meetings are valuable, and the friendships alone are worth it. Get involved and get the most out of your membership. I promise you won't regret it.

Why it works: If you are trying to grow

your business, the first thing you must do is grow yourself and your staff personally. Being in business is hard. Why make it harder by trying to do it alone? Join today, and take advantage of everything offered. If you apply yourself, you can succeed—no matter what your market is like, and no matter what your background is. We will help you, if you just ask.

I have watched my business grow 300% in the past five years, and I have created friendships that will last a lifetime. I have become a better president, father, husband and friend since I became part of these organizations. I have learned that working on your business is more important than working in it. I owe it all to these organizations, and would never do it again without them. **SB**

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