

Community as Strategy

Associations have always been in the community business, building the networks that link and support their members.



10 Measures of a Successful Association Community

asae | american society of
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FOUNDATION

**This report is part of a
multi-year ASAE Foundation
research project on Community
as Strategy, with emphasis
on the impact of information
technology.**

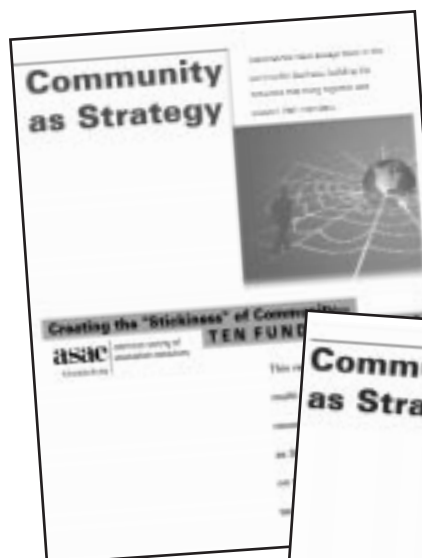
Associations have always been in the community business, building the networks that draw together and support their members. For associations, community is strategy. But information technology is a dislocating force, offering new ways to communicate and new ways to sustain community. As members' needs shift, associations are finding it harder and harder to know how to foster community. Meanwhile, competitors—and potential partners—are jumping in where associations were once the only game in town.

Now more than ever, the value of community seems clear. Whether virtual or in-person, ad hoc or structured, our social relationships give us the means to help one another learn, communicate, make a difference, cope with difficulty, and celebrate success. And, as the ASAE Foundation has emphasized throughout its multi-year research project on "Community as Strategy," associations play a key role in building and sustaining these all-important connections.

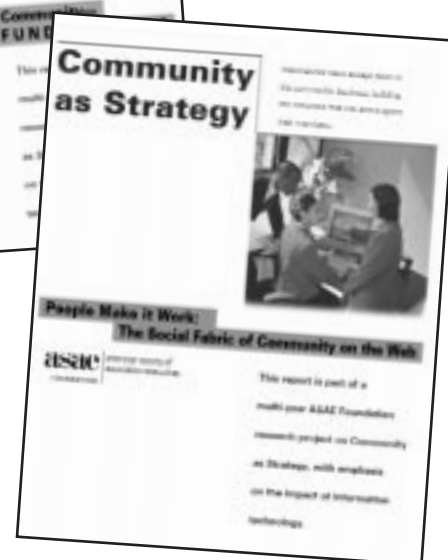
In May 2000, the ASAE Foundation launched an ambitious research effort, "Community as Strategy." It was based on the belief that because associations are voluntary, geographically distributed organizations; a sense of community or "stickiness" among members is critical to their long-term vitality. The Foundation partnered with the Center for Applied Research (CFAR) to identify and clarify the elements of community. The goal was to move beyond the familiar nebulous "I know it when I feel it" concept, to provide members with tools for objective measurement of community in their associations. This is the third and final report issued as part of the Community as Strategy project. Others include: *Creating the "Stickiness" of Community—Ten Fundamentals* and *People Make It Work: The Social Fabric of Community on the Web*.

In this Report

This, the third and final report issued as part of the Community as Strategy project, summarizes early findings from the State of Community Assessment and points to areas worthy of additional exploration. Of course, the results are very preliminary and may or may not be true for your association, But, by administering the SOCA among your members, you can gather tremendously valuable information about the quality of their experience with your association. The results reflect not just raw numbers or percentages, but patterns within the data, such as the impact of face to face vs. online interaction, the relationship between age and member satisfaction, and attitudes or experiences that form the building blocks of community.



Creating the "Stickiness" of Community—Ten Fundamentals



People Make It Work: The Social Fabric of Community on the Web

For complimentary copies, please visit www.asaenet.org/foundation

WHY MEASURE COMMUNITY?

What is it?

In terms of definitions, we were fortunate to be able to draw on solid behavioral science research that suggested there are four key characteristics common to all communities. They are:

The Experience of Community: *Operating Definition:*

Membership: a feeling of belonging or sharing a sense of potential relatedness. For associations, this may be considered a version of “the linking business” and of identity.

