

Chairman's Letter

How Does PPAI Stay Competitive?

I have always been a strong believer in the concept of "core competency." That is, determine what you do best, use it to create a competitive advantage and hammer home that point unceasingly to your customers.

As members, we all recognize that our Association is at a pivotal point in its history. The promotional products market continues to expand dramatically, new players are entering on both the supplier and distributor side, and PPAI now has competition in the trade show business. How does our Association respond to these challenges and opportunities? By first focusing on core competencies.

Traditionally, our Association's core competencies, and most visible benefits, have been trade shows and education. Your board of directors, committees, and staff understand that in this new environment both must be continually improved. PPAI must continue to provide the best value in trade shows while increasing our responsiveness to member requests, particularly in the areas of show registration, housing registration, and lead retrieval systems. Convention center amenities must be continually upgraded, including food service, telephones, and package service. In education, we must continue to improve the quality of our instructors, challenge them to provide increasingly relevant content, and insure these programs are readily available to

the membership. Regional Associations and individual members must have increasingly easier access to information such as core curriculum requirements as compared to a member's current CEU status and available speaker programs.

As suppliers and distributors, our business is driven by our ability to service the customer. Lead times are continually shrinking, and clients increasingly demand higher quality at a lower price. In our businesses, we are compelled to respond to those demands. I believe our Association should provide service that is equal to or surpasses the best of our members'. This does not mean always saying "yes" to every member demand. That is impossible in our own businesses, and certainly impossible in our uniquely structured Association that brings together both suppliers and distributors. However, it does mean listening to our members in a sympathetic way, showing a willingness to explore options, and responding promptly and professionally. It means providing our staff with the direction, the tools, and the training to succeed as service providers. Most importantly, it means asking for member feedback, using that feedback to improve, and then asking again. The new PPAI will succeed, first and foremost, by burnishing our core competencies and enveloping them in a customer-oriented culture.

In preparation for the new board member orientation that takes place each December, I was re-reading our Association's Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan was drafted in 1992 by a group of industry veterans and visionaries as

a map to the future. Much of that original work, revised in 1995, remains highly relevant today. One phrase in particular relates to core competency: "...the best path for PPAI is to become *very* good at what it now does: offering high quality/good value shows and education services in response to the needs of the members, being a valuable and efficient source of industry and business information..." Those who drafted this plan understood that to be truly successful with new programs and initiatives, an organization must first excel at its established strengths.

There is, however, a downside to focusing on core competencies: not recognizing the opportunities to develop new ways of delighting your customers. But we'll cross that bridge in the March issue.



A large, stylized handwritten signature of Michael Woody in cursive script, written in black ink. The signature is positioned vertically to the right of the portrait.

By Michael Woody, CAS • PPAI CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD