

Where have our industry groups gone?

When I started with the flower industry sixteen years ago, Queensland had the Queensland Flower Growers Association (now the Flower Association) as the state peak industry body. There were also five regional grower groups and two commodity groups, which were the Flower Growers Association of Tropical North Queensland, Cooloola & Sunshine Coast Native Flower Growers Association, the Corroboree Native Flower Growers Association, The Queensland Wax and Native Flower Association, The Central Queensland Flower and Foliage Association plus the Rose and Gerbera Growers Commodity Groups. None of those groups exist today. There was also a national Protea Growers Association as well as the Australian Flower Export Council (later the Flower Export Council of Australia). Neither of those groups exists today.

In addition, a number of the remaining regional groups including the WA Protea Growers Association, Wildflower Growers of WA and the North Australia Cut Flower Group are shadows of their former selves. All grower associations, both state and national, struggle to maintain membership levels and financial sustainability.

Reasons for the reduction

In their heyday, regional industry groups were very active, met regularly, had dozens of members and some even hosted conferences and trade delegations. The common theme with all of them though was a core group of committed and active members that usually started the organisations and then worked to run them. Hosting the meetings, organising technical speakers for field days and conferences, drumming up members and ensuring the group's structure and activities were conducted legally all took effort and, most importantly, leadership.

One of the issues with formalised groups is the need to meet a number of legal requirements. This varies from state to state and also depends on the structure of the group, but usually requires keeping an accurate set of financial accounts, securing and processing memberships, hosting regular formal meetings, electing officials and taking meeting minutes. This can be burdensome and tends to fall to the same core members. Without providing the leadership skills required, new leaders fail to step forward, resulting in the same people doing all the work. This seems to inevitably



lead to the groups' downfall, as those leading members move out of the industry, retire or just burn out.

The need for industry groups

Regional groups exist for a reason and provide a number of benefits to their members and the wider industry.

Firstly, groups are usually governed by a basic set of principles, including that everyone has a common interest; for example, they are all professional flower farmers or that they are all exporters. Although some groups allow members from along the supply chain, they usually only do so to the extent that it assists the group to achieve its goals.

Groups represent the members to influence the formulation and implementation of government policies. Groups are also avenues to provide information and training to their members, with informal learning opportunities available at meetings or more formal training such as chemical handling accreditation or bringing their members together for field days and conferences. Some groups develop their own information and in some circumstances, they may be the only source of information needed to succeed commercially. Most groups communicate via a newsletter, website or social media through which they share event information and legislative information which may impact on their members' businesses.

Groups usually also offer their own support or secure external support for their members. This can range from the casual swapping of plant material between members, to negotiating bulk or group discounts with key input suppliers, or securing government grants for research and market development, or advocating for drought and disaster relief funding. Groups also provide an important social outlet with like-minded people who understand their common concerns. It is this element that is almost as important as the professional benefits for the members of regional, and sometimes fairly isolated, groups.

Turning things around

The industry needs to rediscover the power of local and regional industry groups. With this goal in mind, a project is being undertaken under the umbrella of the Australian Flower Council, led by the Flower Association in collaboration with the Flower Growers Group of New South Wales, Flowers Victoria and WildFlowers Australia. For more information visit the Flower Knowledge Centre. ↗

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Shane Holborn