Influence: a sense of mattering and making a difference. Associations enact this as “voice,” in the form of lobbying, advertising and advocacy. People want to know they have influence within the association, too—that leaders will hear their voice.

Integration and fulfillment of needs: a sense that the resources received through membership in the group will meet one’s needs. This may be found in the first phase of research in the forms of learning, advocacy, and exchange.

Shared emotional connection: the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history and/or similar experiences. Although people don’t typically join associations with friendship as a primary goal, the seal-of approval function is a mechanism for screening both colleagues and suppliers, assuring the member that the individual is “one of us.” In addition to this gatekeeper function, associations offer a venue where people can join with others around some key element of identity or experience, thus rendering an emotional connection more likely.

The underlying premise of the “Community as Strategy” project is that there is a relationship between members’ sense of community, which is essentially intangible, and more tangible indicators of an association’s health, such as member voluntarism, participation in association-sponsored events, and a willingness to recommend membership to others. To find out whether this was in fact the case, we needed to measure community and discern its relationship to these desirable outcomes.

Initially, we had two major challenges: coming up with a consistent definition and finding an objective way to measure this profound but elusive experience.

And yet, in addition to a psychological or emotional connection, all communities—particularly associations—have:

- Formal and informal social structures. For example, association governance represents the formal social structure, whereas the informal network of “heavy hitters” may include some who are not directly involved in governance.
- Financial structures, with any number of venues where economic exchange may occur. Associations often act as a marketplace for trade, professional, or philanthropic groups, where people with shared interests have an opportunity to pool their purchasing power to buy specialized products or services.
- Diversity of age, ethnicity, economic focus, and other characteristics. The longevity and vitality of any organization ultimately depends on broad and varied participation by members from all quarters.

Finally, in the context of the Internet, the newer forms of remote access communication impact them all.

Our research needed to take all these things into account as well.

10 MEASURES OF A SUCCESSFUL ASSOCIATION COMMUNITY



How can we measure community objectively and consistently?

Accurately assessing human attitudes and behavior can be challenging. For example, the mere act of being observed causes many people to unconsciously alter their behavior. Thus, if we simply watch them participating in communities, we may get a distorted picture. We could measure participation through the use of “unobtrusive measures” like web statistics, but this could be considered a violation of the observed individuals’ privacy.

However, if we measure their “sense of community” and their participation in association activities, we can learn about how connected they feel with the association and how this connection is linked to participation. The best way to do this is to use a survey instrument in which members respond to questions that have been tested to ensure they are a good measure of the elements of community and the behaviors are central to the long-term health of the association. The State of Community Assessment (SOCA), developed by the ASAE Foundation and CFAR, does just this.

What are the building blocks of a thriving association community?

A successful association is a successful community. But, how can association leaders foster a strong sense of community? In this abstract, we describe what we have learned and suggest how ASAE members can mobilize to use this information to enhance their effectiveness.

It is organized around the ten primary elements of community in associations.

- 1** Leadership and Followership
- 2** Connection
- 3** Influence and Inclusivity
- 4** Motivation and Affirmation
- 5** Collaboration
- 6** Listening, Sharing, and Voice
- 7** Learning and Growth
- 8** Technology
- 9** Competence, Standards, and Trust
- 10** Valuing Pathfinders and Tolerating Trailblazers

A New Tool

The State of Community Assessment (SOCA) instrument was designed to not only identify those areas where community thrives on its own, but also to reveal areas in which community building needs a boost from association staff and volunteers. It is a brief paper-and-pencil survey that aims to measure the characteristics of community that matter most. It includes questions about members’ personal experiences with and perceptions of the association, their use of technology, their involvement in association activities, and overall satisfaction. These results may confirm or contradict some long-held assumptions within particular associations. The aim is to initiate a conversation among leaders, members, and staff and to help association executives identify which “levers” will make the most difference.

10 Measures of a Successful Association Community

These are the ten measures with brief descriptions. In each case, you may wish to ask yourself, "How would our members answer these questions?"

1 Leadership and Followership

While in some types of organizations, leadership is best described as executive-driven, in associations it is member-driven.

