

Managing Editor's Desk

Nelson Fabian, M.S.



Transitioning to a More Youthful NEHA!

Whether we like it or not, we all get perceived by others in certain ways. The same phenomena holds true for organizations. So it has been interesting that in recent years, there has been a flood of articles in the association management literature on branding, brands, messaging, and so forth.

In what seems like countless discussions that I have had within the association management community, I have passionately argued that brands, images, and perceptions are controlled not by the sender but rather by the receiver. (You may remember my editorial on this a couple of years ago.) Furthermore, the receiver of your actions or services makes the final judgement as to whether your deeds do in fact line up with your words. And deeds, not words, ultimately determine what your real image is.

While no one has succeeded in dissuading me from that central point (i.e., that the receiver defines your brand), I would agree with one sentiment that many of my adversaries share. That is, it is only natural that we all have self-images and we *hope* that others see us in the way we want to be seen. In other words, I find no fault with the idea that we can hope that others see us (and our organizations) in a certain way. I firmly believe, however, that if our actions and deeds don't line up with our hopes and pronouncements, then the perception that we want others to have of us won't develop—no matter how slick or cute our words might be.

To turn this topic in the direction of NEHA, let me acknowledge that we too have a vision of how we would like to be perceived. We also work hard to demonstrate that we mean what we say. From the feedback we receive,

You will always be the judge of who we are. The most we can hope for is that you will see that our actions are consistent with our words.

it seems that most of our members believe us to be authentic, i.e., they believe that we are who we say we are.

Over the years, our efforts have been directed at an image that defines NEHA as an organization that is credible, high-quality, caring, personal, expert in environmental health, capable of representing the concerns of the environmental health profession, and in touch with the issues. As wonderful as it sounds, that image is now undergoing enormous change! The impetus for this change started out innocently enough in a discussion some two years ago.

That conversation took place at our board meeting in April 2006. We were discussing the general topic of our multigenerational work force and its implications for the practice of environmental health. Two elements of this topic emerged in the discussion.

The first element, discussed by several deeply concerned board members, addressed the general issue of succession planning and

what NEHA could do to first, help draw younger people into the profession, and second, replace the baby boomers (and their expertise) who were retiring.

The second element was led by a couple of our younger board members who urged their board colleagues to think of ways that we could make NEHA more appealing and relevant to the younger generations.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these two strands converged. The discussion changed into a rallying call for NEHA to become more attractive to younger professionals. (To be clear, no one was saying that we should abandon our older members. On the contrary, the calling we heard was that NEHA should become a much more multigenerational institution—especially if we hoped to stimulate younger professionals about our profession.)

After this landmark discussion, the seeds of change were sown.

We added to those wonderful attributes of our self-image that I mentioned earlier the concepts that NEHA is also “young, electric, exciting, changeable, fun, interesting, on the edge, innovative, and even daring!” As I also mentioned earlier, however, saying it is one thing; doing it is quite another. If our words are to be believed, we have to engage in those activities that will convince you that we mean what we say.

Accordingly, let me now share with you some of the more daring things that NEHA is doing that support our determination to be as fun and innovative as we are credible and caring. Our quest is nothing less than to be an association that is relevant to all generations in today's workforce.

continued on page 68

The AEC

In my last journal column, I went into extensive detail about many of the changes that we are making to our annual conference. I will therefore be brief this time around. Nonetheless, I can't stress enough that our upcoming AEC will be unlike any other that we have ever sponsored. Together with a more traditional series of lectures, we will be offering a slew of innovative educational sessions in our "Learning Laboratory" campus at the Hilton. From the technique of "Pecha Kucha" to "speed dating" formatted education to design sessions to role playing exercises to self-organizing education—we have never had anything that even remotely approaches this degree of interactive and participatory education at any conference we've ever put on. (Nor has almost any other association!) Yet that is how many of our younger professionals learn, and we are determined to be there for them.

In addition, we are implementing a host of measures that will make this the greenest conference in our history.

Beyond the conference's educational format and green infrastructure, the conference design is also focused on making this a fun, exciting, and unique event.

High tech, high touch, highly green, highly interactive, and highly fun. Little wonder we now see ourselves as a young, energetic, and daring association!

