



What is a trade association and what is your place in it?

"The association has endured its troubles, whether economic or internal, because it was and is needed. It withstood these tiny erosions, as the lighthouse withstands the lapping of the tides. CSFA has become a rational, responsible group with a high batting average. All eyes were upon us in 1922, to see what direction we would take. This is well known today, and the association is respected...We have not allowed ourselves to be stampeded into unwise moves, because we shun bizarre and spectacular legislation. Our methods have remained dignified; not only as enhancers of firemen, but as guardians of the people; because we would rather suffer defeat than to stoop to corrupt practices. This is a reputation worth keeping."

Cecil Lochard,
CSFA President, March 1937

We are all more less familiar with labor unions. They evolved from ancient craft guilds of over two thousand years ago into the organizations they are today. Generally, unions focus on labor and working conditions for their respective members.

Gone are the secret hand-shakes and code words of former guilds like the stone masons who were charged with building large cathedrals and underground vaults that stored the wealth of the church. They have been replaced with membership cards with magnetic strips.

But what about trade associations? What do associations really do for their members and the industry they represent? The short answer is they engage in activities and programs that support industry, manufacturing, marketing, trades, educational institutions and professionals.

Association programs may include public education, advertising, donations to other organizations, sponsorships and scholarships, publishing, developing a recognized certification program, training and education, support and development of legislation including rules and regulations impacting association membership. Many associations also produce special events, seminars and symposiums.

Committees are the heart of most trade associations and can be the sweet spot of opportunity for members. Committees frequently set industry standards and practices as well as enjoying access to people and resources outside the reach of any one individual. It is the association committee where you will find value in your membership.

CSFA is a trade association that originally incorporated in Fresno in 1922. A small group of firefighters astutely saw the need to come together with common goals and objectives to support and advance the California fire service. Their efforts began a long history of legislative achievements that have enhanced the fire service and improved public safety for decades. CSFA has been successful in the implementation of hundreds of bills that became law from ideas and suggestions that grew from individual members who got involved.

Clearly, there is much that CSFA members can be proud. No one working in the fire service today can deny the efforts of hundreds, if not thousands, of members before you. They worked tirelessly for what you have today in benefits, working conditions and safety. Without a doubt, CSFA is dedicated to the interest of the entire fire service including labor, paid and volunteer, administration and management, and the public.

A common question I hear when I am on the road is "What is CSFA doing for me?" While this is a legitimate question, the real question is what are you doing with and for CSFA? After all, the benefit of an association comes from participation, engagement and interaction.

In 1991 I called CSFA with what I thought at the time would be a simple question, "What are the requirements for a volunteer firefighter in California?" Some twenty years later we are about to have an answer to that question. The CSFA Volunteer Committee under the leadership of Ronny Colman has developed an updated strategic plan and a significant training syllabus designed by Sonoma County Division Chief Robert MacIntyre and is supported by IFSTA Essentials of Firefighting.

The training program is a triumphant achievement by a group of exceptionally dedicated volunteers and professionals who have donated hundreds upon hundreds of hours of time to the project. The improvements in hiring practices, training, policy and procedures, administration and management will no doubt help improve future relationships between career and volunteer firefighters.

Chief Paul Stein recently commented that "a trade association is like an exercise buddy. It is much easier to work-out with a friend." Indeed it is. Alone, most of us will either put off exercise altogether or just not put any real effort into it. Working with someone else changes the dynamics of the entire process. A real buddy will also call you out when you are not trying your best or cheating. So it is in an association too. The association is only as good as what you put into it, not what it puts into you.

CSFA is not just a membership card, decal, lapel pin, magazine and an 800 number. It is a living organization that represents the good of the whole. Together we can maintain what former CSFA President Cecil Lochard said was and is still today "dignified; not only as enhancers of firemen, but as guardians of the people." What has CSFA done for you? If you have to ask, you are not engaged.

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