That is, associations receiving the most favorable ratings on the statement "This association's leadership does its job well," also got high ratings on the statements "This association is responsive to my concerns," and "People from many walks of life feel welcome in this association" and strong disagreement with "This association is dominated by one or two subgroups." Effective association leadership is porous and discourages in-group/out-group dynamics. The "model" for success is more akin to what Max DePree has called "servant leadership" and encourages participation of different subgroups within the association and society at large.

2 Connection

In our research, associations receiving favorable scores on member satisfaction were those where the bonds

between members were strong enough to foster connections outside of formal association meetings and sponsored events. Knowing fellow members as people really makes a difference. People who felt a strong sense of community in their associations also strongly agreed with the statements:

- I discuss common concerns with other members.
- I generally recognize other members quickly when I see them outside of association events.
- I collaborate with other members outside of association-sponsored forums.

3 Influence and Inclusivity

These results show very clearly that, for association members, perceptions of the quality of leadership are strongly related to openness and to welcoming diversity of all forms—from demographics to attitudes and interests. Diversity is about gender, race, age and other characteristics, and it appears that many associations are not particularly diverse on these dimensions. In addition, our results show that it is equally about appreciating differences among people who may look like you but do not necessarily think like you. Key questions include, "To what extent do you agree with the following:"

- All members have equal access to leadership roles in this association.
- This association includes people from different backgrounds within the field.
- People from many racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds feel welcome in this association.

A THREE-PART PROCESS CREATING THE STICKINESS OF COMMUNITY

In 2000, the ASAE Foundation issued *Creating the Stickiness of Community: Ten Fundamentals*, which outlines the many ways in which associations are in the community-building business. For instance, associations:

- Link members to one another and to the larger world, through meetings, networking opportunities, and forums for the exchange of goods and services.
- Provide members with an identity, through credentials, standards, and recognition programs.
- Train and educate members, both formally and informally.
- Serve as a unified voice for members, through activities such as lobbying, advertising, public relations, and advocacy efforts.
- Provide an unofficial "seal of approval" so members feel comfortable dealing with one another and with suppliers to the trade or profession.

THE SOCIAL FABRIC OF COMMUNITY ON THE WEB

The second report issued by the ASAE Foundation, *People Make It Work: The Social Fabric of Community on the Web*, looks at how associations can use the Internet and emerging technologies to foster relationships and thus build community.

Some of those strategies include:

- Convey a sense of place through a warm, welcoming Web presence.
- Increase responsiveness and flexibility by using Web-based tools to assemble and communicate with members of ad hoc task teams, rather than creating more standing committees or boards.
- Integrate electronic and face-to-face interaction, such as establishing a short-term online community so participants can exchange information immediately before and after an annual meeting or conference.
- Create a ladder of participation that increasingly engages people with the association through their online activities (for instance, moving them from simply sending staff an e-mail to registering online for a seminar or posting comments in an electronic forum).
- Customize online interactions so members feel known and valued, while respecting their need for privacy.

10 Measures of a Successful Association Community

4

Motivation and Affirmation

A critical measure of the strength of an association community is its ability to inspire action, particularly voluntarism.

Perceptions of the value of membership, the effectiveness of leadership, and one's own sense of involvement in an association were strongly linked to agreement with the statement "Members voluntarily contribute their time to association initiatives." In many ways this is the strongest measure of the sense of community because it implies that members are freely choosing to give their time to something they perceive to be a worthy effort. In an interesting twist, our research also found that association members often perceive the organization as valuable to the extent that they feel valued by the organization. The relationship between associations and their members is one that truly thrives on mutuality.

5

Collaboration

Sharing experiences, working together towards a set of common goals, giving and getting help: these are the fundamentals of any community.... Especially an association

community that forms around an issue or an aspect of one's identity. How strongly would your members agree with the following statements?

- I feel I share a common bond with other association members.
- When a member of this association has a professional problem or question, it is easy to get help from other members.
- Members of this association pitch in to help each other.
- If I am in need of guidance, other members of this association are generally willing to provide it.

As those who participated in ASAE's beta-test and pre-test told us, these are very important benefits of membership.

