

# Map Quest

**How the industry's regional associations are helping promo professionals grow business, make connections and build community—one member at a time**

*By Sean Norris*





In the spring of 2013, Paul Kiewiet and Roger Burnett scheduled a lunch in Lansing, Mich. Kiewiet had become the executive director of the Michigan Promotional Professionals Association (MiPPA) the year before, after Donna Hall, the previous executive director, had passed away suddenly and without a succession plan. MiPPA had been caught off guard, and membership and morale were down. Kiewiet and Burnett, then MiPPA's immediate past president, were going from city to city, inviting members and prospects to talk as they worked to get the organization back on track. So here they were, at a restaurant in Michigan's capital city, hopeful they'd attract some interest this far from Detroit, some 90 miles to the east. Kiewiet grabbed a table. Burnett set up a video camera to record interviews with attendees for promotional use. They were optimistic. They were ready. No one showed up.

No one except Jane Mitchell, that is. Mitchell, owner and CEO of Jungle Jane Promotions, had been in business in Lansing for more than 20 years. She knew about MiPPA, but felt it was too concentrated in the eastern part of the state, around Detroit—a three-hour round trip on a good traffic day, four if I-96 was jammed up. She'd gone to a few MiPPA shows, but it didn't seem worth it to join. Yet, when she saw Kiewiet and Burnett would be in her home city, she figured she'd at least grab some lunch and hear them out.

"They talked about the legislation that they were doing in Michigan to help to make sure my business would be able to run the way I needed it to run," Mitchell remembers. "They talked about how they were trying to bring things over closer toward the east side of Michigan, and they were looking for somebody to help them build that side of the state. And they talked about the discounts they offered with SAGE, the discounts with FedEx—several different discounts that would offset the membership. It's only \$125 now to join, and it seems like it might have even been a little bit less to join at the time, for the whole year, so it wasn't really cost prohibitive once they showed me a few benefits that I would gain. And they started talking about how they were trying to improve the shows they were putting on, and things like that that would make it beneficial for me."

Mitchell liked what she heard, and by the time dessert arrived, she agreed to join MiPPA. In 2014, after a year as a volunteer, she

ran for and won a spot on MiPPA's board of directors. A year later, she joined the executive committee as treasurer, then became vice president the following year. By 2018, she was president. In those five years, MiPPA regained its footing and emerged looking stronger than ever. Mitchell helped solidify all of its committees, shore up its organizational structure and spearhead major initiatives, including an annual breakfast event with state lawmakers. More than that, Mitchell's experience with MiPPA contributed to significant growth for her promo business—up to 65 percent over five years, she estimates.

“Probably the biggest benefit I've gotten that has helped my business grow with being involved with MiPPA is the fact that you're working side by side with not only other distributors that we can share ideas with and learn ways that I can grow my business, but also with the suppliers that I, as a small business owner working out of my house, didn't always have that access to,” Mitchell says. “I would say that the connections that you make on the supplier and on the distributor side really will make a huge difference in propelling your business to that next level. As a small business owner, you don't always get the same treatment that larger businesses do—the suppliers only have so much time, and they don't really have a chance to always get out and make those connections with the smaller businesses. And by being involved with the local associations, you get that close time with those individual suppliers that are representing you.”

Mitchell's success story shows what regional associations can do for their members, and vice versa. But it's remarkable how

close it came to never happening at all. What if she hadn't shown up to lunch that day in Lansing? Not everyone will have the same experience with their regional association that Mitchell did, but there's clearly great potential there for promo professionals willing to give it a shot. To learn more about member benefits, common objections to joining and how to get involved, we talked to representatives from several industry regionals. We hope it provides some helpful information for anyone who, like Mitchell, was on the fence about joining up. And who knows—maybe it will inspire the next industry success story.

### **Why Regionals Matter**

The U.S. promo industry has 27 regional associations in all, representing every corner of the country. (See map on page 22.) PPAI groups these into five districts, each with its own district reps that act as liaisons to PPAI's Regional Association Council (RAC). Formed in the late 1990s, RAC serves as the overall organizing body for the promo industry's regional associations, providing resources, tools and support. Each individual regional has a RAC delegate whose role is to facilitate communication between their association and RAC, relaying information and messaging and acting as a local agent for industry-wide initiatives.

