

President's Column

WHERE'S THE HERD?



Dr. George Sweetnam

In an old *Animal Crackers* comic strip, a gnu — a caribou-like creature — wanders about on a bald, desolate prairie and then stops to ask a gopher if he has seen his herd. “I’m their leader,” the gnu says.

Indeed, although leadership means envisioning the future and planning a direction to take, it also involves demonstrating sensitivity to the wishes of those being led. (This amusing anecdote does not mean that I believe CDA members constitute a ‘herd’. I use it only to illustrate a point.)

As the Association works on budgeting for 2003, the old questions emerge on cue: “How much do we have? How far do we go? How do we get more?”

CDA depends heavily on dues to support its activities — more so than most professional associations. Our dues-to-non-dues ratio is 73 to 27. CDA is well aware of the need to

improve this ratio. In the recent restructuring at the Association’s Ottawa headquarters, a newly created Promotion and Marketing Department was tasked with increasing membership and enlarging the possibilities for non-dues revenue sources.

The equation of desirability of membership with enhanced value is basic. The concept of value — in the eyes of the members — is not.

In an attempt to quantify the value factor, CDA is currently preparing a discussion paper entitled *Valuing CDA Membership: Short-Term Return, Long-Term Investment*. This heading is particularly pertinent, since we must look for value in CDA in a more extended time frame.

One doesn’t have to go far into the valuation process to realize that part of the value is non-quantifiable in such areas as the strategic positioning of the profession on issues, in public relations and with government. This raises questions for leadership. Do most dentists expect to receive direct and quantifiable benefits from their association dues on a dollar-for-dollar basis? Or do they feel that, as members of a leading profession, they have an obligation to protect and promote the profession’s interests — as well as their own — and a commitment to collectively better society’s oral health?

Remarkably, CDA satisfies the concerns of both perspectives. Users of CDAnet save themselves two-and-a-half times their membership fee in cost savings on the transmission of insurance claims, when compared to our southern neighbours, even before evaluating other member benefits, some of which certainly stand up to the dollar-for-dollar comparison. As well, tax savings resulting from successful CDA lobbying efforts demonstrate that our members benefit to the tune of several thousand dollars a year!

But what of other non-dues revenue sources? This requires an examination of our inventory to see what we have of value.

First, we have our reputation and good name. An endorsement by CDA — such as our Seal of Approval — has marketing value. We already use this to our advantage. More can be done and this area is under study.

Another area of wealth generation is information, which some see as the currency of the future. In addition to our technical expertise, we have a wealth of untapped statistical data from CDAnet.

Unfortunately, like a geological ore deposit, it needs to be mined and refined. As with drilling for ore, it requires an investment of capital and time before the revenue stream starts to flow.

This is a dilemma for our leadership, but CDA is now in a position where it must spend money to make money. Do our members only want to see an immediate dollar return or are they willing to invest in future savings? How long are they willing to wait and to what level will they agree to invest?

And to what degree are members willing to invest to bring more members into our Association, thereby providing additional revenue and savings?

Taking a cue from retailers, we could adopt our own variant of the loss-leader strategy. It would of course have to be understood that this was a temporary measure for new members only. Would current customers stand pat while this scheme matured?

This leader asks: “Where’s the herd?”

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