The Journal

Arguably, our most visible if not most important product is the *JEH*. It is the one product that goes to all members and the one that ties all of our members together.

As with the AEC, for years we have followed a basic format not unlike the formats that you see with other association journals. And like most all other associations, the heart of our journal has been devoted to the technical manuscripts that we publish. So much for being in the pack! Get ready for a new kind of *Journal*!

For starters, we have added a new position to the *Journal*. This new position will allow us to investigate and report on the profession itself. Our former copy editor Rebecca Berg's job is going from being a little reporting and a lot of copy editing to nothing but reporting! We have also hired a new copy editor, Elizabeth Donoghue-Armstrong—who, like Rebecca, also has her Ph.D.

With this change, our intention is to immerse ourselves more fully in the profession.

We want to investigate, for example, the inside workings of local boards of health, what it was like for environmental health professionals who were on the front lines during the San Diego fires, what young people are saying about environmental health, and the fears people have in this line of work. We want to report on the perceptions that others have of us, ways for you to better handle the media, how you can better communicate your knowledge and ideas, what you should be doing to take better care of yourself, how you can protect your income, what politicians really think of you, and so forth. In her new position, Rebecca will pursue issues like these and report back to you on what she finds.

As we add more components to the journal that are more likely to be read, our inclination is to make the technical manuscripts available to you in other ways. Some possibilities are: through our Web site, a separately published compendium, or a link on our e-newsletters. Be assured that you will get all of these articles and even more, since we will no longer have to constrain the number of manuscripts we publish based on available journal pages. This transformation of the *Journal*, however, will allow us to give you something that is much more relevant, exciting, electric, interesting, and even fun. We want the *Journal* to become nothing less than your indispensable and personal companion and advisor. It kind of fits with the enhanced image, doesn't it?!

Web site

NEHA has invested over \$40,000 in an effort to upgrade our Web site and make it more contemporary. Two columns ago I talked about how social networking products were transforming the way in which we go about building and participating in communities. I also mentioned in that column that associations could ill afford to ignore these products and trends inasmuch as community is the very heart of what we are. Accordingly, we have worked hard to understand these trends and to construct community-building network tools that will help NEHA members to better communicate and interact with colleagues.

Our new Web site should begin to become available by the time you are reading this editorial. As the year progresses, more and more of these more modern day resources will become available to you.

Entrepreneurial Zone

Easily the most creative new venture of all has been the construction of what we are fondly calling our Entrepreneurial Zone. We actually have three new staff positions in this unique program, two of which are presently filled by Christine Hollenbeck and Barry Porter. (The third position is in the process of being filled). To my knowledge, it is the only program of its type in the association world.

We are determined to maintain within NEHA a place for the experimental, the daring, the adventurous, the edge, the wild ideas, and so forth. The purpose of the zone is to provide a "laboratory" to experiment with new and innovative programs. It also serves as a "garage" to which we can bring programs that aren't working very well or are in need of repair or innovative redesign.

The mere existence of the zone gives NEHA a daily energy drink. More importantly, it gives our association an institutional capability for breathing fresh life and new creative ideas into everything we do.

We also have other initiatives up our sleeves, but the ones I've reported on here are probably our most significant. I should mention, however, that we also have the staff to pull this off. Over the years we have been building a staff resource that today features considerable expertise, energy, dedication, initiative, and especially, a caring for you. Without a staff of this kind, we would not have the vitality to embark on the kind of agenda we have set out for ourselves.

I want to make clear that "the discussion" that prompted many of these changes was not responsible for them alone. We've been on this course for years. It is amazing, nevertheless, how powerful a discussion can be. That discussion put the pieces together in such a way that we could all more clearly understand both what needed to be done, and how we all needed to be on the same page. And we've never looked back.

You will always be the judge of who we are. The most we can hope for is that you will see that our actions are consistent with our words. We are working hard to convey through our daring actions that we take very seriously the responsibility of serving all generations of this workforce. We are determined to succeed. We simply cannot afford to have our younger members be any less enthused about environmental health and NEHA than their predecessors in the boomer generation were. ■■■

