

## **The Case for a Trade Association for Employee Assistance**

**Phil Evans**

**President, Employee Assistance Society of North America**

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With the support of our volunteer Board of Directors and dozens of Committee members, and the guidance of our professional management company, EASNA has made great strides in its ability to deliver on its mission. While the hopeful signs of an economic recovery may be a part of the explanation for this year's 75% increase in attendance at our Annual Institute in May in Montreal, it is certainly also the result of consistently reaching out to our constituents with meaningful and valuable content and services.

One of the essential characteristics of a strong and resilient industry is a well structured and active trade association. An effective trade association can create greater product awareness, adoption of standardized and ethical processes and best practices, and dissemination of a unified message to help the industry communicate with its stakeholders and customers. However, many people inside the Employee Assistance profession will describe our industry as fragmented and suffering from the unsustainable margins that result from commoditization, rapid consolidation and channel confusion among related industries. Perhaps most threatening to the industry is the current lack of a strong strategic plan at the industry level to deal with the threats and opportunities created by the rapidly changing landscape of healthcare and employer sponsored benefit plans.

The terms "trade association" and "professional association" are often thought of synonymously; however, the term "trade association" is used to more deliberately reflect an emphasis on organizational/business representation rather than individual practitioner membership. We further assert that the functions of a trade association are not currently being addressed in a cohesive and unified manner.

There are examples outside our field that may be instructive. Consider the "Got Milk?" campaign. This is the work of a trade association. Specifically, in 1993 the members of the

California Milk Processors Board, --a trade association made up of companies that process and distribute milk-- agreed to allocate three cents of each gallon of milk they sold in order to develop a marketing campaign to promote the consumption of milk. It does not advertise any specific type of milk – only that milk is good for you. So it remains up to each dairy to compete on price, quality, and distribution channels. Thus, as a group, milk processors took on the shared responsibility of educating the public and strengthening demand while being individually responsible for the strength of their own brands and internal operations.

So what is our industry's version of an equally well-funded and well-organized campaign to educate purchasers and policy makers of the value and impact of workplace-based behavioral intervention?

Is there currently an industry-wide plan to communicate directly to the potential users of the EAP? More importantly, do we, as independent businesses providing EAP services, see it as our responsibility to participate in such a collective effort? And if so, what would we be willing to contribute in terms of time and money to that effort. Most importantly, what could we reasonably expect in return?

We at EASNA believe that the EA industry is now, more than ever, in need of a more fully developed and better-funded collaboration between EA providers, large and small, with the explicit goals of creating standardization in professional practices, sponsoring and disseminating research, influencing public policy, and developing strategies to speak directly to the purchaser and end-users. Over the last several years, the Employee Assistance Society of North America has taken several important steps in this direction. The balance of this article describes these current initiatives in the hopes that EAP providers across North America will come together more deliberately to participate in and influence these strategies in the years to come.

### *Educating the Customer*

The EASNA publication, *Selecting and Strengthening Employee Assistance Programs: A Purchaser's Guide*, provides education, guidelines, data and inside information on employee assistance programs (EAPs). It was written for purchasers and funders of EAPs, and professionals in human resources, finance, occupational health, labor/management and human

capital who work at organizations that hire EAPs; for brokers and other sellers of EAP services; and for all those within the employee assistance, workplace wellness and health promotion communities. To date, the *Guide* has been downloaded, free of charge, more than 500 times. It remains available to all interested parties at [www.easna.org](http://www.easna.org).

The EASNA Annual *Corporate Award of Excellence* provides high-profile recognition to two corporate purchasers each year whose own partnerships with their EA provider exemplify the kind of management level collaboration that makes workplace intervention strategies highly successfully and profitable. Information about the 2010 Corporate Awards of Excellence is available at [www.easna.org](http://www.easna.org).

Like the “Got Milk” campaign, the *Purchaser’s Guide* and the “*Corporate Award of Excellence*” are two examples of EASNA’s our efforts to influence the understanding and resulting behavior of the potential EA purchaser with compelling evidence that a well-designed EAP is an equally healthy choice.

#### *Monitoring and Influencing Industry-Related Public Policies and Regulation*

The new EASNA Advocacy Committee is charged with reaching out to policy makers and influencing the regulatory and market conditions that affect the success of our stakeholders. The Advocacy Committee’s mission is to represent and advance the interests of the employee assistance community in legislative and regulatory affairs at the state, provincial and federal levels, where applicable. Working collaboratively with other organizations and coalitions, the committee has sought to create a regulatory and legislative landscape throughout North America that will facilitate the maximum growth and positive societal influence of employee assistance programs.

The Advocacy Committee has authored several letters to influence the debates on health care and urged them to recognize the value of EAPs in any proposed reform. Copies of Advocacy Committee letters and minutes are is available at <http://www.easna.org/media.html>.

### *Defining, Encouraging, and Promoting Best Practices in EAP*

Promoting the common interests of companies through a trade association also includes setting a series of standards by which the producer can benefit from industry-wide credibility, while curbing confusion and protecting consumers. In the EAP marketplace several examples already exist. They include the EAP Accreditation standards, originally developed by EASNA and now administered by the Council on Accreditation, and the Employee Assistance Professionals Association's individual CEAP Certification. Both of these long-standing programs are designed to promote best practices in our field through external accountability, yet they remain underutilized if the ultimate goal is to create credibility and consistency in the eyes of the purchaser.

The prerequisite to a trade association's efforts to promote best-practice and industry self-governance is the research to support such declaration of best practices and standards. EASNA's Knowledge, Transfer, and Research Committee (KTR) is an elite cadre of research-focused EA professionals actively engaged in current and relevant research projects. Examples of the KTR in the last year include the publication of the *Purchasers Guide*, the monthly newsletter *EASNA Research Notes* which addresses research topics of current interest, and the recently published "EAP Value Brief," a concise summary of more than 20 years of research findings on the value and return on investment of EAPs in the workplace.

The EASNA Annual Institute, now in its 23<sup>rd</sup> year, is another example of how collaboration and research based-best practices are promoted by a trade association. Consistent with a trade association approach, future Institutes will promote greater organizational-level involvement by EAPs and an expanded focus on the role of industry level collaboration in creating strategies to address common business challenges,

### *EAP Organizations as the Building Blocks of a Powerful Trade Association*

The EAP industry has a tremendous opportunity to more effectively convey its value proposition and establish greater credibility through promotion of best practices and standards fueled by

research. Here again, other industries represent examples of the importance of the trade association in achieving these goals through self-governance and standards setting.

The actions and goals of a trade association that I have illustrated here require a unified and well-funded trade association. Traditionally, organizations such as EASNA have derived their participation and funding from individuals practicing in the EAP field. In the recent years, EASNA has recognized the importance of engaging EAPs at the corporate level if we are to create a true trade association with the ability to advocate, lobby and speak broadly to the purchasers for the benefit of all providers and consumers of EAP services.

Now is the time, with the global economy still in turmoil, for all providers in the EAP industry, large and small, to come together to help define the purpose of its trade association, to develop an industry level marketing campaign, to advocate more forcefully with policy makers, and to help support research-based standards and increased accountability. It's a frequent criticism voiced among many EA professionals that our field lacks a unified voice and a focused approach to the challenges of this marketplace. EASNA invites you to join with the growing number of other organizations and individuals who are already working to give a stronger voice to these goals and to ensure the long-time viability of the EAP's role in promoting workplace health, productivity and wellness.