

**Organizational Tactics for Optometric
Professional Associations**

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Abstract:

This paper reviews the function of Optometric associations, answers the question “What do Optometrists need from an organization?” and makes suggestions as to how Optometric organizations might be able to better serve the interests of their members. Research was generated by the utilization of a survey given to Optometric professionals and students. The survey found that the two issues viewed as being most important to these groups were collective efforts to provide patient education and conducting continued educationals at affordable prices. While the data collected may have been influenced by the disproportionate number of student responses, it does suggest that technological issues are viewed as some of the most pressing. Optometric association leaders should, attempt to incorporate such issues into their organizational goals.

Key Words:

Organization, Optometric Associations, Educationals, Needs, Tactics, Technology, Patient care, Management, and Predicted challenges.

Introduction

The Optometric profession has a rich history of organization. Shortly after the introduction of the optician to the United States, associations began to form. The majority of these groups were fixated on local regulations and practice strategies, but the work of a handful of individuals, like Charles Prentice, laid the foundations for the profession as we know it today(1). The earliest optical society appeared in New York in 1896(1). These individuals banded together to carve out a niche for the profession in the New York Law. The first national association, the American Association of Opticians, now known as the American Optometric Association (AOA), was founded in 1919(1). Today, the American Optometric Association stands as the nation's most influential Optometry organization. This group of Optometrists represents the profession's interest in legal, ethical, and patient care issues. They claim a membership of over 32,000 optometrists, nation wide(2). At the present time, there are a great multitude of organizations and associations in the United States. The fact that there are so many begs the question why? If the intent of these organizations is to fill a void in the interest of the professional community, can there really be enough need within the profession to justify so many different groups? This paper will address three questions: Why are there so many organizations? What are the needs of an Optometric professional? and How are Optometry's professional organizations addressing these issues? New research will be presented and reviewed. This is followed by a discussion as to how one might structure an organization to better meet the needs of the eye care professional.

Why Are There So Many Organizations?

The current number of associations reflects not only the diverse array of topics needing to be addressed, but also the multiple reasons behind the organizations. At this time, there are organizations based on geography, specialty aspects of care, Optometric education, corporate affiliation, financial gains, humanitarian services, and religious affiliations. Each has its own emphasis and strategy for serving the needs of its members. Based on the volume of associations, it is likely that the needs of optometric professionals are being met.

What Are the Needs of the Optometric Professional?

To better understand the needs of eye care professionals, we first must realize that the functions of professional organizations stem from the needs of their members. Therefore a review of the functions of current associations will provide a good starting point. Today's Optometric professionals are banding together to address issues of patient care, legality, business management, and public perception. The issues most relevant to today's optometric organizations include: advancement of patient care (member competency and standards of care), patient perception, staffing and office management tactics, equipment and procedures updates, efficiency of the medical model, patient education, and the legal restrictions defining the scope of practice. The following paragraphs are an overview of the methods currently being employed by optometric associations to address these issues.

How Are Optometric Associations Meeting the Needs of Their Members?

Advancement of Patient Care:

Patient care issues have consistently trumped all other issues. This is a need that has been well agreed upon since the first organizations began appearing. The biggest issue facing early Optometric associations was how to earning Optometry a place in the World of Medicine. Forerunners understood that the only way to demonstrate their ability was to structure standards to insure all refracting opticians were providing correct and accurate spectacle prescriptions and lenses. Since the beginning, patient care advancement has been driven by the enthusiasm of optometrists wanting to provide better care. Such Optometrists seek to find the most appropriate management tactics through evidence based research. The role of the professional organization has been to provide such Optometrists with open lines of communication and information sharing. Today's organizations continue to facilitate advancements in our understanding of eye care. Once new tactics are known to be advantageous, professional organizations respond by endorsing them as standards of care. These standards are the primary tool implemented by the profession to encourage compliance from all members of the trade.

