

Editorial

CHANGING CONVENTIONS THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS



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Recent conversations with 2 leaders of our profession got me thinking about the future of continuing dental education in Canada. One colleague told me that his organization was actively exploring online education initiatives with some well-placed partners. These projects sounded truly interesting.

In the other conversation, I floated the idea of CDA offering a limited online education program of its own. This second colleague, while interested in my idea, expressed concern that soon dentists would have so much choice among online continuing education courses, they might choose not to attend continuing education meetings. This colleague was concerned that such a trend could be harmful to the sense of community in our profession.

With greater requirements for professionals to demonstrate lifelong

competencies, continuing education is becoming big business. Management guru Peter Drucker predicts that continuing education for knowledge workers will be a major growth industry over the next 30 years, with much of the content delivered online.

With new technological developments and a greater choice of education offerings in a variety of locations available to dentists, it is conceivable that the elements of the traditional dental convention may need to be rethought in the years ahead. We are lucky in Canada to have a number of excellent conventions organized by very professional volunteers and staff. I suspect that these people are conscious of the forces affecting traditional conventions as well as the need to satisfy their stakeholders.

It is, of course, difficult to consistently satisfy all stakeholders. Dentists want interesting and useful education opportunities for themselves and their staff members. They also want to catch up with friends and make new acquaintances. Professional associations rely on conventions as an important source of non-dues revenue. Exhibitors need to sell products and build client relationships to help justify the hefty costs associated with having a booth at these events.

Interestingly, these same exhibitors have been developing new channels for customer relationships in recent years. Many have developed elaborate Web sites capable of handling business transactions. Their representatives are calling to your office with greater frequency and these companies are providing education courses in greater numbers. All could have an impact on future convention sponsorship.

As part of my role with CDA, I attend many dental conventions. I will be happy to be told otherwise, but it seems to me that attendance at some conventions is decreasing. When asked about traffic to their booths,

exhibitors tell me it is down from past years. Of course, I have also been told that even though crowds seem to be smaller, the dentists that do visit a booth are prepared to buy products and not just browse.

Many lecture rooms at these conventions also seem to be far from full. I don't know if this is because the offerings are not exciting enough for attendees, or if the traditional didactic lecture holds less appeal than a practical, hands-on course. With so many private institutes and corporate-sponsored education events on offer, the traditional association-organized convention may not hold the same interest it once did.

While I am a fan of online education and publishing, I firmly believe in the need to have face-to-face meetings for the promotion of a sense of professional community. I therefore want to see conventions thrive despite the challenges they face. National, provincial and local dental associations all have their respective roles to play in the convention business. I believe we have common cause in working together to gather detailed information on the needs of various stakeholders with an interest in the future of our professional conventions.

I believe it is time for organized dentistry to conduct national level consultations in order to gather the views of dentists, dental office staff members and the dental industry about what they really want to see in the conventions of the future. Such a consultation could provide us with excellent information that will enable Canadian dentistry to plan even better conventions. Cooperation between interested parties will be the key to success.

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