

# Becoming a 'must-join' association of professionals

John Peacock



**There are many occupations that wish to be considered a 'profession'. This article discusses the foundations for a profession, and concludes with how an association of professionals can increase the value of membership through an 'aspirational branded designation'.**

Eight considerations for associations of professionals are presented. These points are called considerations as they are not prerequisites for a successful profession.

## Knowledge and the public good

Clare Bellis, an Australian Actuary, wrote a feature article entitled 'Professions in Society', published in *Australian Actuarial Journal*, 2000 Vol 6, Issue 2. Ms Bellis's definition of 'profession' leads to the first two considerations:

**Consideration 1:** Does your occupation have specialised knowledge and long training? ("cognitive")

**Consideration 2:** Does your occupation have ethical standards and a commitment to provide a service for the public good? ("normative")

These considerations apply to the individual, who needs to acquire the knowledge and apply it for the good of the community. Doing good for the community does not preclude a professional making a living – and the role of an association in increasing income for its members is discussed elsewhere in this article.

Professionals do not work in isolation and this is where associations enter the picture. Clare Bellis is acknowledged for the next consideration:

**Consideration 3:** Does your occupation have a national body with disciplinary powers?

Without an association that binds the professionals together and has influence over their conduct through the power to withdraw membership, it is hard for an occupation to claim to be a professional.

## Public recognition of a profession

The 'profession' tag is sought after, and there are differing views about who is and who is not a 'professional'.

Again quoting the insight of Ms Bellis: "Profession... is a value-laden label, not just a description: to describe oneself as a member of a profession is to claim certain qualities, not simply to state a fact about oneself such as being right- or left-handed. Many varied occupational groups aspire to the label, and the definition therefore tends to be tailored to fit the characteristics of the group, which is doing the defining," Ms Bellis says.

"For some people, profession simply means a paid occupation - hence professional sports players. Others would say 'just cognitive', so would consider computer programming a profession. Some would include teachers (cognitive & normative), but not computer programmers. Others would exclude teaching if teachers were not considered to have a controlling professional body, as distinct from a trade union".

Readers will see that there is no clear definition, however the points raised above are useful thoughts that associations can consider in their own context.

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## Individuals choose to join an independent association

The association must be structured to allow it to be a genuine representative body, hence the next two considerations:

**Consideration 4:** Does your association have individuals willingly becoming members?

As being a professional is an individual attribute, there are implications for the relevant association:

- > Members must choose to join, which is different to registration authorities where professionals may need by law to join to practice.
- > Voting members should be individuals, based on the association's membership criteria.
- > Group membership for a firm or department of professionals may be a problem if it clashes with the need for professionals to choose to join.
- > Organisations should not be voting members, but can be involved in non-voting membership categories, sometimes called affiliates.

**Consideration 5:** Is your association independent, controlled by members?

Associations of professionals should be able to speak out on behalf of their members on relevant matters. They should not put themselves into a position where they follow the interests of government or major employers. They should have appropriate governance and election mechanisms that allow for a turnover of Office Bearers and Board Directors from among the membership.

## Setting professional standards for members

Associations of professionals sometimes set the standard for an occupation and are left to themselves. Standards may include educational qualifications, code of ethics and conduct, continuing professional development requirements and associations require the right to discipline or expel members under stated circumstances.

**Consideration 6:** Does your association set professional standards and, where there is registration, go beyond registration standards?

In a number of cases, governments see registration as being necessary for the public good. Registration is usually compulsory; professional association membership is voluntary. In our opinion, registration criteria should be set at a reasonable and realistic level to allow sufficient people to work in an occupation. Associations should aim to have membership standards beyond registration.

Many associations validly choose to perform the valuable service of setting standards, but this is sometimes not enough for a high level of membership. The next considerations look at commercial advantage – how can membership of this association help me make more money in my profession?

In strong commercially orientated businesses (eg sales), the financial outcome of the individual is what matters, not whether they have a professional qualification, a degree or even high school matriculation. This is understandable as some human skills are innate and cannot be replicated by a professional qualification.

The ideal positioning of an association of professionals is to have its members more sought after than practitioners who are not members of the association. Professionals in private practice often use their association membership as the platform and build upon this by reputation amongst clients.

Where there are monopolistic employers such as government departments and a shortage of potential employers, it is more challenging for an association to recruit and retain members if association membership does not assist employment prospects.