Patient Perception of the Profession:

Along with the actual commitment that the Optometric profession has made to the advancement of patient care, there is also an effort to increase the public's opinion of the profession. Unfortunately, attempts to educate the public about Optometry have had little

effect. Parity remains the primary hurdle to overcome. The optometrist has always been viewed as a second rate care provider. In the past, many optometrists fed this misconception by overlooking eye care in favor of increasing profits. As the scope of the profession has expanded, the Optometrist's attention to ocular health has increased greatly. Today, most third parties acknowledge optometrists as equally well trained care providers, for procedures included in the state laws. Optometry won a major victory when the government included optometrists in reimbursement fees for Medicare in 1986(3). Yet, the public has been slow to recognize optometrist as credible care givers. Today's optometry organizations continue to promote the competence of their members, but much is still to be done. Current efforts to advance the profession include media outlets and public interaction. Events like Save Your Vision Week and Special Olympics Vision Screenings, along with television advertisements, suggests that Optometric Associations are actively working to address this concern.

Educational Advancement:

Sustaining and improving doctor competency is a staple of both patient care and public perception. In an effort to address this issue, most organizations offer Continued Educationals (CE). The majority of these educationals consist of either a lecture given by a professional with extensive knowledge on the topic, or grand rounds. In either case, the information is presented, noted, and questioned for application. Optometric associations have proven time and time again, that they are more than efficient in conducting Educationals.

Staffing and Office Management Tactics:

Needs historically overlooked by Optometric organizations include office staffing and financial concerns. While many organizations direct their attentions toward topics like improving patient care, they lack the recognition that some of their members are struggling to keep their business properly staffed and in good financial standing. Issues of office staffing, including job tasking, and conflict management are essential skills for the private practitioner. Fortunately, there are a few organizations that do address these issues. With the emergence of publications like *Optometric Management*, providing Optometrists with financial advise, staffing suggestions, and office flow tactics, Optometrists are now better able to obtain management advise.

New Technology: Equipment and Procedures Updates:

One of the most exciting issues in Optometry today, is that of new technology. Most organizations introduce their members to new equipment by inviting manufacturers to advertise at their educationals. Often educationals are inundated with corporate salesmen pushing their new products. They have favorable studies claiming the marvelous breakthrough that their new products constitute. Unfortunately, many of these corporately funded studies are of little value to the discerning practitioner. What the professional needs is solid clinical trials and information regarding the application and administration of the equipment. Many organizations allow these new systems to rent floor space, but they don't address the relevance, effectiveness, or application of the equipment. Unfortunately, this approach can lead to uncensored misinformation, validity confusion, and a lack of objective input. The true cost of this strategy is that by the time

true advancements are taught, the opportunity will have been lost to utilize the equipment in caring for patients

The Efficiency of the Optometric Medical Model:

One issue that has been rarely addressed is the efficiency of the Optometric Medical Model. Many professionals report feeling rushed to see more patients per day, in order to maintain their income levels, in spite of managed care. All too often, remedies for such concerns are not being discussed. The majority of optometrists seeking efficiency assistance are left to contract outside agents to research their office's flow and time management skills. In recent years, publications like "Optometric Management" have addressed this issue, but even it is not specific to regional concerns.

Patient Education:

Patients have always had a degree of interest in gaining knowledge about their conditions. However, in recent years patients are more accepting of their role in decision making. The immense popularity of the Internet has fueled a new found interest in patient education. Today's optometrists are faced with a new responsibility for protecting their patients from misleading information. They also have been enlisted in warding off the influence of scam artist selling supposed cures for ocular conditions that have no scientific credibility. As of this time, there have only been a handful of organizations who have attempted to construct comprehensive web sites that educate patients with accurate information. Amongst the leaders in this field are the AOA and the Review of Optometry web publications(4). These sources provide patients with information that has been

reviewed by Optometrists and is deemed appropriated for patient education. The advancements made by these organizations have been great, but much more work is needed.

Legal Scope of Practice:

Optometry is a profession limited by laws. Optometry's desire for an increased scope of services is dependent on both the competency of its members and the legislative efforts of its leaders. Most of the lobbying being conducted by optometric organizations is done at the state level. Leading the legal fights are the national and state chapters of the AOA(5). Members directly support this work with financial contributions and local legislative connections. In recent years, legal issues have made great gains for the profession.

A Survey to Determine What Optometrists Want from a Professional Organization.