This structure is one of the overall benefits of association membership. Those resources from RAC filter down to the individual associations, which then pass them onto their members. This includes sharing best practices, common goals, programming ideas and pain points, and keeping members briefed on macro



Members of the AzPPA board for 2019.



**Attendees at MiPPA's Promotions That ROAR! end-buyer trade show at Ford Field in Detroit line up for field goal attempts coached by retired Detroit Lions kicker Eddie Murray.**

industry trends or issues that might not be as obvious at the local level. It also includes broader representation on a national level. Harold Wood, account manager for BIC Graphic and current RAC board president, told me that many regional volunteers end up participating in PPAI's Legislative Education and Action Day (LEAD). "Having volunteers from all over the country come to Washington, D.C. to lobby on behalf of the entire industry truly makes a difference," he says. "While this is a PPAI initiative, RAC helps engage the regional associations in the messaging and the process of helping identify volunteer advocates."

On the local level, the benefits become even more numerous and specific to businesses in that region. MiPPA, for example, holds Michigan factory tours and an annual leadership conference. Specialty Advertising Association of Greater New York (SAAGNY) has a member app, an online directory, an awards program, a job board and more. Philadelphia Area Promotional Products Association (PAPPA) gives distributor members a coupon book with discounts from supplier members. Arizona Promotional Products Association (AzPPA) offers affinity programs that reduce costs for FedEx, Constant Contact and other services, and has partnered with other regionals in its district for a district-specific webinar series.

"In 2019, AzPPA also established an online-only membership category specifically to serve potential members in Utah who were not being served by any other regional association," says Betsy Andrade, MAS, MBA, executive director for AzPPA. "This reduced-cost membership level gives our remote members, who cannot or do not travel to the Phoenix area, internet access to all webinars and benefits that are available online. They also are

eligible for reduced-cost entry to in-person events when they are able to attend."

Most regionals provide similar opportunities to those above, along with education and volunteering, professional development training, newsletters, webinars, annual meetings and discounts. But perhaps the single biggest benefit to regional association membership is the networking. In addition to its leadership conference, MiPPA hosts two distributor-only trade shows and two end-user trade shows. SAAGNY gives members free access to four trade shows in its region and PPAI Expo East in Atlantic City. PAPPA offers four trade shows and various social and networking events.

These are just a few examples. Look up any regional and you'll find similar trade show lineups, annual meetings, professional development seminars, conferences and other events. Some, like the end-user shows, put distributor members directly in front of customers and prospects, creating a direct path to new business. That's, obviously, a major benefit, but the inter-industry connections and resulting partnerships regionals help build might even be more valuable. That's what Mitchell discovered soon after joining MiPPA.

"I would say that the connections that you make on the supplier and on the distributor side really will make a huge difference in propelling your business to that next level," she says. "As a small-business owner, you don't always get the same treatment—the suppliers only have so much time, and they don't really have a chance to always get out and make those connections with the smaller businesses. And by being involved with the local associations, you get that close time with those individual suppliers that

**“When we have the opportunity to learn about one another in a setting outside of a business transaction, it creates an opportunity to build strong relationships within the industry you might not otherwise be able to build.”**

– Roger Burnett, immediate past president, Michigan Promotional Professionals Association (MiPPA)

are representing you. At the shows that we have, the suppliers that are there are not necessarily the owners of the company or the higher-ups, but the actual [local] rep, so you build that connection.”

And she’s not the only one. Everyone interviewed for this story said the same. Most of them have seen it in action or experienced it themselves.

Here’s Patti Ward, executive director of PAPPA for the last five years and of Three Rivers Advertising Specialty Association (TRASA) for the last 17: “Regional associations provide a local opportunity for promotional product professionals to attend trade shows, network, learn and socialize among one another. Regional associations help members develop business relationships and open doors to new business.”

Here’s Paul Sprunk, current SAAGNY president and owner of Paul Sprunk and Associates: “Regional associations allow you to make local contacts with both distributors and suppliers. Walk before you run. Networking with regional people help you grow your own business locally. SAAGNY offers webinars and many social events over the year. The year ends with a great holiday party. But networking is probably the best benefit with any regional association.”

