

Commentary

New Directions For ACE

Russell Forte

I think ACE should do a lot more for us than it does. I think ACE should serve as an advocate, a union, a spokesperson. ACE should develop and carry out national initiatives. ACE should be highly visible nationally. Professionals in other communications organizations and professions ought to know ACE exists. ACE should be more influential. Our CEOs' ought to be aware of ACE.

What do you expect from a professional organization such as ACE?

Think about it. Why did you really join ACE?

Was it only for self improvement? If only that, couldn't you get that through organizations that specialize in your field? Photography? Writing? Editing?

For example, if you need to know the current art of making PSA's because you're in that end of communications, couldn't you talk with broadcast professionals to learn what they want? Couldn't you study PSA's on television to see what stations are using?

Or if you edit press releases or publications, couldn't you talk with reporters and editors that cover your organization's work, study the writ-

ing that presents itself from those sources—advertising, good books, newspaper editorials and similar sources—and learn?

This is not to say our annual ACE conferences are not good. I've been to a few and I always come away with my sights raised.

ACE or any other professional organization is only as good as the time we all put into making it good. We all have ideas on what makes an organization successful. Here are mine.

What I'm saying is that I think it's time for ACE to move in some new directions. To represent us actively. To participate in a lot of the debate going on around us and to make its voice—our voices—heard.

Extend Professional Influence

We generally have about 700 members each year, spread throughout the country and the world. Some are in private industry.

Shouldn't a group that large "stand" for something, have an agenda?

Shouldn't we have specific positions on topics, such as First Amendment rights, freedom of the press, access to government information?

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Shouldn't we testify at hearings in and out of our state assemblies and national Congress? When lawmakers in our legislatures are discussing topics connected with communication and information, shouldn't we have a spokesperson there give our opinion? Shouldn't we write the committee chair and argue our view? Or at least support those who are supporting our view? Don't we have anything to say?

Shouldn't we come to the aid of whistle blowers we think are in the right? Couldn't that be you standing out there all alone some day, helping your country by trying to keep your government honest?

Wouldn't it be nice at such a time to know the professional organization you belong to cares about the outcome, actually has a plan to help you during your crisis?

When you see something going on in the organization you work for that compels you to speak up, shouldn't you expect ACE to back you in some way—IF YOU'RE RIGHT? Perhaps it might be as small a thing as writing and getting other professional organizations to write to appropriate people and say, "We support the position of Joe (or Jane) Blow and ..."

Shouldn't we support organizations that are trying to strengthen our professional role?

We Need To Address Technical Issues, Too

I've always been troubled by the ACE special interest groups, our SIGs. I felt SIGs had a powerful role to play in ACE but only after mulling it over for a few years and bringing new experiences into my mix, did I finally determine that role.

It goes back to the very reason the five Extension service editors

who founded ACE met in the first place, way back in 1913.

The five formed ACE to find better ways to get information to the news media, their funnel to the public.

Now, you could argue that an organization that offers professional self-improvement to its members—as ACE does—is carrying on that original purpose. Put simply, better photographs, clearer writing, equals better press pickup. Right?

Maybe. But we should also be working with the information industry at high levels to find better ways to make information available to them and the public?

Wouldn't that be a more direct way of keeping our promise to the five founders? It would also, by the way, raise the stature of ACE and its members, strengthen our organization, bring in new members and help our profession and the country—all at the same time.

Our SIGs should work with news media and other professional organizations to establish standards for our profession, to help make it easier for news media to use our information and pass it on to the public.

For instance, I recently participated in CD-ROM (compact disk, read only memory) training for my office. It occurred to me that a valuable thing our ACE computer SIG could do would be to help determine what standard to back for the publication of CD-ROM, a new technology.

Many producers are going in their own directions, developing their own standards for software to search the information on their disks. That makes it difficult for people like us to publish disks with "standard" search software on them so our audiences can read them. Our computer SIG

could study the field, pick the software it thinks best and recommend that ACE support it.

