

Assessing The Membership Voice

This is the time of year when membership needs and wants are important topics of discussion by association staff and leadership. Not only is it a time when an assessment of ongoing initiatives and goals for the new year must of necessity be in the forefront, it is also a time when some members, for a variety of reasons, deliberate the question of their continued membership support. We find ourselves again in the annual membership renewal cycle. Perhaps some of the comments listed later in this column will provide convincing evidence that the California Dental Association is providing the leadership and benefits that the membership really needs and wants, despite some occasional rumblings to the contrary.

In mid-2003, CDA undertook a Member Survey, "Let Your Voice Be Heard" that provided some needed insight not only into member wants and concerns, but into the trends and attitudes of the many different segments in the membership universe. The difference in member opinions based upon groupings such as gender, ethnicity, new vs. old members, and high tech vs. low tech should be helpful in shaping future decisions and directions within the association to better meet the needs and expectations of the membership.

The summary findings of the consulting group that tabulated the data, confirm the changing trends in the makeup of the CDA membership. They stated that the trend in diversity brings "... an entirely new set of values and understanding" of the various segments of the membership. These insights should be very helpful in de-

signing association initiatives to gain acceptance with the various groups of members. For example, the summary pointed out that "it is often difficult to realize that people of different gender and different ethnicity will see or hear something and end up with two different perceptions."

Our purpose here is not to go into detail about specific data, but to mention only a few general findings that might be of interest. For example, an understanding of, or a familiarity with longtime programs and services such as peer review and CalDPac, and the new entity, technology, were found to differ depending on ethnicity and years of practice. The "new" membership group with 15 or less years in the profession is composed of a greater percentage of minority members. Data showed that this group is less familiar with peer review and is over two times more likely to disagree when asked if there was a great deal of value in the peer review process when compared to the group with over 15 years in the profession. Similarly, the newer group was less likely to be familiar with CalDPac, which illustrates the need to adjust the communication and education to the different segments of the membership.

One "dynamic" that apparently did not differ between the new and old member groups in this survey is that both were in agreement regarding the value of the association's print publications, the *CDA Update* and this *Journal*. Both member segments were in agreement regarding the



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value of the print publications, and currently the new group does not have a preference for online vs. print delivery, expressing the want to have the content both online AND in print. This disputes a belief of some individuals who we have been hearing for sometime, that eventually all professional publications would be distributed online only.

The data also showed that “high technology” was positively correlated to the makeup of the new trend in CDA membership and is very similar across all groups (i.e. gender, ethnicity, etc.) Interestingly, those members classified as “low tech” were found to be more likely to disregard the value of the Peer Review process, disregard the value of CDA endorsed programs, less likely to be familiar with CalDPac, and, more likely to disregard the value of CDA for their dues dollar than the “high tech” group.

As to what the membership as a whole wants from CDA in terms of resource allocation, the top three benefits identified in this survey were legislative advocacy, marketing, and continuing education.

The overriding theme of the data from this aspect of the survey is that CDA will need to emphasize the value of some of the necessary member/professional benefits in order to overcome the differences of opinion between the various membership groups. As many in leadership know, staff and volunteer leadership consistently have made efforts to identify and address what are believed to be membership needs and wants. However, this survey does illustrate that the results of these efforts are not universally appreciated because their value (or their perceived value) is not always understood by some segments of the membership.

The final part of the survey asked for “additional comments” from the respondents. We usually find the open-ended responses revealing and useful. In my opinion, these comments fall into about five categories.

The first category I’ll label **just plain critical**. Usually this member has had a neg-

ative experience with a sponsored insurance program or a negative experience at Scientific Sessions, or with a CDA- or ADA-sponsored activity. Staff and volunteers can learn from such complaints and generally remove the obstacle. However, we suspect the complainant may perceive this one event as typical of association management, perceiving it still to be true many months or years later, even though only experienced once.

Next is the **impatient complainant**. Because many of our colleagues practice solo and are used to controlling issues that arise with staff and patients with immediacy, they believe that CDA should be capable of resolving issues (such as the Dental Materials Fact Sheet, the Amalgam Controversy, and Denti-Cal funding). They may forget that the Legislature and the public they represent, regulatory agencies, and legal issues may be involved in the eventual resolution to a problem, making it highly impractical for CDA to bring about immediate closure.

Another category I shall label **uninformed and dissatisfied**. CDA staff members encounter this type of concern frequently, and some of this type of comment was present in this survey. Fortunately, some of these can easily be explained and resolved once the information is communicated. However, some perceptions may be developed from misinformation provided by uninformed colleagues and are therefore more difficult to overcome.

Moving forward, some members **offer suggestions** that will be helpful to them and their colleagues. These are positive and resolution oriented. While all comments are worthy of consideration, these are most helpful.

Finally, the **satisfied or complimentary category**. This observer was pleased to see a good number of these comments voiced in the survey. We believe these voluntary comments are reflective of the many positive efforts that are being made by California Dental Association on behalf of

the membership. In our opinion, publication of some of these comments might convince a member undecided about renewal that continued membership support is of sound benefit to the future of their practice. It is in that spirit that we share the following comments:

■ CDA is moving in the right direction. Strategic planning has been effective at tuning in better to members' needs. Glad to see the emphasis on auxiliary recruitment and on membership expansion.

■ As a recent dental school graduate, I have found the programs and services that CDA offers to be of great benefit as far as keeping me informed about 'new issues' that affect our profession on a daily basis.

■ Although CDA had questionable priorities a few years ago, great strides are now being made to support the members and serve the public. This is an extremely exciting time at CDA. The quality and commitment of volunteers is exceptional, and many opportunities await us.

■ I would have to say the CDA is a great benefit.

■ Overall, quite satisfied. Thank you!

■ CalDPac is doing a great job.

■ Please continue your hard work with state legislation and regulatory bodies.

■ CDA is a competent organization and is doing a fabulous job representing the profession by providing valuable services to members. Proud to be a member.

■ Peer review is one of the best things that we have.

■ As a former Dental Board member, I appreciate the watchdog role that CDA plays in monitoring and advocating dental health legislation. I have been proud of the ethics of CDA and appreciative of its stand on dental issues, even when I did not agree with or support its position. Any progress the Dental Board made during my tenure came about because of the leadership training and mentoring I received from CDA. Thank you.

■ I strongly support legislative efforts

of GRO. We (CDA) are fortunate to have a well-organized and effective staff, and CalDPac


■ CDA is an excellent organization. I receive much more than I put in. Thank you!

■ I really enjoyed being a part of the Legislative Conference in May (2003). The CDA sets "the standard" for organized dentistry.

■ I love the CDA and the work that they do. I have always been a member and appreciate its programs and the quality of people that work with the CDA.

■ I see many new changes at CDA – all for the better. I am willing to spend more money for marketing dentistry by CDA.

For those who have not been watching closely, there have been many new and exciting changes occurring at CDA. We are pleased that some of the survey respondents have noticed and acknowledged the changes. The message is getting out! Gradual implementation of a carefully designed strategic plan that resulted from membership input is proceeding. An executive director, who has been carefully assessing the organization and its functions and has been reorganizing with efficiency in mind, demonstrates another current event that speaks volumes about the potential for increased benefits to the membership in the future.

The 2003 member survey provides your organization with some useful data about how it can better communicate and work with the membership in order to achieve mutually desired goals. Criticisms, suggestions, and the survey data about perceptions within various groups will help staff and volunteers to close existing gaps in communication. And finally, the unsolicited praise that was included in the member comments should help convince the doubters that membership in California Dental Association and the American Dental Association provides many values for them and for their patients. 

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