

Fulfilling Member Expectations

For a number of reasons, most of which are not really pertinent to this editorial and which would be very complex to explain in the limited space available here, the American Pharmaceutical Association is in the initial process of assessing and reassessing the products and services that it provides to its membership. Essentially, the Association is attempting to ascertain how well its present activities, projects, and products meet the desires and needs of today's pharmacists and of APhA members in particular.

Moreover, this is not always an all-or-none matter. Perhaps it is just a case that shifting interests or membership orientation calls for expanding a certain activity or project; alternatively, for the same reasons, the budget and resources involving another area may need to be cut back from current levels. But in the case of some projects, it may be concluded that a partial reduction is not a suitable remedy, and total elimination may be the only logical solution.

As an illustration, the huge costs associated with updating the data base for APhA's Drug Interactions Evaluation Program and the skyrocketing costs of paper and printing—coupled with less in the way of clinically significant new information and diminishing practitioner interest—led the APhA Board of Trustees recently to decide against the publication of a complete new edition of its *Evaluations of Drug Interactions*. At the same time, however, the Board also directed staff to continue to explore other communication approaches for drug interactions information, including computerized systems that might be more economically viable.

This incident is not an isolated example of APhA changing its approach in providing some member service. During the past 10 years, there have been any number of such modifications, to wit: in the publications area, the Association's newsletter was doubled in frequency to become a weekly, thereby making it a speedier communications vehicle; several different approaches were tried with regard to supplying news of the Annual Meeting and disseminating the Association's Annual Report; mid-year, regional, and specialized meetings of each of the Association's three subdivisions have been sponsored in addition to the traditional APhA Annual Meeting; innovative poster sessions, audiovisual learning programs, scientific exhibits, and assorted other departures from conventional meeting formats have been experimented with and largely implemented; and books, journals, and meetings have all been condensed and either severely edited or restructured to make them more concise in an effort to save time and money for all concerned. Many of these experiments have proven to be highly successful; on the other hand, in a few

cases the reception has been dismal despite every reason to have expected an enthusiastic member reaction.

Nor has APhA been alone in such efforts and their outcome. Other professional, technical, and scientific membership societies have been likewise searching for new and alternative ways to meet contemporary membership needs and expectations. Although few such groups have attempted as many innovations and have been quite as daring as APhA in departures from the conventional "tried and true," we believe that each organization in its own way strives to satisfy the perceived desires of its members.

And, as Shakespeare would have put it, therein lies the rub! No survey, no questionnaire, no Gallup poll, or whatever, really can tell the organization anything, or give it any meaningful guidance, unless the membership has a pretty clear idea of what it wants, what it will use, and what it is willing to support and pay for.

Just this past week, this writer received a questionnaire from the American Chemical Society, an organization in which we have long maintained personal membership. Over the years, the ACS has done a conscientious job of trying to be responsive to its membership, and this latest questionnaire was largely devoted to exploring member preferences in ACS's continuing education programs.

In completing the questionnaire, we were struck by our own ambivalent feelings and reactions. When the question was asked about our interest in, or desire for, a CE program in a new computerized format, we impulsively wanted to express our positive reaction. But yet, our own working experience in conducting such surveys gave us pause to stop and critically ask ourselves the question, "In all honesty, would we *really* order it, pay for it, and use it?" And in this case we concluded that our answer was, "No, we really wouldn't."

The message of this editorial is to suggest that all of us need to reflect in a similar fashion when we are asked for our opinions by our professional organizations.

We know for a fact that the officers and staff of APhA, as well as its Academy of Pharmaceutical Sciences and the other APhA subdivisions, all are making a sincere effort to provide meaningful membership services in the most cost-effective manner. But they can only be responsive in direct proportion to the accuracy with which the membership articulates its true desires and its willingness to utilize and pay for those services when they are subsequently offered.

The best chef in the world can do little to please the diner's palate unless and until the diner selects from the menu a specific dish that will appeal to that particular diner.

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