

## **I have seen the association, and it is us**

By Jeff Schurman

5-21-07

I was never a big Pogo fan. With Superman, Popeye, Beetle Bailey and so many meaningful comics why make the effort? I just remember it as a harder comic to understand than most. That and Pogo's timeless observation, "I have seen the enemy, and he is us".

This one really gives me pause for thought. It dawned on me that a variant of this quotation applies to our association. To paraphrase: I have seen the association, and it is us! TAVMA is not me. TAVMA is not the executive committee, the board of directors, committees, or committee chairs. It is us. TAVMA is us. And what we do with it *now* will determine our standing as an industry in the future.

## **Dreaming of a Bright Future**

I tell everyone who will listen about my great dream. It is that the settlement services industry and the people who invest the best years of their careers in this line of work are viewed by media, government, clients, and vendors as vital and valued promoters and protectors of the land title system in the United States. My other dream is for TAVMA to be to the settlement services industry what the Mortgage Bankers Association is to the mortgage lending industry. Fanciful maybe, but I am serious.

Every great industry has a strong and vibrant association that represents its interests. Associations offer strength in numbers, leadership, innovation, and swift responses to threats to the industry's business model. I believe our industry can be great and that TAVMA will play a pivotal role in this success. Frankly, I do not believe the industry can attain great heights without this association. If indeed the association is us, then we collectively have a duty to make it happen.

## **The Future Begins Today**

I am fascinated with the future, perhaps even obsessed by it. My great dream is about the future. I've read a dozen or so books about it, Learning From The Future most recently. I've written about, talked about, thought about, and studied the future. The future was the theme of our 2005 conference. It was the theme at this year's conference. It will be the theme again next year (April 7-9, 2008, Royal Pacific Resort, Orlando, FL). And I am a member of the World Futures Society. Oh yeah, I'm obsessed!

The most compelling aspect of the future is that we possess power to influence it. It's really not that hard to do. One way is through scenario-learning. By building and interpreting several different scenarios of alternative futures important clues emerge to help us conceptualize what the future might look like. Key indicators are identified and then measured over time to track progress and steer our course to (hopefully) the desired future.

Play along as I walk through one such scenario that may illustrate TAVMA's future by pairing Volunteer Activism and Financial Resources. Of course our future hinges on far more than just these two conditions. Let's pretend for now though that these are the two most critical factors to our future success or failure. Here is what we'll do.

### **Back to the Future(s)**

Draw 4-inch intersecting cross-hairs ( + ) on a sheet of paper. At the top of the vertical line write High Volunteer Activism; below the vertical line Low Volunteer Activism. Beside the left horizontal write Low Money in the Bank; beside the right horizontal High Money in the Bank. I'd go so far as to add a smiley face near High Volunteer Activism and High Money in the Bank, but this is just me. Such a condition is association manager nirvana.

Now, envision what the future might look like if TAVMA enjoyed High Volunteer Activism and High Money in the Bank. Briefly summarize, in bullet points, characteristics that an organization with highly motivated activists with a whole lot of money will look like. Frame it in the present-tense, as if the future has already arrived.

My High Volunteer Activism and High Money in the Bank list looks like this:

- TAVMA has the funds needed to hire staff to administer the additional workload and larger volunteer corps that action and financial abundance can offer. These staff additions include membership, government affairs, and public affairs director(s), meeting and volunteer coordinator(s), two-handed economist, Webmaster, and administrative assistant.
- TAVMA is finally able to relocate to a larger facility and no longer must rely on a member company (currently LandAmerica Onestop) to provide rent-free space.
- TAVMA volunteers develop, launch, and administer a legislative monitoring and action machine involving inside and external lobbyists and PR firms to promote the industry and TAVMA, and further our interests in states where opponents to a level playing field erect barriers to competition.
- TAVMA engages experts to develop reports, white papers, articles, and web content that our members rely on for keen insights to the future. The developing knowledge base wildly increases to the return on our members' significant investment in the association, elevating TAVMA's reputation and influence in the mortgage lending arena.
- Current and future employees now enjoy a resource for industry research about their profession. They have a new sense of pride about what they and/or loved ones do for a living. Friends and family members no longer struggle to understand what we do and can even brag about the industry to their acquaintances. (Ok, this one may be over the top!

