

Grow Your Own

I joined our little corner of the industry in 1998, straight out of The Florida State University Graduate School of Library and Information Studies, my master's in hand. I had never heard of "prospect research," but the job posting in our local newspaper, published shortly before graduation, intrigued me, and the subsequent interview and testing involved made me even more eager to land this opportunity. Back then, one had to write a select statement for a Dialog search, per a hypothetical research request. [And, yes, I can still do this, if my life depended on it!]

FSU is the "big fish in a small pond," so there was not really a local chapter of any association applicable to prospect research, but, as it turned out, a number of my FSU colleagues had been instrumental in growing its own State chapter of APRA. It was supported at the institutional level, so it was easy for me to attend the conferences. I have so many dear, dear friends, only found via APRA FL!

I still live in Tallahassee, and my career path has allowed me to remain in the Capital City. Like New York State, Florida is geographically challenged, with a center point of Orlando still being somewhat out of reach for those organizations in Pensacola at the western-most edge of the panhandle and Miami at the (close to) southernmost tip of the State. For the most part, if you are involved in the intelligence side of fundraising, you are pretty land locked in terms of networking. But wow the opportunity available through the chapter organization is huge. Such is likely the case with APRA UNY and numerous other APRA chapters.

My husband David and I love to attend and participate in APRA chapter events because we truly enjoy the hands-on opportunity the education events at the chapter level provide – the ability to connect within a less noisy environment than that at the international conference. APRA International events have their own energy and is somewhat akin to the stadium rock concert vs. the chapter events which are like intimate coffee house performances. Both types of events work together to produce and nurture one's own network.

Networking with similar professionals is absolutely essential to not only your own personal career growth but also to the success of your own organization. The ideas and advice one receives from colleagues who are only met via a chapter network can provide sustainability for your nonprofit, your university, your arts organization, your hospital, and all other varieties of fundraising organizations. It's way too easy to become insular and myopic working at your own place of employment, doing your "day job" – you end up missing the big picture of what you are trying to accomplish.

Through growing your own and continuing to support your local APRA chapter, you broaden your knowledge, your career, and your network. By sharing with others, you enrich your own palette of expertise. You're able to take advantage, at a significant cost savings, of the power of a group in terms of bringing in experts from the outside, having access to resources your own organization cannot afford, and finding a mentor, either formally or informally. I know it's hard to believe this, but I say this to you ever so gently – your organization and its issues/challenges are NOT unique. I tell you this, as a consultant, in that odds are if you are having a professional problem or an information/research related challenge, you are not the first. PRSPCT-L is great; Twitter is also wonderful; but these are tools to be used in addition to in real life and in real time resources.

I have to imagine a number of you reading this right now are the direct beneficiaries of someone who has gone before you, so to speak. It's a community – it's your community. Through the community's involvement, growing your own expertise and that of your colleagues within the network allows your extended community to become even richer and deeper. Your network extends outward and your knowledge being shared and consumed by others within your broader community through your active participation proves to be beneficial to all.

If your employer will not subsidize your participation, you owe it to yourself to join your local chapter - the cost is just a few venti lattes from Starbucks typically – save the calories and spend the dough on what and who you know! I've met over the years colleagues in our sector who invest in themselves like this – not only at the chapter level but also at the international membership level. They tell me they owe it to themselves, even if their employer will not pay for their membership.

Growing your own requires your participation. Get involved. Get involved in leadership activities too; I eventually became vice president and then president of APRA-FL. Don't be a passive recipient of the efforts of others. Find out how you can get involved. Promote your own chapter! It's fun, it's informative, and you'll never know who you'll end up meeting, and what an impact that person can have on your life. (Shout out to my husband!)

Lori Hood Lawson is a frequent speaker at both APRA International and APRA chapter events. She further supports prospect development initiatives through serving on the APRA Ethics Committee, APRA Online Curriculum Committee, and APRA Body of Knowledge Committee. Her husband is David Lawson; they both credit APRA and the APRA FL chapter events for having met and started their friendship so very long ago.

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