Ethics Of Computerized Photography

Likewise, ACE can make important contributions to moral decisions about the new photography. Here's the situation.

The Associated Press may cover the 1992 national political conventions photographically without developer or hypo—or even film. They'll photograph the candidates making their promises using 35mm cameras that record the still image on tiny video disks. AP photographers will transmit photographs from their disks into computers.

Editors can see the entire "roll" of pictures, select and crop the ones they want, adjust their color, write captions right on the computerized image and transmit the pictures to the world—all with the lights on and without chemicals.

Computerized photographs now make it possible to put my face on, for example, ACE President-elect Larry Whiting's body in a way no courtroom can discover, at least not yet.

Computers can put objects in a photograph, move them around or take them out. That sort of thing can mislead the public, damage reputations and destroy careers.

Shouldn't ACE members have an opinion on this new technology to make public through their professional organization?

Should ACE speak up when a newspaper takes a soft drink can out of a front page photograph? Today a soft drink can, tomorrow a human being. What if it's a photograph YOU released and an editor re-arranges the elements in it.

Shouldn't ACE be concerned about such things? Shouldn't we research it and help form public opinion by speaking our point of view?

And speaking of photography and other forms of visual information, shouldn't we try to increase pay scales for jobs in those fields so skilled people don't have to leave them to make more money? Shouldn't we petition our governments and help them recognize visual skills as being every bit as valuable as writing, editing and other forms of communication? If we don't care, why should they?

I'd like to see our entire national workshop devoted solely to visuals, so we can all get a strong understanding of their power in communicating ideas and information.

Get A Grip On The Future—It's Here Now

Shouldn't we form committees to examine new methods of photography, of on-line information distribution, printing, CD-ROM publishing and other forms of information storage and retrieval? Shouldn't we put the strength of our 700 members and perhaps even organizations they work for behind us to help set standards for different areas of our craft?

Couldn't we develop a consensus toward computers, software and word processors so we communicators who really need word processors don't have to use computers just because our Information Resource Management people—not us—decided what equipment we should use? We're the communicators, not them.

And Take Writing

Writing standards are slipping, in our schools, in our profession, in

all the organizations around us. Our next staff members are passing through college writing courses right now. Soon they'll come to work beside us and maybe join ACE.

Shouldn't ACE work with schools and other organizations that support fine writing to help them raise writing standards?

Wouldn't it be useful for us to contribute toward an effort to raise literacy? To sponsor readings in public libraries throughout the country? Or to establish a program whereby we ACE members donate two days of vacation a year to working with school kids?

We can do these things as individuals, of course, and some of us do. But wouldn't it be great for ACE—as an organization—to announce and carry out such a program?

Work With Other Organizations

There are a number of communicators' organizations like ours. Couldn't we work with them toward common goals? Sure, they have their own agendas, just as we have. But sometimes **some** of their agenda will agree with **some** of ours.

Couldn't we communicate with them, let them know our agenda, learn theirs and ask for their help during certain times?

Last year, former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volker presented to President Bush, a study Volker had headed of federal government work and jobs. Wouldn't it have been good for our organization to have sent Volker and the President each a letter giving ACE's posi-

tion on the study? Shouldn't people hear from us when they're talking about our jobs?

It's apparent to me our profession has been under attack in government for several years. For example, communication work is being politicized in the federal government and many communicators have been fired. It's called "a reduction in force" but the outcome is the same. I've heard similar stories from communicators in the states.

Where I work, my profession has a ceiling on it for career employees lower than five years ago, because political appointees are placing political appointees lower and lower in our ranks.

Is America best served when the public gets its information according to whatever political party happens to be in power? Do we as professionals care?

The effort of this special organization—the Agricultural Communicators in Education—shouldn't stop with an annual conference. We have more to contribute.

We need to select our priorities, set a course and follow it.

New directions require more work, more thought, more money. We are in a period of adjustment in America. Things are changing. We need to help make those changes so they're made properly.

There's so much going on around us we should respond to that will effect the future of our jobs, our profession, our country and the way we do our work. It's difficult to let this cup pass.