

# Growing and Maintaining Viable Student Chapters of Professional Organizations: The Case of the National Agri-Marketing Association



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## Abstract

There are thirty-five accredited student chapters of the National Agri-Marketing Association (NAMA) from twenty-four states and three Canadian Provinces. Membership in a NAMA student chapter allows students to network with professionals, develop their marketing and communication skills, and develop leadership and team-building skills. A survey of student chapter advisors was used to identify what facilitates student chapter success. Advisors indicated the opportunity and enjoyment of the national conference, and professional and career development opportunities to be the most important reasons students participate. They noted the opportunity to network with professionals to be the most important advantage of participation, followed by experience in developing / presenting a formal marketing plan. Advisors agreed that the students themselves make student NAMA successful, in particular the leadership skills of students. Professional NAMA can take advantage of its focus of marketing to help grow and maintain viable student chapters. Efforts should focus on marketing the value of student NAMA to students, faculty advisors, academic administrators, and professionals.

## Introduction

The National Agri-Marketing Association (NAMA) consists of approximately 3,500 members globally, and includes 25 U.S. and four Canadian chapters (National Agri-Marketing Association). It traces its beginnings to the formation of the Chicago Area Agricultural Advertising Association in 1957. This organization began several of the key events that highlight NAMA today including local meetings, a seminar including educational programs, and awards recognizing advertisements and individuals. New chapters were organized and, in 1968, the first national conference was held. Key membership benefits include networking opportunities, ideas, recognition, events, professional development, industry news, contacts, leadership experience, mentorship opportunities, and influence.

In 1969, the first student-chapter of NAMA was formed at California Polytechnic and State University San Luis Obispo. Today there are 35

accredited student chapters from 24 states and three Canadian Provinces which include approximately 1,200 student-members. The University of Wisconsin system claims student chapters at three schools. There are student chapters at two schools in California, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Membership in a NAMA student chapter allows students to network with professionals, develop their marketing and communication skills, and develop leadership and team-building skills. Student-chapters can participate in local or regional events with their professional chapters and attend national events.

Approximately 300 students from 30 student chapters attend the NAMA National Conference and Trade Show. In addition to participating in special activities designed for student chapter members, students can attend educational sessions and the Best of NAMA awards ceremony and otherwise network with professional members and with one another. Student chapters also compete in the Student Marketing and Outstanding Student Chapter Competitions and are eligible to receive a number of generous scholarships.

Participating in the student competitions entails work throughout much of the academic year. Students prepare a marketing plan for a product marketed by or to farmers, and submit a five-page executive summary of the plan to NAMA. Industry professionals judge the written executive summary, and the student team's presentation at the national conference. The Outstanding Student Chapter is selected based on student team activities throughout the year as based on a portfolio the team submits prior to the national conference. Professional NAMA members also judge the portfolios.

In spite of its benefits, offering and participating in student NAMA can be challenging and require considerable resources. With the overall objective of developing recommendations to help student chapters maintain and grow their viability as (co)curricular activities, we sought to identify what facilitates and what constrains chapter success and, from this, develop recommendations for professional NAMA members and faculty advisors. The focus of this paper is to assist faculty advising student NAMA,

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recognizing that faculty can be ill-prepared to serve as advisors of student organizations (Williams, 1998).

## Methods

Advisors of accredited student NAMA chapters were surveyed. A survey message was sent out via the advisors' list-serve directing advisors to a web-based survey. The original message was sent in early August 2006 and a follow-up reminder message was sent three weeks later. Ten advisors responded, representing ten of the 35 currently accredited student chapters (29% response rate). All questions were unaided. The survey instrument is available upon request from the author.

## Results

### **University and Chapter Organization**

With one exception, responding schools had total enrollments of at least 10,000 students. The range was from 1,600 to 61,000 students. Most NAMA student chapters are housed in a Department of Agribusiness or Agricultural Economics. Two responding school chapters are housed in a department or departments including business. Housing academic unit enrollments ranged from 40 to 1,600 students. Among the schools, five-year average participation in student NAMA ranged from 8 to 35, although the number of students attending the national conference and participating in the student competition was relatively consistent between schools and averaged eight and seven, respectively. Attending number of students ranged from 3 to 10.