Here’s Andrade, who was even able to leverage connections she made through AzPPA to sell her business when she was ready to retire: “Because of the great relationships I have enjoyed during my time in the industry and as part of AzPPA, I was able to relatively easily find a local friendly competitor who was interested and able to purchase my distributorship. We formalized the sale effective Jan. 1, 2020 and are working now to transition my clients to the new owner. Outside of my own business, I have witnessed other newcomers to the industry, in sole practitioner or very small companies, find mentoring and support among other AzPPA members that have helped their businesses overcome some early roadblocks. There’s always someone around who is willing and able to answer a question, provide some advice or just listen with a sympathetic ear.”

And here’s Kyle McGovern, current president of Ohio Promotional Professionals Association (OPPA) and regional sales manager for McGovern Marketing Group: “I have a friend named Ken, who has attended all of our events. When I first met him, he was new to the industry as a distributor. He has told me that, through our education sessions and trade shows, he has learned how to be a better salesman in our industry. Ken’s company has grown each year. I met him at a trade show, and



now work on projects with him all the time. We’ve built a great relationship. This probably would have never happened without OPPA. As for me personally, I love the people I’ve met along the way. I can’t stress enough how important relationships are. At one of my first trade shows, a competitor of mine saw I was getting slammed and that a customer was waiting to talk to me. He walked over, handed her a catalog of mine, and got her card to give to me later. This person has been a mentor to me and has become a great friend. I met him through OPPA.”

### **Common Objections**

For Roger Burnett, this is what it’s all about. Burnett served as MiPPA president in 2012 and again in 2019. He remained involved with the organization in between, and is still involved as immediate past president (as he was in 2013 when he helped recruit Mitchell). He’s worked at industry companies large and small, as both a distributor and supplier, but he credits much of his success and visibility in the industry to his time as a MiPPA volunteer. It’s what led him to co-found PromoKitchen, the all-volunteer mentorship and education community, 10 years ago, and PromoCares, the industry organization focused on corporate social responsibility and giving back, three years ago. It’s also given him valuable business insights.

“On a personal note, I’m able to speak with members of the leadership teams of many of the businesses I buy from, not

because of the size of my spend with them nor because the company has an open-door policy of having it's execs speak with customers of all sizes (that happens sometimes, but not most of the time), but because of the time I have been able to spend with those execs serving together as volunteers. When we have the opportunity to learn about one another in a setting outside of a business transaction, it creates an opportunity to build strong relationships within the industry you might not otherwise be able to build."

He adds: "The perspective I bring to a client is built from the national and international exposure we're afforded as association members, and that ability to convey a higher degree of understanding with respect to important decision-making criteria. Regulatory issues like product safety and supply chain concerns due to tariffs, natural disasters and medical emergencies (like the one we're witnessing at this very moment [with the coronavirus]) represent the pillars of value a customer should be looking for in a promotional products consultant. You won't be able to learn that important information any more efficiently than by being an association member."

Yet, for all the benefits and success stories, there are more people not involved in regional associations than there are who are members. Burnett estimates that MiPPA has 250 members, while PPAI has around 900 in Michigan. That means there are more than three times as many promo professionals in the the state who don't participate in MiPPA than those who do. Burnett believes a lot of that gap comes down to awareness. "There's a podcast-length discussion we could have about what the other factors in the mix might be," he says. "But we know there are promotional products practitioners in our marketplace who would stand to benefit from a professional development perspective should they be made aware of the benefits of [regional association] participation."

Still, like Burnett says, there are other factors keeping people from joining regional associations. Ward believes some promo professionals are comfortable with their status quo, relying on a core group of familiar suppliers rather than seeking out new vendors and opportunities. Others may be concerned about the time investment, the cost of membership, the travel distances (as Mitchell was) or getting too close with competitors. Any or all of these can be valid concerns depending on a given business or individual's situation. But there are compelling arguments to be made that the pros of membership far outweigh the cons.

