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MOTN – A Model for Employing a Collaborative Strategy Fostering Economic and Technological Success in the Marine & Oceanographic Community

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***Abstract* – Over the past 8 years, the Marine & Oceanographic Technology Network (MOTN) has established itself as a successful and unique industry collaborative, geared toward improving both the economic and technological positions of its New England regional members. MOTN's diverse membership consisting of over 70 industrial, academic and government organizations, provides MOTN with a very broad-based view of the ocean marketplace. Despite several challenges, MOTN continues to grow, and its membership continues to benefit directly from this broad based perspective, through a variety of organizational initiatives and sponsored events. This paper will present an overview of MOTN's inception, its structure, growth and its planned future. The Paper will also provide specific information relative to how the strength and breadth of the combined membership is being used to launch several new strategic initiatives that promise to fuel the growth of the organization in the years to come.**

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

In 1995, the MOTN was originally established, as the Massachusetts Ocean Technology Network, with the administrative and financial support of the Massachusetts Office of Business Development (MOBD). At that time, the concept of "industry clusters" was becoming widely accepted as a trend for public economic development planning in the US. The MOBD viewed the establishment of industry clusters, such as the MOTN, as a way to deal with firms and industries as a system, as well as a means of being able to most effectively allocate their limited resources for urban and regional economic development.

At its inception, MOTN was legally incorporated as a 501(c)(6) not-for-profit business league organization , with primary oversight being provided by an annually elected Board of Directors. The IRS defines a 501(c) (6) organization as "An association of persons having some common business interest, the purpose of which is to promote such common interest and not to engage in a regular business of a kind ordinarily carried on for profit."[1] Day-to-day administration of the MOTN was (and is) the responsibility of an Executive Director, who is duly appointed by the Board. Between 1995 and 2001, Maggie Linskey Merrill, MOTN's founder, also served as MOTN's Executive Director. Under her leadership, MOTN received initial funding support from the MOBD. These funds, along with member dues, were invested in developing programs and events meant to stimulate business growth within the Massachusetts ocean industry. One of the most widely-recognized MOTN events, that Maggie helped to create and still spearheads today, is the Ocean Technology Workshop (OTW), a bi-annual showcase of MOTN member technology, which is the subject of a separate Paper being presented at this Conference *("The Ocean Technology Workshop Series: The Importance of Offering Technical Training to Equipment Users")*.

As MOTN grew in size and popularity, it became obvious that the entire New England region, with its dense population of marine technology design and manufacturing firms, could draw a benefit from MOTN membership. Thus, in 2000, the Massachusetts Ocean Technology Network evolved into the larger, more diverse Marine & Oceanographic Technology Network. MOTN currently consists of more than 70 members with business operations in Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut.

In comparison to other industry organizations, such as the Marine Technology Society (MTS), or the IEEE, MOTN is somewhat unique. Unlike MTS, or IEEE, MOTN does not operate strictly as a professional society fostering the continued growth and public recognition of marine science, from solely an academic or engineering perspective.

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[1] IRS Website: http://www.irs.gov/charities/article/

Instead, MOTN functions more as an industry trade association with a strong focus on enhancing the economic well-being of its industry members. While MOTN recognizes and accepts the need for continued education, research and cutting-edge science in order to insure the successful future of the industry, the Network also recognizes that there are many economic and competitive challenges facing today's technologists and manufacturers that must be overcome if the industry is to thrive and remain relevant in the future.

Continued success as an organization has not come easy for MOTN. Given the current fiscal uncertainty of many regional State Governments, MOTN can no longer depend on receiving the public economic support that was routinely provided in the past. With a new attitude and a re-vitalized agenda, MOTN is currently achieving success in meeting a number of significant challenges in its quest to become an increasingly relevant and self-sustaining organization.

II. MOTN CHALLENGE #1 - ESTABLISHING A "COMMON INTEREST" AGENDA

The Investment Bankers Association of America defines a "trade association" as: *"Individuals and companies in a specific business or industry organized to promote common interests."*[2]

Perhaps the biggest challenge that MOTN faces today is defining and establishing an agenda that meets the "*common interests"* of its members. One of MOTN's strengths has always been its ability to attract and integrate a diverse membership. Today, MOTN encompasses a variety of members from a number of economic sectors, such as private industry, academia, the public sector and DOD. Within the private industry sector, MOTN's membership includes companies of differing scales, such as large DOD Prime Contractors, small-to-mid sized manufacturing companies, OEM parts suppliers and a number of support businesses and manufacturing/technical service providers. The diversity that is represented by all of these factions serves MOTN well in its ability to stay fully connected to the priorities and needs of the overall marine and oceanographic community. However, it also creates a significant challenge in trying to establish an organizational agenda that provides equitable benefit to all of the membership.

