

## Association Management Companies – Friend or Foe?

I can't count the number of times I have heard association management professionals working directly for an association refer to Association Management Companies (AMCs) negatively. The most common references I hear are: "AMCs are generalists, we are specialists"; or "AMCs just want to take my job away;" or "An AMC can't possibly know what I know about the industry or profession my association represents."

I would like to dispel these misunderstandings. I view employees of AMCs as association management professionals – just like the professionals employed directly by associations. Further, I view AMCs as a resource for all association management professionals. Finally, I view AMCs and association management professionals directly employed by associations as having the same goal – to promote and advance the association's industry or profession.

If we are all association management professionals and we are all trying to promote and advance the industries or professions we represent, how can we be "foes"?

The answer simply is we can't be and we aren't. Let me prove it to you.

Let's start by dispelling the "myths."

**Myth #1: AMCs are generalists, not specialists.** The "generalist" charge implies that direct employees of an association know and care about the association and industry they are serving while the AMC's employees do not. This is truly a myth; employees of AMCs must immerse themselves in the associations and industries they serve if they are to serve them successfully. It makes no difference from which entity the paycheck comes. Interests are aligned in both relationships. Most AMCs can cite long-standing relationships with associations that have endured precisely because they are fully invested in the association and the industry or profession.

It is also true that many association management professionals may have general expertise in many or even all areas of association management. As an Executive Director of an association, for example, you may have a good or even an excellent knowledge of meeting planning, financial management, consensus development, lobbying, marketing, continuing education, etc. Does this make you a "generalist"? Perhaps it does. Is the employee of an AMC serving as an Executive Director for the ABC association any more a generalist than the employee of XYZ association serving as their Executive Director? Of course not.

What about the other association management professionals working for that AMC? Most AMCs employ specialists in a variety of areas who provide their expertise to several of the AMCs partner associations. These specialists might be meeting planners, tradeshow organizers, accountants, publishers, editors, marketers, lobbyists, etc.

Can small to mid size associations afford to hire and maintain on staff these same “specialists”? Of course not. Could these same small to mid size associations turn to AMCs to help provide expertise in these areas – absolutely.

That leads to myth #2.

**Myth #2: AMCs want to take my job.** AMCs are in business to provide professional services and add value to associations. As stated earlier, AMCs and direct employees of associations are all trying to achieve the same goal – promote and advance the industry or profession served by the association. Sometimes that means the associations want to hire the AMC to provide all the staff to the association. Other times that means the association has a need that can be filled by the AMC without the association having to add more direct employees.

When an association selects an AMC to provide professional services, often times the AMC has to hire new employees. Many AMCs look for those employees from the association management community. So AMCs aren’t taking jobs away from association management professionals, they are creating job opportunities.

I’ll leave it to you to decide if you view AMCs as your “foe” or your “friend.” For me, the choice is clear:

1. AMCs and direct employees of associations have the same overall objectives – to promote and advance the industry or profession served by the association(s) they represent.
2. AMCs provide the expertise needed by associations (whether managed by an AMC or not) to deliver value to the association’s members.
3. AMCs provide employment opportunities for association management professionals.

We are all in the same profession. We are not enemies - we’re barely competitors. Who is the real competition of association management professionals and associations?

1. Apathy among - and lack of training for - volunteer leaders.
2. The people and companies that don’t recognize the value of belonging to their industry trade association or professional society.
3. Future generations who may not recognize the same value in networking with peers to drive value in their businesses and professions.

This is our competition. We need to spend time together finding ways to overcome these challenges. That’s what friends do.