6

Listening, Sharing, and Voice

The results of our testing could not be more clear: to "speak" effectively, you have to be a good listener. Having "heard" what members have to say, it is incumbent upon leaders to take it seriously and to carry the message forward. Looking at ratings on the effectiveness of leadership and member satisfaction, we found that members valued association leaders who could wield influence on their behalves, but also would allow themselves to be influenced by members. These questions were found to be critical measures of that ability and vital to member expectations.

- This association is responsive to my concerns.
- This association provides members a voice regarding important issues that affect them.
- I believe that the association will protect my interests.

Learning

Previous research sponsored by ASAE suggested that education was a primary benefit of membership, and our results corroborate this finding. Even among respondents who describe their primary reason for joining as "It is expected in my field," satisfaction with membership remains high when education and information are relevant and of high quality. For example, the National Athletic Trainers Association (NATA) found that while the plurality (50%) of respondents said their main reason for joining was "It is expected in my field," close to 70 percent also designated information and learning as "the best thing" about being a member.... and over 80 percent described themselves as "satisfied" or very satisfied."

In short, even when membership is "expected," associations benefit when they also earn member loyalty, as has NATA. Top-quality, member-focused information and education are wonderful means for doing just that.

7



10 Measures of a Successful Association Community

8

Technology

The question is not “How will technology affect your members?” It is “Are you keeping up with your members?”

Associations and their members are quite active on the Web. For example, research conducted during the past year by the Urban Institute shows that the vast majority of nonprofit umbrella associations have a Web site, use e-mail for internal and external communications, and provide Internet access to staff. In one survey of more than 500 such organizations, 98 percent had access to the Internet. (www.urban.org) Indeed, three out of five of our respondents (60 percent) described themselves as “advanced” users and one out of four (25 percent) describe himself/herself as “proficient” in using e-mail and accessing Web sites. A vast majority, more than 90 percent, say they have visited their association’s Web site. In general, people gave good ratings to association sites, most often citing ease of navigation.

Despite a common assumption that Internet usage declines as age increases, no age-based differences emerged in computer expertise, usage, or comfort level. In fact, members over age 65 were just as comfortable with computers as were those under 25. This may reflect the fact that the survey was sent out via the Web and thus attracted respondents who were Internet-savvy.

In spite of the fact that they are very comfortable using the Internet, knowing other members personally remains a powerful means of connection. For example, attending annual meetings and talks or presentations—all face-to-face activities—was vastly more common than participating in online forums, even for those under age 24. In fact, few respondents mentioned participating in online forums, either those sponsored by the association or by others.

By way of illustration, the National Roofing Contractors Association (NRCA) found that its members got information from a variety of sources, with over 80 percent using an association journal, 19 percent using its Web site, 17% accessing research reports, and 15 percent each from association staff or association-sponsored events. (These add up to over 100% due to overlapping categories.)

To summarize, the Web powerfully supports communication, but personal interaction is still the coin of the realm. The most effective approach is to weave online and face-to-face interaction together, as described in abstract #2.

9

Competence, Standards, and Trust

Particularly for trade and professional associations, there are some member expectations that relate to the kind of gate-keeping, standard setting, and “seal of approval” functions we discussed in the first abstract. Thus, key measures of member satisfaction and faith in association leadership included favorable ratings on these statements:

- Being a member of this association makes it easier for me to be successful.
- It is important to me to be a member of this association.
- This association does a good job of maintaining standards.
- I believe that the association will protect my interests.

Valuing the Pathfinders

Finally, Confucius’s comment that, “Everything has its beauty but not everyone sees it.” is as true now as it was 2,500 years ago. In human affairs, people who are ‘ahead of their time’ are often indistinguishable from those who are misguided or simply have an axe to grind. Yet, as noted in measure #1, associations that can tolerate diverse “speakers” and their many “messages” may find that they ultimately benefit. As some have said, the seeds of the future are found in the present. It’s just that it can be difficult to know which are seeds that will bring rewards and which are simply predatory or opportunistic ‘weeds.’

Yet in terms of readiness for the future, associations and their leaders need to be able to tolerate divergent voices—to hear messages that are weird, annoying, and/or iconoclastic and to literally invite them “into their homes.” Our research found that associations that received favorable ratings on important measures of community, satisfaction, and involvement had members who agreed with the following statements:

- I regularly follow the latest developments in my industry, profession, or interest area.
- I am comfortable voicing my opinion to association colleagues (staff and members), even if it is different from theirs.
- I participate in association-sponsored social functions.

