

Leaving a Legacy

by Mark Levin, CAE, CSP

I went into a gift shop in a hotel in New York a few weeks ago just to buy a pack of gum. As I walked up to the counter I saw a sign sitting on top of the cash register that caught me a little by surprise. The sign read "Absolutely No Refunds."

I asked the girl behind the counter what the sign meant. She said, "Why, it means exactly what it says. We don't give any refunds."

Being the pain in the butt I usually am, I asked her "You mean if I bought a jar of that cold cream over there from you and opened it up, and found a dead mouse inside, you wouldn't give me a refund?"

"Well, of course we would in that case. Don't be silly.", she said.

"Oh," I replied, "then you DO give refunds, don't you?"

"Only if there's something wrong with the merchandise," she said.

"Why else would someone want a refund?" I said. "Shouldn't that sign say 'We will gladly refund your money if you're not happy with our products?'"

The poor girl was really befuddled now. I couldn't resist one more shot. "The way it is now, you might just as well put up a sign that says 'We DON'T Want Your Business.'"

She said that I was probably right, and that she would talk to her boss about changing the sign.

The problem with the whole situation was that she still didn't understand. The sign didn't need changing, the policy behind the sign did. Her boss shouldn't make her try to sell anything with that sign sitting on the cash register. I felt bad because the girl not only had a bad situation in which to work but she also had a boss who obviously didn't teach her anything about customer service. It's not the bad policy that bothers me -- it's the bad teaching.

It's time for those of us who have been around association management for a while (in my case, quite a while) to take even more responsibility to guide the next generation of executives and staffers. So much of what we've learned over the years seems to be getting lost in the shuffle between the generations. Either we've taken too much for granted or made too many assumptions about what people bring to our profession these days because there are a lot of people working for associations who don't seem to understand what we do.

I've had the honor of teaching the "Association 101: An Orientation to Association Management" program for many years for ASAE Allied Societies, associations, and Chamber organizations. At a recent program, I asked the attendees to identify the single biggest distraction they face each day at work. What, I asked, prevented them from really getting their work done. I guess it was really no surprise when many claimed their two biggest distractions at work was the constant ringing of the telephone and the overflow of emails.

What these newcomers -- and quite a few of us who have been around a lot longer -- need to understand is that they have it BACKWARDS! When the phone rings in our office, or when an email comes in from a member, that is when we go to work. Everything we're doing between phone calls and emails is supposed to be getting us ready to pick up the phone or respond to the email and help the person (the member) on the other end.

This may sound pretty simplistic, but it's true. My concern isn't so much that these new association professionals don't grasp that concept as much as it is that the people they work for didn't explain that to them before they put them to work. Why would you want a person who doesn't understand this concept answering the phone and corresponding with your members?

The burden is on the managers, and the organizations, to help the next generation of association management professionals understand what we do and why. All of the technical skill and youthful energy of new workers is wasted if they can't master the one skill that makes us unique -- the skill of dealing appropriately with our members. There needs to be more mentoring and guidance from those who have been around, and less of an assumption about the understanding of our younger/newer workers.

Many career association executives have left a legacy in their organization or in their industry or profession. Their legacy includes things like building an organization, building a building, passing a piece of legislation, or becoming the spokesperson for an entire industry. Not everyone in this profession can leave a legacy like that. But we can ALL leave the legacy of understanding to those who follow us. Maybe that's the best legacy of all.

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