In response to this challenge, the MOTN leadership has now developed a "Common Interest Agenda"; a multi-level operating plan outlining organizational initiatives that are designed to address a wide array of complementary member requirements. Some examples include:

A. New Market Access

To assist its members with understanding and accessing the newly created Homeland Security market, MOTN has established a 2003 organizational focus on "Technology to Protect Ports & Harbors". MOTN has formed a Port, Harbor and Maritime Security Sub-Committee to provide a platform from which the organization can stay abreast of developments within the new Department of Homeland Security and the effects they might have on new business opportunities, as well as new regulations that affect member organizations. This initiative has provided a benefit to nearly all MOTN members by establishing open forums for sharing of relevant information between the academic institutions, the government planners, the on-scene security providers and the technologists and manufacturers.

B. SBIR Training

Since the majority of MOTN's industrial members are small businesses, it is important that they are able to take advantage of the significant funding that the Federal Government has set-aside for small businesses under the Small Business Innovative Research (SBIR) program. MOTN has initiated a program to co-sponsor workshop events in which members can learn how to become knowledgeable about the SBIR program, as well as how to prepare and submit winning proposals.

C. Prime Contractor Outreach Assistance

Over the past year, MOTN has aggressively pursued large Prime Contractors for membership in the organization. In prior years, large companies, such as Raytheon, or Lockheed Martin saw little benefit in joining an industry network largely populated by small businesses. At the same time, the smaller MOTN members tended to view these large companies with suspicion and trepidation. Times have changed, however, and today these same Prime Contractors see small, innovative companies as potential partners for new technology developments and low cost manufacturing assistance. MOTN is now considered an important resource by the larger companies seeking smaller, but specialized industry partners. MOTN's new role as "match-maker" between the Primes and the small business members has already begun to pay dividends for members.

D. Technology Transfer Support

In this new era of fiscal belt tightening, many Federal Government Agencies, as well as many academic institutions, are viewing intellectual property as a marketable asset and have initiated

[2] Investment Bankers Association WebSite: http://www.investorwords.com/cgi-bin/getword.cgi?5015

programs to transfer leading edge, tax-payer funded technology to the private sector. MOTN has recently leveraged this opportunity for its membership by hosting informational meetings focused on this topic, as well as assisting members, who wish to participate in specific Federal and State Government technology transfer-related proposals, which will assist them in gaining access to this potentially lucrative resource.

E. Business Cost Reductions

One area of "common interest" that is clearly defined is the ability of MOTN to assist members in the reduction of the cost of doing business. One particular area - reducing the cost of health insurance coverage for small business members – is currently of paramount importance. MOTN has taken the first steps in organizing a "MOTN Health Care Collaborative" and already has over 600 members and dependents registered to participate if and when the regional Health Insurance providers agree to re-institute a policy of underwriting industry trade associations.

F. Increased Political Visibility

In order for MOTN to be considered truly a relevant and influential organization, able to provide tangible economic assistance to its members, we have determined that it is essential for the organization to establish a political presence at both the State and Federal levels. Naturally, this is not something that can be accomplished overnight and a well-defined agenda must be developed with the help of the membership. As a first step, MOTN has recently conducted a member requirements survey, which is currently being tabulated and analyzed by our newly-appointed Legislative Committee. These results will be used as the basis for MOTN's Political Agenda going forward.

III. MOTN CHALLENGE #2 – MAINTAINING ORGANIZATIONAL FOCUS DURING GROWTH & DIVERSIFICATION

Just as with any growing business or enterprise, MOTN has had to deal with a significant number of strategically important issues in the midst of launching a new growth and diversification strategy. One of the most difficult challenges being faced during this period has been the ability of MOTN's leadership to successfully maintain an organizational focus, while being drawn in several directions simultaneously.

In order to expand the organizations' horizons, the MOTN leadership now ventures outside of the comfortable and traditional marine & oceanographic "neighborhood" and has begun to network into other non-traditional avenues, such as the Rhode Island Manufacturing Extension Services (RIMES), the Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MassMEP), the South Coast Development Partnership (SCDP), the Cape Cod Technology Council (CCTC), the Slater Center for Marine & Environmental Technologies, the Rhode Island Maritime Trades Association (RIMTA), CONNSTEP (an agency of the Connecticut Department of Economic & Community Development), the Ocean Technology Foundation (OTF) and a host of other organizations that, while they serve as a new and valuable informational (and sometimes monetary) resource, also have their own agendas and tend to demand a good deal of reciprocal involvement on the part of MOTN. This situation creates a complex maze of relationships that must be managed intelligently or could quickly get out of control.

One way that MOTN has succeeded in accomplishing this is through frequent (monthly) project reviews and re-assessments by the Board of Directors, as well as the formation of a number of "steering committees", whose responsibility it is to shepherd each of MOTN's strategically important initiatives from inception to completion.

Recently, MOTN teamed with the RIMES to co-sponsor two events that were widely attended by the MOTN membership, as well as companies outside of the marine and oceanographic sector. These events, a Port & Harbor Security Workshop and an SBIR/STTR Workshop and Matchmaker Conference, were extremely successful in both educating the MOTN participants about new economic opportunities, as well as allowing them to present their products and technologies to a new and varied audience. The benefit to RIMES was that it provided two new and unique venues for investing State of Rhode Island Technical Assistance Training Funds outside of their traditional conduits. Both events resulted in significant "win-win" situations for both the MOTN and the RIMES organizations.

