APS Takes a Look in the Mirror

Every so often, individuals and organizations should spend time in self-reflection and analyze what is working and what is not, what the challenges are and how these can be turned into new opportunities. Last fall, the American Physiological Society (APS) took just such an initiative. APS employed a branding firm from Chicago, called Minding Your Business (MYB), to evaluate the way APS does business, to improve our brand and to better promote physiology as a whole to our constituents. This particular group was chosen because of their belief in Simon Sinek’s view that “mission driven positioning is best served by defining the belief that motivates and inspires your audience” (from MYB presentation). As Sinek says, “The goal is not to do business with everybody who needs what you have, the goal is to do business with those who believe what you believe” (1). This strategy has worked very well for many major manufacturers, most notably Apple, Nike, and Coke.

Using a variety of forums, MYB set out to evaluate APS by conducting surveys of members and non-members and interviewing APS staff, leadership, and stakeholders. They also attended Experimental Biology 2016 (EB) in San Diego, where they talked to APS members and non-APS attendees, undergraduate and graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows engaged in “physiology” research. Finally, they organized a focus group at the APS Council meeting at EB, at which various interactive group scenarios were used to explore our own views of our society and identify its diverse goals. Using data collected from these different venues and sources, MYB presented their conclusions during the Summer Council meeting held in July 2016 and made several recommendations.

We are happy to report that there were many positive conclusions. Not surprising to us was that both members and non-members alike view APS as being “trustworthy,” “well respected,” and “reliable.” However, <50% of these individuals thought that APS was “innovative” or “dynamic.” This is especially important in view of the fact that the number of APS members has not increased since 2004. MYB data showed that we do fairly well at attracting new members, especially graduate students and postdoctoral fellows, but we also lose members, some of these same groups, at the same rate every year. It is, therefore, important to understand why members leave the society and what can be done to retain them more effectively after they choose to become part of APS.

A major challenge that APS faces is that members and non-members alike believe that national funding agencies and even the leadership at their own institutions do not see the importance of physiology as being the basis for medicine and life science. Unfortunately, only 25% of both members and non-members claimed that they were able to obtain funding for their research! However, it is difficult to assess whether this figure is specific for our own discipline or could be generalized to all in view of the current funding percentiles at NIH and elsewhere. Another caveat is that there was no breakdown for trainees vs. established investigators in these numbers.

A further positive finding from MYB data is that 50% of the APS membership believes that “APS leadership clearly communicates objectives to its members.” However, 65% of our members were unaware that APS supports research conferences outside of Experimental Biology. In reality, APS provides significantly more funds for each conference than is allocated by FASEB or the Gordon conference organization for their meetings. Similarly, <50% of our members were aware of 20 of the 23 specific awards totaling over $1 million that are available through APS each year. In the graduate student category, an even smaller number of members (only 25%) were aware of 21 of the 23 awards available from APS! MYB identified several factors that could explain this troubling finding, including our website (the-aps.org) being less than intuitive; e-mails not targeting members who could best use the information; and APS Connect often has too much non-relevant information before the important message is displayed onscreen, causing members to delete the messages without reading critical information (note to APS members: please remember to scroll down!). Although APS does well at sending out press releases, often highlighting new discoveries published in our journals, ~60–70% of APS members either don’t make use of or are unaware of the APS blogs, videos, Twitter feed, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, podcasts, and other social media. At least some of the reason for this could be generational. The average age of our current membership is 53 years, most likely due to lack of retention of younger members but also related to the increased longevity of established APS members.

Because NIH and other funding agencies are now favoring more translational projects, basic researchers more and more frequently collaborate in teams with clinical investigators. Perhaps because of this shift, societies that are outwardly much more specialized than APS are becoming more popular with investigators. With regard to the relevance of APS membership, non-members cited that their specialty societies met their needs better,
and thus they found little benefit in joining APS. This was despite the fact that most areas of physiology are indeed well represented and supported by APS, as evidenced by our 12 specific sections and 9 interest groups. The Society for Neuroscience is often given as one such example of a competing organization, but others include the American Heart Association, the Endocrine Society, and the American Society of Nephrology, to name just a few. All of these groups have their own meetings, which may sometimes overlap with Experimental Biology, and many have their own journals. However, all of the investigators in these other societies are performing physiology research! Similarly, The Physiological Society of the United Kingdom (UK) published a report in June 2016 entitled “The Health of Physiology” (2). In their surveys, they found that many scientists in the UK are engaged in research that they at least partially identify as “physiology,” and that, although funding for physiological research in the UK has maintained, it is simply under a different label. We are hoping that MYB will be able to help us tap into this large pool of “physiology” investigators who are non-members and show how the APS can provide them benefits that they do not receive from their specialized societies whose resources may be more limited than those of APS.

APS depends largely on our publications enterprise to provide the funds to maintain the society financially. As you know, impact factors for most of our journals are below 4, with notable exceptions. For example, European Union investigators must provide evidence of publication in journals with impact factors above 5 to support promotion and/or tenure in most of their universities. Obviously, this imposition dissuades many of them (27% of APS members are international) from submitting to our APS journals. Since non-members often report that their specialty societies provide for their needs better than APS despite the fact that most of our best known journals are very focused in specific research areas (e.g., AJP-Heart and Circulatory, AJP-Renal, AJP-Endocrinology and Metabolism, Journal of Neurophysiology, etc.), we clearly need to come up with fresh, new strategies to increase the impact of our journals and improve the peer review process, etc., to attract investigators to publish in our journals and keep our financial health sound in the process. This need is currently being addressed with vigor by the leadership and members of the APS publications team, including a recent re-evaluation of guidelines and expectations for our peer reviewers.

Beginning in February 2017, APS will use the data collected by MYB to inform our new Strategic Planning process. Because of their comprehensive evaluation of APS and familiarity with our strengths and challenges, MYB has been retained to guide us through the process. The participants in the Strategic Planning sessions will include the current APS Council members, including the ex officio members, such as the chairs of key committees; Publications, Joint Programming, Committee on Committees, Science Policy, and Section Advisory Committee members who represent the grass roots of APS membership; and the APS senior staff. In addition, the Trainee Advisory Committee members will be invited so they may assist us in determining how to retain younger members, especially post-doctoral fellows as they transition into their careers as academic and industry researchers and teachers.

So at APS, we are currently actively reviewing our situation, as we have done every few years in the past, to maintain the vigor, impact, and relevance of our society to the current and future community of physiologists. We, the members of the executive cabinet, see this latest Strategic Planning process as a golden opportunity for APS to stay on the cutting edge of research, education, and activism for physiology as a discipline, and to increase the benefits for our members as we move forward. One of our important goals is to significantly increase awareness of society activities among our members as well as the scientific and education communities at large. In this way, we will strive to promote the many benefits of being a member of the American Physiological Society. To this end, we recognize it will be important to keep you informed as the process unfolds. If you have any suggestions, please be proactive and contact one of us with your ideas. We depend on the support of our membership to ensure the continued growth and success of APS. Your interest, input, and involvement will help make this happen.

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References