Methods

In attempting to answer the question "What do today's Optometrists want?" an E-mail survey was formulated and sent to 60 optometry students and 20 practitioners. Suggested statements for measure were generated by selecting topics of interest and input from Optometric students and Professionals. Agree/Disagree statements were then formulated. The study was E-mailed as an attachment. Responders replied to the statements and sent the file back via E-mail.

Results

Eighty E-Surveys were sent out, 36 responses were returned. 27 responses were from students and 9 from licensed Optometrists. The responses suggest that the issues listed below showing high percentages of agreement are included in their criteria for a fulfilling organization. Statistical analysis indicating the level of agreement and disagreement are listed under each of the first 15 statements. The second 12 statements requested that survey takers indicate any topics they wanted to see Optometric organizations address.

Optometric Associations Should:

	A(agree)	N(Neutral)	D(disagree)
Give members easy access (communications) to other members and officials.	A=28(77%)	N=7(19%)	D=1(2%)
Have secured (private) communication with other members and officials	A=12(33%)	N=18(50%)	D=6(16%)
Have officials willing to listen to the concerns of the members.	A=20(55%)	N=10(27%)	D=6(16%)
Set membership prices to reflect the income levels of the OD.	A=7(40%)	N=6(16%)	D=23(63%)
Conduct educationals	A=34(94%)	N=1(2%)	D=1(2%)
Utilize multiple learning strategies at educationals.	A=31(86%)	N=2(5%)	D=3(8%)
Provide educationals at an affordable price.	A=35(91%)	N=1(2%)	D=2(5%)
Provide a network of membership support.(forum for discussion of cases)	A=31(86%)	N=4(11%)	D=1(2%)
Have a mentor program.	A=11(30%)	N=4(16%)	D=21(58%)
Provide new and existing members opportunities to join in the work.	A=29(80%)	N=1(2%)	D=6(16%)
Have gender breakdowns in the administration that match the membership.	A=8(22%)	N=27(75%)	D=1(2%)
Make a better effort to recognize the professionalism of Chain Optometrists.	A=7(19%)	N=16(44%)	D=13(36%)
Provide for easy ways to educate patients.	A=35(97%)	N=0(0%)	D=1(2%)
Make advertisements to attempt to grow the profession in general.	A=32(88%)	N=3(8%)	D=1(2%)
Continue to assist the state boards in their legislative efforts to increase the scope of practice.	A=33(91%)	N=1(2%)	D=2(5%)

Associations Should be Addressing:

Patient care	Agreement=31(86%)
Efficiency of the optometric medical model	Agreement=22(61%)
Patient perception of optometry	Agreement=19(52%)
Business management tactics	Agreement=23(63%)
Public perception of optometry	Agreement=30(83%)
Advancement of patient care (member competency and standards of care)	Agreement=26(72%)
Reimbursement equality(legislation)	Agreement=31(86%)
Staffing & office management tactics	Agreement=25(69%)
Patient education	Agreement=24(66%)
Equipment and procedures updates	Agreement=29(80%)
Publications (news letters)	Agreement=26(72%)
Legal issues	Agreement=23(63%)

Discussion

The information obtained from the survey indicated that the current and future optometrists have a broad spectrum of issues that they would like to have addressed. The subject number 80 (n=80, ns=60, nd=20) yielded a 45% return. The highest common concerns involve patient education (97%) and affordable CE.(97%) There was also strong support for continued efforts to conduct educationals (94%) and assist State branches in attempting to increase and defend the scope of practice.(91%) Other statements drawing high agreement were support for advertising to improve the perception of the profession (88%) and increased utilization of multiple learning strategies at continued

educational.(86%) There was also an interest in facilitating communication amongst members.(86%) The second section of the survey demonstrated support for continued work on patient care standards (86%) and work to insure equality in reimbursements.(86%) There was also high agreement that the public's perception of Optometry should continue to be addressed.(83%) Aside from these concerns the only other surprising agreement was willingness for the provision of new equipment and procedures updates.(80%)

Application:

Professional organizations must meet the needs of their members to be successful. As the scope of practice changes to meet new challenges, the needs of Optometric professionals will also change. The profession can only imagine what the future holds. Therefore, structural frameworks should be constructed to allow for quick assimilation for solutions to new challenges.