- Volunteers guide grassroots efforts, produce and deliver conferences, seminars, educational sessions, and certification and accreditation programs.
- TAVMA's membership grows to unprecedented proportions as a result of the work of our activist volunteer corps and the string of highly publicized and successful initiatives. Decision-makers use these factors to justify their investment in the organization.
- TAVMA's efforts help the settlement services industry and the professionals who invest their lives in this industry gain respect and recognition among government, media, clients, and vendors. Our industry and workforce are now seen as vital and valued promoters and protectors of the land title system in the United States. TAVMA becomes to the settlement services industry what the MBA is to the mortgage lending industry.

Next, envision what the future might present if TAVMA were plagued by Low Volunteer Activism and Low Money in the Bank. Bullet-point some characteristics that an organization may assume (using present-tense) under these conditions.

My Low Volunteer Activism and Low Money in the Bank list looks like this:

- Unable to staff up in critical areas like Membership, Public Relations, and Government Relations, TAVMA struggles to engage a dwindling volunteer corps to take ownership of association-sustaining programs. The lack of resources becomes increasingly evident as the quantity and quality of products and services slowly declines. To those responsible for justifying continued membership in the organization it has become increasingly difficult to approve membership and legislative activities expenditures.
- TAVMA has a string of new landlords as Pittsburgh-based members merge or reclaim space occupied by the executive director. Finding free space becomes ever more difficult and TAVMA is forced to rent space at the going market rate. This adds an additional burden to a growing financial shortfall.
- The lack of volunteers prevents TAVMA from improving its legislative monitoring and legislative action program. The association must rely on staff and a few volunteer resources to wage the industry's legislative and regulatory action campaigns. Opponents recognize the lack of energy as an opportunity to play offense in their never-ending pursuit of an un-level playing field.
- The association finds it difficult to provide consistently high quality products and services to attract and retain members. Our influence in the industry wanes. The settlement services industry devolves into one of the growing number of industries lacking a strong trade association presence to champion the cause.
- Friends and family never figure out what their loved ones do for a living and cringe as their contemporaries boast about their son the doctor or their daughter the accountant.
- Due to lack of funds and human resources, TAVMA and our industry are unable to generate enough waves to attract government, media, clients, and vendors to our status as the promoters and protectors of the land title system in the United States.
- TAVMA cannot sustain its voice among media, government, users and providers of the valuable services our members offer. We fail to be to the settlement services industry what the MBA is to the mortgage lending industry.

5-21-07

Page 4 of 4

Ok, we're all either real happy or real sad right now. I've painted what obviously is a best- and worst-case scenario. There is a lot of room between these two futures to cultivate success and the influence that comes accompanies it. But the focus of our efforts between now and the future seems clear.

### **A Call For Volunteers**

As this scenario exercise makes apparent our success or failure in achieving my great dream for the industry and those who work in it, and for TAVMA, turns on the effort we invest in TAVMA. A strong TAVMA gives our industry the best shot at being perceived by our public(s) as vital and valued promoters and protectors of the land title system. Therefore, creating a High Volunteer Activism and High Money in the Bank association seems to be among the most critical priorities for the leaders of the settlement services industry.

Here's how you can help TAVMA to become the High Volunteer Activism and High Money in the Bank association we were born to be. Visit our new volunteer website, [www.tavmaonline.org](http://www.tavmaonline.org). Surf the site to understand our volunteer program and current volunteer opportunities. If there is a program that you're interested in pursuing, call me at 412-507-2318, or web me at [jeff@tavma.com](mailto:jeff@tavma.com). If there is a program that we don't offer now, but that you'd like to champion, let's talk about it. Call today to see how your time, talent, creativity, and desire to serve can bring about the most desired future for our industry and our association.

Your faithful and diligent assistance means that our future is money in the bank.