To be ready for an unknowable future, leaders need to become interested in their iconoclasts and outliers. While no one is suggesting that all “different” messages require the same treatment, it is nonetheless prudent to attend to them carefully, because we won’t know for some time which ones will bear fruit.

10

IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSOCIATIONS

- In some organizations, the model of effective leadership may best be described as 'command and control.' In associations, however, these results show that leadership is related to responsiveness, open access, valuing diversity, and that elusive quality called voice. It's not just about being a voice for members but also about actively listening to their voices even if what they're saying is not necessarily what you most want to hear. Contrary to popular belief, organizations that foster an open and authentic dialogue among all stakeholders, including those who express dissenting views, are more likely to retain their vitality.
 - The strength of the relationship between the member and the association depends on members' sense that they are collaborating and working together toward a common set of goals. In other words, members do not seem to want the association to do it for them. They want to contribute.
- Associations that set standards serve as quasi-regulatory bodies, often maintaining a role in administering continuing education credits. As such, they have built-in constituencies. Even so, they need to work hard at earning member loyalty so that people feel their dues are well spent and that they get real value from the experience. A true sense of community is voluntary and cannot be forced.
 - Associations should not get bogged down in deciding whether to link members face-to-face or virtually—they need to do both. The focus should be on encouraging connection, collaboration, and exchange, both in person and on the Web. Associations operating on the assumption that their youngest members place more value on online community and conversely, that their oldest members value the physical aspects of community may need to rethink their strategies. All age groups value similar benefits of membership. In fact, members who know other members outside the "sponsored" context were most likely to feel connected to and valued by the association.
 - With the amount of unsolicited e-mail increasing, associations need to differentiate or personalize their online communications. For instance, don't send a broadcast e-mail asking all members to send a scripted message to their congressional representatives about an issue that many know little or nothing about. Instead, target the requests to those with an expressed interest. Customization can overcome the impersonal nature of bulk e-mails and reinforce the feeling of a small town community where people band together to accomplish something.
 - Increasing diversity among members continues to be a challenge for many associations. In view of results from the 2000 Census, which point to the United States becoming a majority-minority country by 2025, associations that do not reach out to members from different backgrounds may find their constituencies shrinking in proportion to the population. Consequently, a good question for all associations to ask is: Who are we missing? Internet-based communication can prove useful in efforts to expand diversity of all types. It is increasingly inexpensive, accessible, and able to invite broader participation from those who, for a variety of reasons, may not attend face-to-face meetings.

IN APPRECIATION

The ASAE Foundation expresses its sincere thanks to the following organizations and their members, who generously provided feedback on the survey instrument, assessed its validity, participated in the beta test, or completed the survey during its market testing phase:

American College of Emergency Physicians,
Dallas, Tx.

American Diabetes Association,
Alexandria, Va.

American Dietetic Association,
Chicago, Ill.

American Subcontractors Association,
Alexandria, Va.

National Athletic Trainers Association,
Dallas, Tx.

National Black Women Health Association,
Washington, D.C.

National Roofing Contractors Association,
Rosemont, Ill.

10 Measures of a Successful Association Community

SUMMARY

Examining issues ranging from how members feel about association leadership to their use of the Internet, the State of Community Assessment Instrument (SOCA) can help you learn about the links between community and participation in your own association. It can also help you identify differences between member subgroups so that you can better target communications or offerings. Ultimately, it will enable you to concentrate your efforts in areas where they are likely to have the most favorable impact.

Simply filling out the survey seems to encourage members to think about community. Here are some comments made by participants in our early testing of the instrument:

This survey made me realize how uninvolved I am in [association name] and how much I don't know about our association.

I would like to explore ways to become more active in my association. I have only been a member since January.

I know none of the members nor have I attended any of the conferences, social functions, seminars, etc. I received an initial welcome letter and nothing more until May 17....I did, however, join because this organization focuses on issues that are important to me and I want to get involved, learn, and do more.

Provide more information via mail or e-mail to keep members abreast of current topics and events.

