Printing news and information for Australia & New Zealand

Search

Latest News

PRINT

Industry Associations struggle in a sea of change – James Cryer

Tuesday, 31 May 2011

By Print21

It is with a sense of *schadenfreud* that we watch various retailers currently grappling with the challenge of online-ordering from overseas vendors. They, like us in the printing industry, are having to adjust to the new realities that there are alternate forms of delivering product to market. Customers now have options in terms of how they buy, what they buy, and from whom they buy.

Traditional forms of manufacture are under threat and new channels of going to market give consumers greater leverage than they've ever had before, the result being more downward pressure on prices. While this may be a cause for lament to many traditional manufacturers with high cost-bases, to many new breed suppliers, lower prices mean increased volumes – and increased profits.

Within the printing industry, who are these new breed suppliers? They come in many forms – online internet suppliers, hub-and-spoke manufacturing systems, digital printing – the list is extensive. But they all share one agenda, to knock off as much print as they can from traditional offset printers.

Are we one industry or many?

Historically, industry associations were formed to promote and protect the interests of a very specific group: employers. All their guns were pointing in the same direction. Now, associations should reflect the interest of and their workers.

A dilemma we face is the name of our association – the Printing Industries Association. Note, that's plural, not just one segment. On that basis alone we should open the floodgates and welcome all the alternate vendors and suppliers of print, even though many existing sheet-fed offset members are bleeding because of them.

If we're fair dinkum, Printing Industries is essentially the sheet-fed offset lobby group. Why should it admit members whose intentions are hostile to the wellbeing and profitability of its members? In a perfect world its name would probably be the Commercial Printers Association", as that more accurately describes its historical constituency.

An "issues-based" approach

In recent times Printing Industries has adopted a new working model, with the creation of ad hoc committees to address sectors of specific concern. I believe this issues-based initiative is an excellent idea. There is a need for this kind of flexible needs based mechanism to serve as a channel through which members may be encouraged to work on problems and solutions on matters that affect them individually, and/or collective.

I also like it because it has echoes of the virtual organisation that constantly adapts and changes shape, according to the prevailing environment, like an amoeba. Some running clubs are adopting this concept, with no formal structure or committees, they simply send out an email to anyone that's interested – turn up at such-and-such a place and time. Their motto is no food – no help – no fees. Maybe that's the way of the future. Do we need a vast administrative superstructure? Just send out an email to interested parties that there will be a meeting to discuss such-and-such a topic, interested parties to attend!
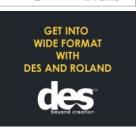
Twitter Feed

We now exist in a wonderfully diverse industry, consisting of many different sectors, some of which may almost be seen to be in competition to other segments. This is one of the inherent problems of any industry association to find more similarities than differences between its members, and to encourage competitors to sit down together and face a common enemy.

We're not alone: LATMA faces a similar challenge. As its name implies, it represents label manufacturers but what about manufacturers of shrink-sleeves? Are they complementary producers, or competitors? Should they be admitted to LATMA, or not?

Defining who we represent

I was present at one of the meetings where this new concept for Printing Industries was raised. One of the first things I observed was how quickly we descend into definitional problems to describe our industry; are we really in print? or multi-media? or corporate communications? And why was there no one from newspapers there? Or from packaging? Or from the mailing industry? The digital side was severely under-represented. These are not criticisms, they simply highlight the difficulties we have in defining who's in and who's out.

There are dangers in both over-specialisation, by just including, say, sheet-fed offset printers, which alienates other segments and turns them into the enemy. But by being too inclusive, by having everybody in the lifeboat, it defeats the purpose of arguing for special concessions.

Hence, a priority, is to re-define the reach and branding of the PIAA. Just who does the PIA represent? Who is its "target audience?

Who do we think we are?

The PIAA (Printing Industries Association of Australia), rejoices in inheriting the name to die for, as it implies it speaks for the entire printing industry, whatever that may mean. Through no fault of its own, we know that's not the case. On a good day it may represent about half of the total printing industry. Historically, its real heartland has always been offset printers, but not even that's correct, as it doesn't really attract big membership from the magazines segment and virtually no interest from the big newspaper battalions.