Student chapter fundraisers are the most prevalent funding sources for activities (including attending the national conference) with seven responding schools indicating this as one of the top three funding contributors. The range was 10 to 75% of the total chapter funding raised by student club fundraising activities. Funding from the college, department, and or university (including student government contributions) is also important for seven schools. Among the seven, an academic unit or student government provided between 40 and 90% of funding. Four of the professional chapters' contributions are included in the top three funding resources for responding schools with a range in funding provided from 15 to 30%. One school relies on an external donor to cover one-quarter of student activity funds. Two schools indicated student contributions are in the top three funding sources.

Student NAMA is part of a formal course for seven of the ten responding schools where students earn between one and six semester credits annually. Nine advisors indicated a relationship with their regional professional chapter. Advisors value the interaction between the students and professionals and the financial and other contributions of professional chapters. The school without a local chapter indicated this to be a constraint. Most professional

chapters hold monthly or quarterly meetings and seven student chapters benefit from regular interaction with their professional members at these meetings and by explicit participation of professional members in student NAMA activities (ranging from a professional member donating his time to (co)advise student NAMA to providing feedback on the students' marketing plan). Responses indicated a general spirit among professional chapters of being willing to help out as needed. Even the two student chapters that had minimal interaction with professional members (e.g., because of distance) noted the importance of professional chapter financial support. One student chapter president serves on the board of its regional NAMA chapter.

### **Student Motivation and Benefit**

There are a multitude of reasons motivating involvement in student organizations (Andring, 2002). We queried advisors specifically about why students participate in student NAMA. The most common responses related to the opportunity and enjoyment of the national conference (70% mentioned), followed closely by professional and career development opportunities (60% mentioned). Opportunities for professional interaction, experience in creating and presenting a formal marketing plan, "real world" experience, and interaction with peers were also mentioned. The question was open-ended and asked only for the advisor's top two reasons.

Advisors were asked to share the top two benefits of NAMA for students. The opportunity to network with professionals was mentioned most frequently, and by seven schools. Next, with three mentions, was experience in developing/presenting a formal marketing plan. Career opportunities and builds confidence each received two mentions. Other mentions included: learning the art and science of marketing experientially; opportunity to put many concepts together; public speaking and presentation skills; develop teamwork skills; resume booster; opportunity to experience an international event; and "The Package" - like running a small business.

### **Success of Student Chapter NAMA**

Advisors were asked what makes student NAMA successful and unsuccessful. Their responses are indicated in bullet form below. As is true throughout the survey, the responses elicited were top of mind answers. The clear consensus is that the students themselves make student NAMA successful, in particular the leadership skills of students and student-leaders. One advisor indicated the time contribution of advisors to be important, one noted networking opportunities and implied that students need to better take advantage of them, and one noted excitement for the national conference. Advisors also indicated that students themselves can make student NAMA unsuccessful, particularly when they are not

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motivated. Other threads of concern were the constraint of faculty time, and lack of support from the university (financial, student credit hours) and a professional chapter. This suggests a great opportunity for professional members to mentor, not only students, but academics and administrators in the role of student NAMA in developing students.

### **What Makes Student NAMA Successful?**

These items contribute to a successful student NAMA:

- Amount of time advisors are able to spend; unfortunately it seems to be getting less each year.
- Quality of the students; Quality of competition leaders; Help from company whose product we are presenting.
- Good officer team is number one. Don't waste student's time with meetings that are not productive.
- The student leaders.
- Motivated students.
- Twice a month meetings with a program or speaker every time (program and speakers selected by chapter officers and program Vice President). Each spring, principles of marketing class offers extra credit to any class members who attend an organizational meeting.
- Networking opportunities for students are enormous. Unfortunately not all students appreciate the value of this.
- Excitement generated by participating in the national marketing plan competition.

### **What Makes Student NAMA Unsuccessful?**

The items were found to contribute to an unsuccessful student NAMA:

- Demands on student's time.
- Unmotivated students; lack of attention to timelines.
- Unmotivated students; we need to work to get them to understand the benefits of NAMA.
- Advisors who don't participate can break some chapters if the officer team is not strong either.
- Tons of faculty time.
- Three things:
  - Not part of course, no credit for the amount of effort.
  - Advisors who were never trained and have little to no experience in branded marketing.
  - Lack of access to professionals given our geographic location in the state.
- Lack of financial support from the university for travel. Student competition is always held when final exams are scheduled at our school making it difficult for students to participate.
- Lack of professional chapter in the state.
- The national marketing plan competition judges are faced with huge challenges trying to evaluate very diverse products developed by the

student NAMA team. Suggest that NAMA simply identify a product or product line that would provide a more narrow focus and allow judges to assess the merits of the marketing plan and not of the product.