I would like to become more involved with the association on a national level; also would like to consider starting a local chapter in my community.

The SOCA survey instrument, with an accompanying users guide, will soon be available for purchase from the ASAE Foundation.

In addition, the Foundation will be partnering with a professional testing service so associations that do not wish to handle data collection and analysis on their own can still take advantage of this powerful new tool.

**For more information, contact the
ASAE Foundation at:
community@asaenet.org**

NURTURING COMMUNITY AT FPA

Consistent, supportive, flexible leadership is a central feature of community building at the Financial Planning Association (FPA), where executives recognize that the role of the leader takes many forms. These include:

- Exercising Thought leadership, by gathering and sharing novel ideas and sources of information with staff and members;
- Demonstrating commitment by participating in training and using new tools to engage members both face-to-face and online;
- Modeling community building by facilitating Board dialogue using FPA's new online environment;
- Providing needed resources for community building activities, and
- Engaging FPA management, Board, and staff in the process of developing a culture that is increasingly team-based, less hierarchical, and reflective of the many 'voices' in the association.

Special features of FPA's "Invitation to Community"

- Facilitation of each FPA community by a trained host.
- Sponsorship of each community by a member of FPA's leadership team.
- Ongoing conversation between FPA's executives and Board about what it means, in terms of governance and management, to be "the community for the financial planning profession."

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THE ASAE FOUNDATION *An Indispensable Resource on the Future*

Associations and the businesses that serve them need comprehensive, credible, and current information to make wise strategic decisions in our constantly changing world. The American Society of Association Executives Foundation has accepted the challenge of providing research to ensure that associations and their partners can face the future with confidence.

The Foundation forms partnerships with qualified researchers to use a range of methodologies, including environmental scanning, case studies, think tanks, focus groups, and extensive literature searches within and outside the association body of knowledge. The Foundation convenes the best thinkers and practitioners to shape and test its research; its work is not done until it has created tools to put its research findings into everyday practice.

Through the Partners for the Future campaign, the ASAE Foundation built a \$10 million research endowment to provide an ongoing source of funding for this work. It also welcomes contributions through the annual campaign; major gifts; planned giving; and a series of special events, including the Partnership Benefit Dinner, Club Energy, Five Star Weekend, and Silent Auction. For more information about the ASAE Foundation research and fundraising programs, e-mail foundation@asaenet.org.

CENTER FOR APPLIED RESEARCH, INC. (CFAR)

CFAR, Inc. is a management and consulting firm that combines a strong social science tradition with business experience. CFAR specializes in strategy, organizational development, and market assessment for clients facing emerging issues and technologies. Clients include Fortune 500 companies, new ventures, associations, universities, and foundations, to name a few. CFAR helps clients build solutions based on their particular opportunities and points of leverage.

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WEB SITES

www.abuzz.com

Online community focused on members sharing knowledge with one another.

www.asaenet.org/newsletters/display/0,1901,425,00.html

Good basic information for associations going online.

www.benton.org

Wonderful source of best practices for nonprofits building Web communities.

www.google.com

A quick, high-quality, easy-to-use search engine—helps you find the information you need, fast.

www.independentsector.org

Portal to vast array of Web resources and data, geared to the concerns of the “independent sector.”

www.naima.com

wonderful source of ideas and approaches to building online communities.

www.refdesk.com

Fantastic source of information on a vast array of topics.

www.pewinternet.org

Web site for the Pew Internet and American Society Project. A treasure trove of information.

www.plastic.com

Self-organizing online literary community.

www.useit.com

Offered by Jakob Nielsen, the “usability guru” of the Web. Substantially demystifies Web design.

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Offers interesting perspective and links regarding nonprofits and the Internet.

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National Center for Charitable Statistics, a terrific source of data and useful links.

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Provides definitions for the ever-expanding list of technology terms.

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VISION STATEMENT

The ASAE Foundation will be the global leader enabling associations, their executives, and their partners to prepare for the future.

MISSION STATEMENT

The ASAE Foundation, in partnership with ASAE, is dedicated to enhancing the association community's ability to anticipate and prepare for change through education and research, thereby maximizing the community's positive impact on society.

To support the ASAE Foundation research, visit our Web site at www.asaenet.org/foundation. Thank you!

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