Associations must follow their particular mission or objects, and many associations choose to exist to represent all people who engage in a profession. This is perfectly valid and may be the right path, but it is also valid for associations to consider presenting their members – or a portion of their members – as having a superior standing among other members of the profession.

**Consideration 7:** Does your association have an aspirational branded designation?

Having been impressed for many years by acronyms that are developed and owned by associations of professionals, I see the need for a general name and suggest we call these 'aspirational branded designations'.

Associations become stronger when they offer a post-nominal designation that is sought-after, aspirational and powerful. This is smart marketing as these members carry and proudly promote the designation. An ideal outcome is for your brand to become a symbol that professionals seek to increase their income.

Perhaps the strongest school of aspirational designations are 'Chartered' designations. Originating in British associations that have Royal Charters, they combined the word 'Chartered' with the noun of their profession, hence Chartered Engineers, Chartered Surveyors, Chartered Accountants and so forth. There are many other very successful aspirational branded designations.

There are a number of issues related to aspirational branded designations:

- > A dynamic respected adjective (eg Chartered or Certified or Accredited or Credentialed) plus noun (the name of the professional) works well.
- > The post-nominal is better if abbreviated to 2-3 initials which can be easily spoken as initials (eg 'CPA') and encouragement should be given to putting these on business cards.
- > "Fellow of the Institute of XYZ's" is less catchy than a fluent post-nominal designation but long established titles should rarely be changed.
- > Pre-nominals also work, but very few professions can use 'Doctor' and other pre-nominals are unlikely to be widely accepted.
- > Aspirational branded designations work when there is an open market and where the designation is recognised by potential employers and clients as bestowing a higher standard of competence.
- > Newly established designations are not instantly recognised and sought after. They may take a decade to establish. But all designations were new once so think medium and long term!
- > Have a hard-to-pass exam or interview.
- > If only a small percentage of candidates for the designation pass, publicise this as it is good for the brand to prove attainment is a challenge.
- > Position your association's designation as superior to a university Masters qualification and more relevant.
- > Make designated members maintain their accreditation, which is does not happen once a university degree (eg MBA) is attained.
- > The granting of designations can become a strong income generator for your association. If your association does not get this money, universities or others will be pleased to do so instead.
- > Consider more voting rights or non-designated members not having a vote
- > The lower the percentage of representatives of a profession that are members of your association, the greater the incentive to push your association's 'chartered, accredited, certified' designation.
- > Own your brand: develop, maintain and protect your unique designation through brand name registration and trademarks
- > Brand names of professionals controlled by a registration board cannot be controlled by associations of professionals
- > Having one internationally consistent and tightly controlled brand is ideal
- > If no internationally controlled brand, work with colleague associations overseas to use the same designation
- > Ultimately, develop your brand into a separate profession

## Case study: two competing brands within one profession

Perhaps the strongest association-owned brands of professionals in Australia are the two competitive brands of accountants: Chartered Accountants (CA) and Certified Practising Accountant (CPA).

These are brands that compete to be seen as the premier designation by university graduates choosing their post-graduate qualification courses and by clients. Significant funds are invested each year by the relevant associations, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia and CPA Australia, in promoting their brand name. Newspaper advertisements for senior accountants often say "CA or CPA applicants preferred". In a large profession such as accounting, it is possible for there to be two successful brands. Whilst most professions will only have one designation, these accounting bodies lead the way with their brand marketing.

**Consideration 8:** Is the name of your association closely or exactly connected to your aspirational branded designation?

A final consideration is where an association has an aspirational branded designation, the name of the association and the name of the designation should be very similar. If your designation becomes more powerful than the name of your association, change your association's name.

The USA-based Association for Investment Management and Research (AIMR) did such a good job in establishing and promoting its Certified Financial Analyst (CFA) tag that the designation became better known than the association. Therefore the association changed its name to CFA Institute in 2004.

Demonstrating that new professions are still being established and immediately recognising the power of aspirational branded designations, the Self Managed Superannuation Funds Professionals Association of Australia (SPAA), founded in 2003, has established a new brand and multi-disciplinary profession in less than a decade. The association's Mission is: "To enhance SPAA's reputation and brand as the peak professional body for Self Managed Superannuation, responsible for creating best practice framework and standards that are adopted by members, acknowledged by regulators and recognised by customers."

## Conclusion

Potential members need to be given compelling reasons to join their association of professionals. Only a few associations have been fortunate enough to position themselves so that people are willing to undergo tough examinations or peer review, for example, to join, but all associations of professionals should consider going down this path. The outcome may be worthwhile for many years ahead.

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