For instance, here's McGovern on time and cost: "If you see all suppliers in the area at one of our events, you're really saving time. With regards to the annual fee, it's a small price to pay for the relationships you gain. A lot of suppliers will go the extra mile if you're closer. Whether it be helping on pricing, free samples or just working extra hard for you, as a distributor, you make more money, while having to spend less. From a supplier's perspective, which is what I am, my best customers are the ones that want to support me, not just the companies I represent. I have been able to build these relationships through OPPA."

And here's Donna-Jeane Plante, executive director of SAAGNY: "The membership fee is an investment in you. Membership provides you the opportunity to connect with other like-minded professionals, collaborate with colleagues through giving back, mastering new

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skills and valuable professional experience and learning—taking a deep dive into the issues that affect you and your business so you can grow as an employee/employer.”

Here’s Andrade on getting close to competitors: “Though I understand the thought, this is so short-sighted in my opinion. First of all, from whom can you learn more than those who have more experience in the business, or those who have a different approach to the business? In these changing times, even our most experienced industry leaders can learn from those with greater facility in dealing with technological and inter-generational issues. Secondly, networking with our peers can give us opportunities for change—in my case, selling my business. In other instances, growing, updating or changing our business model.”

And here’s Mitchell: “This is the rare industry where we are willing to share information and help each other out and not feel like it’s just, ‘You’re gonna steal my business.’ I think a lot of us have the attitude that if you’re doing a good job for your clients and you’re giving them what they need, they’re not out there looking for somebody else. And if they are looking for somebody else, you probably weren’t doing what you should be doing to begin with, because you should have that partnership with your customers as well. I’m not going to necessarily tell my competitor who my customer is and what I’m doing for them, but I can generally talk to them about, ‘Hey, I have a client and this is

## For More Information...

In this story, we spoke to representatives from six regional associations and the Regional Association Council (RAC). For information on any of the other 21 regionals we weren’t able to profile here, check out the graphic below for a listing and territory breakdown. Each association’s website is loaded with helpful information on programs, benefits, contacts and how to get involved. If you can’t find what you’re looking for, try the RAC website, which has contact information for key members of each regional association.

what’s going on, how would you handle it?’ And they’re more than willing to help us out with that.”

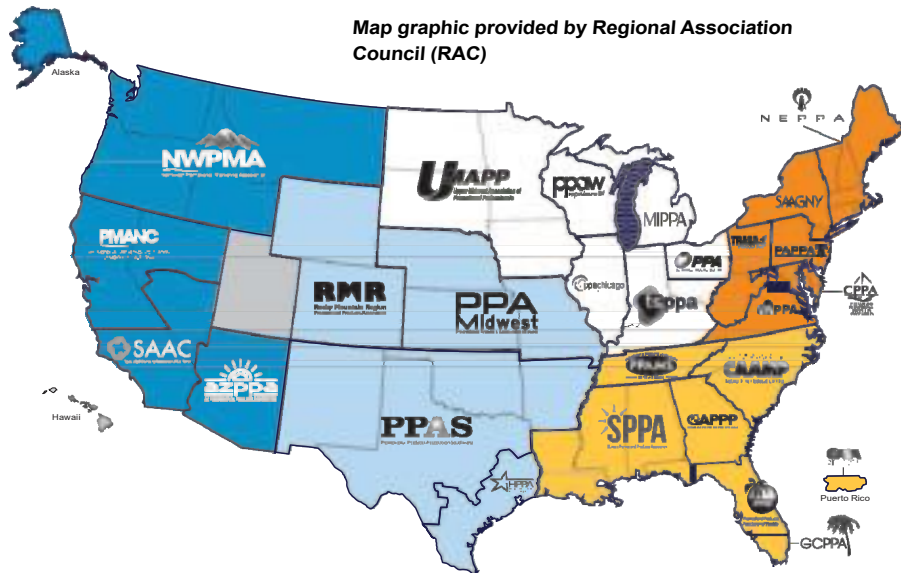
### How to Get Involved

Regional association membership might not be for everyone, and

# The Five RAC Districts



Map graphic provided by Regional Association Council (RAC)



