

My Career in Association Circulation

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Back in late 1997, early 1998, I was a relatively young man who was seriously considering a career as an association professional. I had an MBA in Marketing from George Washington University, had already worked at two associations and really thought that climbing the ladder in associations was what my life had in store.

That was when the fateful call came. My sister-in-law was a recruiter and ran across the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a group that was looking for a membership and marketing director. I applied and was fortunate enough to be granted an interview.

Stumbling Into Circulation

At the time, AAAS was basically a one trick pony—members joined to get a subscription to the popular title *Science*. There were not many additional benefits of membership.

During the interview process Mike Spinella, VP of membership and marketing, stressed that they really wanted to turn the association into an organization with multiple benefits, therefore giving members multiple reasons for wanting to join.

I couldn't wait to turn what was then basically a publisher into a multi-faceted membership organization. I guess I should have realized that I was going to be doing circulation when from the first day all I heard about was rate bases and advertising, not necessarily membership numbers and benefits.

It really started to sink in when Mike and Marlene Zendell, director

of fulfillment, taught me about grace copies, publication auditing and magazine fulfillment. I was hopeful, however, and continued to look for member benefits that could be introduced that would help recruit and retain members.

I finally knew that I was actually a circulator when for my first big direct mail campaign at AAAS we tested "join" versus "subscribe" in our acquisition campaigns and subscribe won pretty handily. At that point, there was no turning back. I was a circulator!

The Constant Change

My next stop was at *National Geographic*, where I met two of the biggest influences on my circulation career. Keith Bellows and Dawn Drew were the editor-in-chief and publisher of *National Geographic Traveler* during my tenure, and they both taught me a ton about the industry, not just circulation. We worked on many new and exciting projects, and I still am grateful for everything they taught me.

Although circulation was not my chosen career path, it has turned out to be one of the most exciting and scary industries to have worked in over the past 10 years. When I started, it was all about planning, implementing and tracking direct mail campaigns and insert cards. That focus has changed incredibly with the introduction of the Internet and many other new types of circulation marketing.

The constant change has forced us to really push the envelope and think outside the box. I don't think I would ever have learned as much as I have about marketing and been



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as creative as I have been forced to be if it weren't for taking that first job in association publishing.

Everything I have learned as a circulator has really helped me in my current role. I launched Scott Oser Associates in March 2006 to help associations and publications better understand their audiences, strategically improve their recruitment and retention activities and grow their overall revenues.

Over the past 17 months, I have completed audits, developed branding campaigns, created and implemented membership acquisition and retention plans, consulted with an organization on outsourcing all of their fulfillment activities, and successfully sold advertising, sponsorships and exhibits and more. I never would have been able to successfully handle all of these various tasks if I wasn't forced to learn all of these things, and much, much more as a circulator. ■