## Conclusions

It deserves repeating that the National Agri-Marketing Association serves the food and fiber industry, focusing on its members' professional development by providing access to solutions and opportunities in agribusiness. As the name implies, the organization is focused on marketing. Perhaps nothing should be easier to market than active participation of students in student NAMA. It is of great value to most: students, their supporting academic units, local and regional NAMA chapters, national NAMA, and individual professional members and firms as employers of these students. If this inherent value is real, but the students and resources are not well dedicated to student NAMA, the organization should turn to marketing, its focus, to help grow and maintain viable student chapters.

There are lots of opportunities as a result of membership in student NAMA. On the constraint side, advisors indicated that students themselves can make student NAMA unsuccessful, particularly when they are not motivated. Other threads of concern include: the amount of required faculty time, and lack of support from the university (financial, student credit hours) and a professional chapter. Essentially the concerns are that there are not adequate resources allocated to student NAMA and students may not be appropriately prioritizing their participation in student NAMA. This suggests a great opportunity exists for professional members to educate, not only students, but academics and administrators about the value of student NAMA.

### **Marketing Student NAMA**

What did we specifically learn from the chapter advisors that will help (motivate) us to market student NAMA?

- The target audience is broad. The value of student NAMA needs to be marketed to students, faculty-advisors, academic administrators, and professionals.
- Academic advisors value student NAMA and consider professional chapter interaction and support to be vital.
- Faculty-advisors believe networking to be a key component of student NAMA, but students do not take full advantage of the opportunities for interaction with professionals and other students.
- Student leadership and motivation are vital to the success of the student chapter.
- Financing student chapter activities is a consuming task, and there is considerable variety in the means by which chapters raise funds. The playing field is by no means level. Benchmarking makes that

clear. However, students that spend a considerable amount of time and effort in raising funds may be gaining many other benefits (e.g., networking opportunities; opportunity to develop, implement, and see the success of creative efforts; more opportunities to market themselves and their organization).

- Resources are scarce and therefore their employment must be motivated and rewarded. Faculty, students, administrators, and professional members need to be sold on the value of student NAMA in a context that is important to them. NAMA is all about marketing. Identifying “the how” of selling the value of student NAMA to a finite set of well identified market segments seems a reasonable task for NAMA members to undertake.

Professional members and faculty / advisors can take steps to encourage student participation, alleviate constraints, and close the gap between the potential for student NAMA and the reality in their own chapters. We offer some ideas resulting from the experience of our responding academic advisors.

### **Role of Professional Members**

Help your professional members recognize what they can do! They are the marketing professionals, and those most familiar with the value of NAMA and student NAMA. Most of these suggestions mirror techniques they use to gain, maintain, and thrill their clients. Offering these suggestions to professional members will help them support your student organization.

- Get to know the students; make it easy for them to approach you. Provide tangible incentives to entice students to network. Students are not naturally good at it, and professional networking opportunities at the annual conference often put them far outside their comfort zone.

- Help faculty recruit students and encourage/ entice them to be active in the student and the professional NAMA chapters. The value of the experience is not going to be enough for most students it is sometimes difficult for them to actualize what they are hearing about the “value of student NAMA.” Show them through your participation and mentorship. Let them know you care they are participating and that you and your firm value their efforts and experiences.

- Help the students finance their activities, particularly their expenses to the annual conference. Although they receive a steep discount on the cost of the conference, and have been known to sleep five or more to a room, it can be an insurmountable expense for many students. You can help them by marketing the organization, and particularly the value of the student chapter to (other) professionals, and to academic administrators. A simple letter to the Dean(s) of the supporting college(s) and the Chairman of the supporting department can do wonders. Write the president of the university explaining how important student NAMA is to you,

your firm, the community, the profession, the students, and the university. Make sure they know it is important to you as a local, state, or regional businessman and business that they help financially support this organization.

- Reward the students for participation with tangibles (financially, with recognition or awards, or otherwise). Also consider lobbying academic administrators to ensure students get the credit they need. Helping faculty advisors recruit students by helping arm them with tangible offerings will help grow and maintain student membership. The value of student NAMA is considerable, but the cost to students in time is also large. Help shift the balance.