#### District 1

- Chesapeake Promotional Products Association (CPPA)
- New England Promotional Products Association (NEPPA)
- Philadelphia Area Promotional Products Association (PAPPA) (formerly SACDV)
- Specialty Advertising Association of Greater New York (SAAGNY)
- Three Rivers Advertising Specialty Association (TRASA)
- Virginia Promotional Products Association (VAPPA) (formerly MAPPA)

#### District 2

- Carolinas Association of Advertising & Marketing Professionals (CAAMP)
- Caribbean Advertising Specialties Association (CASA)
- Georgia Association of Promotional Products Professionals (GAPPP)
- Gold Coast Promotional Products Association (GCPPA)
- Promotional Products Association of Florida (PPAF)
- Promotional Products Association of the Mid-South (PPAMS)
- Sunbelt Promotional Products Association (SPPA)

#### District 3

- Michigan Promotional Professionals Association (MIPPA)
- Ohio Promotional Professionals Association (OPPA)
- Promotional Professionals Association of Chicago (PPChicago)
- Promotional Products Association of Wisconsin (PPAW)
- Tri-State Promotional Professionals Association (TSPPA)
- Upper Midwest Association of Promotional Professionals (UMAPP)

#### District 4

- Houston Promotional Products Association (HPPA)
- Promotional Products Association of the Midwest (PPAMidwest)
- Promotional Products Association Southwest (PPAS)
- Rocky Mountain Region Promotional Products Association (RMRPPA)

#### District 5

- Arizona Promotional Products Association (AzPPA)
- Northwest Promotional Marketing Association (NWPMA)
- Promotional Marketing Association of Northern California (PMANC)
- Specialty Advertising Association of California (SAAC)

that's OK. Burnett, for example, knows that the time commitment, more than anything, is a very real concern, especially for small-business owners 100 percent responsible for every aspect of every order. But he also knows that those same owners are the people who can benefit most from the close connections and shared experiences that come with regional membership.


"There are many communities you can join to help sharpen your sword, but if that group doesn't include at least a few people who do the same thing you do, it's hard to compare notes in the kind of specific way you can with someone who does what you do," says Burnett. "If you don't have people like that in your circle, I'd tell you to stop everything and schedule a meeting with the president of your nearest trade association."

If you're on the fence, or even just curious to learn more, that's a good starting point. But Andrade has another suggestion: jump in. "When I speak with potential members, I always encourage them to try it for a year and really make an effort to participate as much as possible," she says. "Attend local events, both educational and social. Bring your clients to the end-user portion of our Expo. Listen to the webinars. Take advantage of the benefits that are offered. Read the bi-monthly e-newsletter. Ask for advice whenever you need it. See for yourself if you can benefit from involvement before passing judgment without ever trying it on for size. The worst that can happen is that you won't find it valuable and you don't come back for the next year. The potential best that can happen is limitless."

That was the case for Mitchell. And for Sprunk, who is now in his second of two terms as SAAGNY president after multiple years of service in other roles. It was the case for McGovern, who, through OPPA, has become close friends with some of his biggest competitors. And for Andrade, who started attending AzPPA events as an industry newcomer in 2003, joined the organization when she started her own distributorship in 2010 and still serves as executive director today.

And it was the case for Harold Wood, who held a number of roles at two different regional associations before working his way up to board president for RAC, where he now works tirelessly to help ensure that every regional member has a voice. Wood knows better than anyone the time and effort required to get the most out of regional association membership. But he also knows the how valuable it is to be a part of something bigger.

"Regionals provide community, and in an industry where many people operate independently, this community is vital," he says. "As a member, immediately you feel a sense of belonging and ownership, and with that comes the pull to contribute. Often, getting involved can be a challenge, as you feel lost in the shuffle of daily operations. But I encourage anyone who hasn't explored membership in their regional to do so. And once you are a member, reach out to the executive director and ask how you can become more involved. They know where the volunteer need is, and can help place people based on their time commitment and skills. Start with your regional association. Learn what programs and events are offered. Once you join, see how you can help bring more value to the membership. Share input, feedback and, if you are inclined, volunteer."

"Just do it," says Plante, the SAAGNY executive director. "You will be glad you invested in yourself." 


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