What the new PE-driven businesses think of our industry associations is yet to be tested. They pay only token interest, although we note they're very happy to win our awards.

The other segment that operates right under our nose are the newly emerging digital printers. With one or two exceptions they're all missing in action as far as any involvement in PIAA activities goes. This is no one's fault, they perceive the PIAA as a relic of a bygone era, probably representing the vested interests of the traditional offset companies. And they'd be right.

We could launch a membership appeal to the upcoming digital segment. This may be controversial, however, as many offset companies are losing business to … guess who, the digital segment. Do you really want to sleep with the enemy?

But if we don't, it'll simply give more ammunition to the accusation that the PIAA really is the last bastion of the old guard – the last gasp of a dying art.

So what to do?

Traditional roles of an industry association -

I suspect it is easy to inflate the powers of industry associations to do much at all. It's easy for us to toss all our problems at the association to fix, but all that does is absolve us, as individual members, of taking some responsibility for fixing our own problems.

Let's re-visit the core issue of: what purpose does an industry association serve?

• Back in the good old days, it acted as a blunt weapon to bash unions and was really a default instrument of torture used to further the ends of the bosses. Luckily those days are over.

• It can also serve as a lobby group to press the special interests of a particular industry and the PIA has had some good wins, it must be said.

• It can serve to provide legal advice and even represent companies in litigation.

• It can disseminate technical advice and hold forums, etc.

• It can also promote the industry to the wider community, through promotional and educational initiatives – and importantly, through the mechanism of the NPA's.

For us to advance as an industry body, we have to hold up our range of services andbenefits to the template of what do the punters want? and see how closely they match up.

For example -

- Do members want economic reports? My suspicion is "no".
- Would they want someone on-board to act as an industry marketer? I suspect "yes".
- What about more technical forums? Difficult for the PIAA to muscle in here, as that seems well catered for by the LIA and GASAA.
- Legal and workers' comp/OH&S advice? Probably an overwhelming "yes".

On another matter, are we extracting maximum promotional bang-per-buck from the NPA's? Probably not. They're a dazzling showcase of the industry which I suspect we keep pretty-well hidden within our four walls. Do we appropriately price the entry-costs. Probably not, when you consider the considerable prestige that winning an award bestows on the company.

Some companies have made an industry out of their award successes, perhaps even promoting themselves

way out of proportion to their actual abilities. But aren't we giving money away by under-pricing the cost of submitting an entry and then by not capitalising on all the razzmatazz of the event to the wider community – ie, schools, print-buyers, the media?

What are the benefits of membership? -

One of the big problems the PIAA faces as an industry body is making membership seem desirable. Back in the olden days, it rejoiced in the title Master Printers and there was the inference that it was restricted to certain companies that had passed a test and the public would benefit by dealing with these companies, as against the rest. Like dealing with a licensed plumber who guarantees his work.

Is there some way in which membership of the PIAA be restricted to those companies who have achieved some kind of accreditation, be it in print quality, environmental standards or good employee relations?

Is there some way in which we can issue a gold medal to those members who achieve a certain standard of being a good corporate citizen? I know it'd be difficult, probably expensive and may result in fewer members than more! But we can only look in envy at our brothers the builders, with their Master Builders Association which somehow maintains the illusion that all their members are better than all the non-members. Oh, for the restoration of good old-fashioned monopolies!

But therein lies the problem, print is readily available to every man and his dog, from anyone who wishes to call themselves a printer. Quality has become such a moveable feast as to be virtually unenforceable, even in a court of law.

Therefore do we need an association? Or perhaps do we deserve one? Have we been too ready to commoditise our industry? Quick to desert our original role of content generators we're just a bunch of tarts searching for some legitimacy under a nice-sounding name, like … the "PIAA"?

[This is the first half of an article from James Cryer. Watch for the second installment here next week when James asks the question and searches for the answer to, **One industry or many?***]*

If you enjoyed reading this article   Subscribe to the FREE Print21 news bulletin

Comment on this article

Name

E-Mail (will not be published)

Website

☐   Receive comment notifications?

Comment

Submit Comment

To receive notification of comments made to this article, you can also provide your email address below.

Email address   Submit