- Make certain your firms know the benefits of your participation with student NAMA so you get credit for your efforts. Take care of yourself in this venture so you can help the students and the faculty succeed.

### **Role of Academic Advisors**

What can academic advisors do?

- Know your professional members. They can and will help you, even if they are not in close proximity. Make sure their bosses know the value of their employees' participation for the students and the university, and especially for their firm.

- Recruit students. The best salesmen for student NAMA are likely current and previous student NAMA members (these are the students' peers). Advisors believe the fun and experience of the professional annual conference to be an important draw. Consider bringing a non-participating student with considerable leadership potential and in his or her freshmen or sophomore year to the annual conference.

- Recruit good students. Like any group, you will have a mixture of personalities, motivation levels, skills, and so on. Most faculty agreed that students and their leadership and motivation are what make student NAMA successful and unsuccessful.

- Reward the students for participation with tangibles (including academic credit; visible recognition or awards). Academic credit for what can be a very time-consuming curricular (or co-curricular if no credit is offered) activity ranges from none to six credits per academic year. Work to ensure credit is available if it is likely to be an important draw for student members.

- Gain a strong reputation by meeting and exceeding student expectations. The best way to help ensure NAMA meets student expectations is make sure they know what those expectations are up front.

- Have a mission statement. Of our ten respondents, only three provided mission statements. Most activities, particularly those providing academic credit, have written objectives. Make sure students and everyone else know exactly what you hope to achieve with their participation. Student

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chapter goals are due in December of each year. Take this exercise as a serious activity by which you can define your mission.

- Encourage (better yet, require) students to network with professional members. Have your students sit no more than two chapter members to any one table at events; create “graded activities” for them that require professional-member interaction.

- Make sure your academic chain of command knows the value of student NAMA and the commitment you do and must put forward to help achieve this value. You need to get credit for serving as an advisor. Be certain your administrator recognizes the value of your success to the academic unit. A success by you is a feather in his cap. Help him define “success.” You do not need to advise a student team that placed in the outstanding chapter or marketing plan competitions. Having a team that actively participates and meets many of their objectives and gains exposure among local, regional, and national firms and professionals is success. Suggest to a couple of professional members that would be nice to recognize student-representatives from your school.

These suggestions are offered to take advantage of what we learned from ten NAMA student team advisors. Although one can retroactively hope for more responses, we are blessed with a wealth of information provided as advisors, academic units, and professional chapters strive to improve student-NAMA or simply “make it work.”

Our focus on student NAMA is somewhat unique in that advising of a specific cost- and time-intensive organization is considered. Readers are also advised to consult additional references useful in honing skills as a student organization advisor (e.g., Banks and Combs, 1989; Dunkel and Schuh, 1998; Emmett, 2000; Han Mi, 1996; Keeshan, 1997; Norbert and Schuh, 1998; Torok, 1999).

## Summary

Not unlike other student groups aligned with a professional organization, membership in student NAMA allows students to network with professionals, develop their marketing and communication skills, and develop leadership and team-building skills. In spite of its benefits, offering and participating in student NAMA can be challenging and require considerable resources. Student chapter fundraisers are the most prevalent funding source for student activities although funding from the college, department, and/or university hosting the student chapter is also important. Students at most schools also earn academic credit.

Advisors found the opportunity and enjoyment of the national conference, and professional and career development opportunities to be the most important reasons students participate in student NAMA. The opportunity to network with professionals they noted to be the most important advantage of student participation, followed by experience in developing /

presenting a formal marketing plan. Advisors indicated student leadership and motivation to be vital to chapter success. Constraints for chapter success included faculty resources and lack of support from the hosting university (financial, student credit hours).

To help grow and maintain viable student chapters, professional members and faculty / advisors can take steps to encourage student participation, alleviate constraints, and close the gap between the potential for the student group and the reality in their own chapters. Professional members can get to know the students and provide tangible incentives to encourage them to network. Professional members can also help faculty recruit students, encourage them to be active in student and professional chapter activities, provide financial assistance, and help faculty market the organization throughout the university. Faculty can get to know their professional members, work with them to recruit highly-motivated students, and ensure the proper incentives are in place to help maintain student motivation.

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