IV. MOTN CHALLENGE #3 – GENERATING MEMBER ENTHUSIASM & SUPPORT

Despite the number of "common interest" programs and initiatives that MOTN has instituted to assist its members, one of the biggest challenges facing the leadership continues to be finding ways to energize the membership into becoming more directly involved in the process and assisting with the implementation of the new growth strategy.

In the past, MOTN was seen, by its membership, as primarily an "event-based" organization. That is, MOTN's real value was in organizing two or three high-profile marketing events per year, each geared toward spotlighting MOTN member products, services or capabilities to a large number of prospective customers. In some instances, MOTN was able to provide trade show or print ad discounts to the participating members. MOTN participation at shows, such as OCEANS and Oceanology, as well as the bi-annual Ocean Technology Workshop (OTW) were the true staples of the MOTN agenda.

Today, MOTN is taking steps to become a more relevant organization, by becoming an integral part of the day-to-day business and operational activities of its members. Although it has taken some time through a number of pro-active initiatives mentioned above, MOTN is beginning to diversify into areas that will generate member enthusiasm and participation because of the tangible benefits that can be realized by the member organization. However, MOTN must be judicious in its selection of sponsored projects and services, since it would be easy to pursue too many initiatives simultaneously, while getting little accomplished.

V. MOTN CHALLENGE #4 – FINDING FINANCIAL SOLUTIONS

The viability of MOTN resides mainly with the organization's ability to generate enough revenue to sustain MOTN activities and provide for salaries of the employees. MOTN has concentrated on four primary, revenue generation areas: (1) increased membership, (2) state and federal grants, (3) events and conferences and (4) private donations and endowments.

Through the efforts of the Board and the Executive Director, membership has continued to grow and the emphasis on regional expansion is paying off. Increased membership is expected as MOTN expands its services into Connecticut and New Hampshire. Both states have a number of ocean technology companies and academic institutions that can benefit from the uniqueness of MOTN.

At its inception MOTN benefited from the infusion of state economic development grant funding. As time passed, funding from the state of Massachusetts decreased and MOTN became more dependent on membership fees for its financial wherewithal. However, other state and federal funding is available to non-profit organizations that provide value-added services to their memberships for economic development-related activities such as employee training, business enhancement and export expansion.

Events and conferences, such as the Ocean Technology Workshops, sponsored by MOTN serve a dual purpose. They provide membership with a venue to present their products and services to potential customers and to raise money to help sustain the organization as a whole. Since planning and implantation consume considerable amounts of time and energy, these activities have to be delicately balanced with other key organizational activities.

Finally, private donations and endowments have contributed remarkably to the growth of many non-profit organizations especially those dedicated to furthering particular scientific, environmental or charitable agendas. With MOTN's main focus being the development of a particular business segment within the economy, raising monies from private donations and endowments may be difficult. However, there may be private funding sources in the New England region that would consider making an investment in a professional organization that is attempting to enhance the economic well-being of its constituents and their employees.

VI. MOTN CHALLENGE #5 - CREATING THE ROAD MAP FOR FUTURE GROWTH

The challenge of establishing and maintaining a professional organization is to grow to a size that provides enough revenue to operate effectively while addressing the needs of its constituency. A five-year planning document is currently being created to provide a MOTN roadmap to the future. The Five-Year Plan is a spin-off of the "Common Interest" agenda mentioned above. Like any planning document it will not be cast in concrete but will incorporate built-in contingencies, which will allow the organization to shift focus as the economic and political landscape changes. Collectively, the MOTN Board of Directors firmly believes in the age-old axiom that "goal setters are goal achievers". If you do not plan or set realistic goals, the organization will drift aimlessly like a ship without a rudder.

As part of the five-year planning process, each of the MOTN Board committees is asked to provide a committee plan for the next five years with some loose guidelines to serve as bounds for the exercise. The four Board committees are: Membership, Events/Conferences, Marketing & Advertising and Finance. Naturally, the goals and objectives of the individual committee plans are highly interdependent and require that each of the authors stay abreast of changes to the master plan. Once finalized the plan will be reviewed and approved by the entire Board of Directors. Finally, as the projects and initiatives are implemented, the progress will be monitored and assessed. The Planning Committee will review the plan on semi-annual basis and provide the results to the full Board for further consideration and possible revisions and updates.

VII. SUMMARY

The inception and growth of the Marine and Oceanographic Technology Network has been diverse and exciting. The goals and objectives of the organization have been adapted to meet the changing political and economic climate and to meet the needs and desires of the membership. The current Board of Directors has met the challenge and has set in motion a thoughtful and structured process to insure the growth and success of the network as it moves into the twenty-first century.

References

[1]U.S. Internal Revenue Service Website: http://www.irs.gov/charities/article/

[2] Investment Bankers Association Website: http://www.investorwords.com/cgi-bin/getword.cgi?5015