

Selecting a Business Association

Chambers of Commerce...provincial associations...national associations...international associations...professional membership associations...special interest groups...

What do they do?

Professional and trade associations offer a variety of services useful to members and others. Depending on the association these may include:

- publishing of newsletters that keep members abreast of trends and developments in the industry and in legislative and regulatory issues;
- library resources and research services;
- the distribution of booklets, videos and supplies such as promotional bags, book stands, holders, special labels;
- providing a forum for the exchange of ideas to improve the industry;
- promotion of the industry and/or products they produce;
- development of an ethical standard for members and issues of quality, service and excellence;
- supporting education (home study courses, videos, books) and research;
- conducting courses, seminars, workshops, conventions, symposiums, etc.
- publishing membership directories; (some associations include wholesalers as members)
- sponsoring trade shows;
- group insurance rates, and other attractive benefits (i.e. buyers discounts to members only);
- technical manuals and other information specific to the business/service;
- referral services for buyers/users trying to find your specific commodity or service.

The Cost of Membership

Membership fees range from nominal fees (intended to cover the printing and distribution of the newsletter) to hundreds of dollars (and more) each year. But which one do you choose when you have a limited start-up budget? Only you can decide which association will better serve your **current** needs.

In the start-up phase of your business, an association with a variety of training, advisory, research services may prove the most useful, regardless of the cost. But once you are on your feet and know your stuff inside-out and backwards, you might want to reconsider your choice of association.

For some business owners, the price of membership even if no other services but group insurance are offered, is still good. These people may indeed save a substantial sum for something they must purchase anyway. In some cases group insurances (liability, disability, etc.) is less than 1/10th the cost of individual insurance. So, for these individuals, the few

hundred they spend for membership to the Chamber of Commerce or XYZ Association is measured not in dollars spent - but rather in hundreds of dollars saved every year.

Professional Certification - Mandatory Membership

You may belong to a profession that is self-regulated. In that case you have no choice but to belong to your professional association because they are also the body that certifies your professional standing without which you wouldn't be permitted to engage in providing services or working in your field. (Doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers - to mention a few.) Many professionals choose to join other associations or their local Chamber of Commerce for networking purposes - i.e. an accountant who specializes in the trucking industry would likely find it beneficial to join the Truckers Association.

How to Find the Associations

There are tens of thousands of associations/organizations in Canada - and the number increases annually. The Canada-Saskatchewan Business Service Centre (CSBSC) has hard-copy directories and licensed databases that list these organizations in a variety of ways - by subject, location, publications, conference or special events, etc. There are also some free-to-the-public online directories where you can search. Please contact the CSBSC if you need assistance with your search.

Asking Questions

Now that you know where to find a list of organizations, and you have a list of quite a few more associations, societies, and/or chambers of commerce than you expected to find, how do you pick the right one?

Questions not asked don't get answered

- What is the fee for membership?
- What services are provided to members? (Are there additional fees for these services?)
- Do they have an information kit they can mail to you that outlines their services?
- Do they have back issues of their newsletter they are willing to send? (Willing to sell?)
- See the sample list of services under "What do they do?" to help you form the questions to which you'd like answers.

Also ask yourself the reasons you have for joining an association

- Is it to gain the tools/services to better manage your business?
- Is it to meet other business professionals in the local area - potential clients? If so, a national association based in Toronto with an annual conference probably won't fill your needs - but the local Chamber of Commerce with its weekly breakfast meetings, or monthly speaker probably will.
- Is it to get timely information about government legislation affecting your customers or product line? If so, membership in a national or provincial association with a good newsletter will probably be beneficial.

Verified: 2010-03-03

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