The tactics utilized by current organizations are extensive and diverse. While most every issue of interest for the optometric community is being addressed, the manner in which these services are being presented to the practitioner is frustrating. To assist the professional, associations should develop and make available four features. The first is a statement of purpose. This should describe why the organization is being founded. The second is a list of goals. These goals will convey, to the perspective member, what he or she can expect to see the association working toward. The third requirement is a list of services offered. This list will clarify what the advantages of membership include. The

final statement needed is one of interaction. The group should describe how it will fit into the community of current professional organizations. This statement should include a description of services that overlap with other organizations as well as features unique to the group. These pieces of information will assist the Optometrist in deciding which associations will best provide them with the advantages they seek.

Some of the most effective functions being conducted by Optometric organizations are Continued Educationals.(CE) Current protocol for CE utilizes the following pattern of organization; First a list of potential topics is formulated. The next step is to select the topics that are determined to be appropriate and relevant. This is influenced by lecturer factors like experience, lecture outlines, clinical skills, and personality. The applicant is most often asked to submit a Curriculum Vitae (CV) and an outline of the topic they wish to have covered. Once the selections are made the educational outlines, CVs, and CE schedule is submitted to the State Board and the Council on Optometric Practitioner Education (COPE) for credit approval. These boards are crucial to ensuring that the materials being covered are appropriate for the advancement of the profession. The research generated by this study suggests that there is an interest in incorporating multiple learning strategies, into the CE, including verbal, visual, and hands on presentations. This might be achieved by incorporation of more workshops, video displays, and three dimensional models. One argument against such a suggestion is that Optometrists are all efficient learners when utilizing the lecture format. This has to be true, because without this ability they would not have made it into and through their educational process. The survey has also suggested that an increased

attempt to discuss new technologies and procedures is favored. In conjunction, it may be to the advantage of members to request that equipment be presented and discussed in the absence of corporate representatives. This would provide for honest and open discussion regarding the technology and its potential relevance.

The legislative efforts remain the domain of the AOA state and national leaders. Efforts made in these areas have been exceptional. It was promising to see that the individuals who responded to the survey recognized the value of legislative efforts. At this time, there is no indication that any aspect of these successful efforts should be altered.

Discussion of office management issues, has gained popularity in professional circles. Publications and Educationals are progressively attempting to provide their members with sound practice strategies. The survey confirms that Optometric professionals are concerned with management issues. Future efforts may be more effective if there is regional and national information sharing. This would encourage both the development of new approaches to management issues as well as providing information on regional dilemmas.

The issues of patient perception and patient education are integrally linked. One can easily understand that the more patients encounter the knowledge base of the Optometrists, the more they will realize the professionalism of its members. Patients are showing an increasing interest in decision making. Many are turning to the Internet for

education. Unfortunately, many of Optometry's competitors have already established their presence there. They tout the skills of their profession and downplaying the professionalism of Optometry. However, it is not too late for Optometry to save its reputation. Recent efforts by the AOA and others are establishing Optometry's presence on the Web. The patient education links they provide are excellent. These pages accurately convey the professionalism of Optometrists. Efforts being made in this field are proof that Optometry is committed to improving the public's understanding of disease and opinion of the profession. However, it remains to be seen if patients will be efficient in their utilization of these sites, or if they will be satisfied with the information presented.

The best way to adjust for the most current and future unexpected issues, is to return a greater measure of influence to the individual practitioners. For example, the overseeing body of officials would be responsible not only for the daily operations of the association, but they would also be responsible for incorporating the concerns of the membership into their decisions and plans. This does happen to some extent, but not to the extent that will be required to keep the practitioners ahead of the issues that the public is demanding. The public expects the world of their care providers, so every effort must be put forth to fulfill their demands. These efforts should reflect of the intelligence and ingenuity of the individuals that form our membership.

Conclusion

Attempting to answer the question, “What do Optometric Professionals Need from their Associations?” a battery of statements were developed and voted upon by optometric professionals and students. Responses suggest that while many issues are being adequately addressed, there are other topics that could be more vigorously pursued. Primary issues of concern were those that deal with technology, patient education, and affordable continued educationals. It is necessary that the profession address these issues in order to further advance the efficiency and influence of the Optometric profession.

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