

MARKETING THE SHE PROFESSION

By LON H. FERGUSON

The SHE profession needs a wake-up call, the author asserts. Its status—and possibly its very survival—rests on a commitment to better promotion and marketing. What can be done to better educate prospective students about an SHE career? What role do current practitioners play in this process?

Occupational safety and health is a dynamic field. So why is there a need to market this profession? After all, most practitioners are so busy snuffing out daily fires that “marketing the profession” is rarely deemed a high priority. These three examples illustrate why this is a growing concern.

1) Since its beginnings, the SHE profession has struggled to be recognized—a battle that continues today. Several factors have contributed to this “lack of recognition”—and marketing and promotion of the profession (by both professional organizations and SHE professionals) are among them. *(Author’s note: I am as guilty as most, because after 20 years in the profession, I am still explaining to family and friends what it is that I do.)*

The “Other Voices” feature section of Professional Safety serves as a forum for authors with distinct viewpoints. Opinions expressed are strictly those of the author(s). Although Professional Safety does not necessarily endorse these opinions, we hope they will stimulate healthy discussions on matters of vital concern to the safety and health profession.

2) Over the past decade, growth in the SHE profession has been stagnant—a fact illustrated by the slow (or negative) growth rate in the membership of various SHE-related organizations. Universities that offer safety-related degree programs have experienced similar downward trends in enrollment. SHE professionals must examine these numbers and ask why the profession is not growing.

3) At a recent college fair, 150 high school students were asked whether they knew anything about the safety profession. Only one student answered affirmatively and his perception related to driver safety. Had these students been asked what it means to be a nurse, engineer or an accountant, their responses would likely have been much different. [Perhaps this explains why out of 1,000 inquiries for information about programs at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) only 15 were about the safety sciences program.]

How can a profession grow when students making career choices and entering universities do not even know what that profession is or entails? This fact is disturbing, especially when one considers that ASSE and National Safety Council (NSC) have been in existence for some

90 years. In the author’s opinion, this profession’s status—and possibly its very survival—rests on a commitment to better marketing.

IS THIS A NEW CONCEPT FOR SHE PROFESSIONALS?

Although “marketing” may not be a common topic of discussion within this profession, the concept is by no means new. While researching this article, I reviewed a letter written in July 1984 by Robert McClay, then chair of the IUP Safety Sciences Dept., to Tom Reilly, ASSE president at that time. He wrote:

There is, however, a serious problem that I need to share with you because it is substantially beyond the power of educators to control. The problem is one of declining enrollments in undergraduate, safety-related academic programs across the country. If we are trusting the future of the profession to college and university prepared individuals, then it is obvious that there has to be a steady supply of eager and well informed high school graduates interested in enrolling in university safety-related degree programs.

McClay attributes this situation to a general lack of awareness of safety as a profession and concludes that this problem has existed for a long time.

Kohn, et al shared a similar view on

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the overall general lack of awareness of the SHE profession (24+). They suggest a need for all SHE professionals to “talk up the field” in order to increase the numbers and mix in the profession.

WHY “MARKET” THE PROFESSION?

What will happen if the profession is not promoted more effectively? Think back to the three illustrations offered earlier. On the education front, for example, one possible result would be a continuing decline in enrollment in safety-related degree programs across the country. If this trend were to continue, it would cause a major shortage of qualified professionals.

A recent study commissioned by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and conducted by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) warned of such a shortage. The report, “Safe Work in the 21st Century,” concluded that the future need for SHE professionals will exceed current supply (IOM).

The entire profession would benefit from an increase in the number of qualified professionals entering the field. While true that not everyone involved in this profession has gone to college, one way to define a professional is “someone with a specific body of knowledge”; for most professions, this knowledge is developed by obtaining a college degree.

Obviously, colleges and universities play a key role in marketing the profession—not only in meeting student needs, but also those of employers who hire graduates to perform SHE services. However, this task does not rest solely with educational institutions—it is a shared responsibility of all SHE professionals. The following discussion outlines some marketing basics that could, in the author’s opinion, be used by all stakeholders to better market the profession.

MARKETING BASICS

According to the American Marketing Assn., marketing is the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives (Burnett, et al). As this definition illustrates, promotion is a key component of marketing.

Promotion can be viewed as that part of marketing which communicates the message to target audiences (Burnett, et al). This communication requires a thor-

ough knowledge of all components of marketing, including those facets that must be communicated to consumers; therefore, an important element of promotion is understanding customer needs.

Just who are the customers of SHE professionals? The answer would be easy if it were just one, but SHE professionals actually have many customers, including upper management, hourly employees, the public, government agencies and even those would-be recruits—high school students.

Now, one must ask, “What does each customer expect?” Although answering this question falls outside the scope of this article, if the profession cannot provide a cogent answer, it would lead to another question: “Are SHE professionals meeting customer needs?”

In an academic setting, feedback on this question is usually obtained through 1) advisory committees and 2) alumni and employer surveys. Results can be used to guide curriculum changes (where needed) to better meet customer needs.

As noted, promotion can be defined as persuasive communication designed to send marketing-related messages to a target audience. Common promotional activities include advertising, personal selling, public relations and direct marketing.

Personal Selling

Personal selling involves face-to-face contact between marketer and prospective customer (Burnett, et al). SHE professionals must be salespeople in order to convince management to accept safety ideas and recommendations. Practitioners also have a role in selling this profession to those outside their own employer organizations. When was the last time you talked to a high school student about this profession?

Advertising & Promotion

Try to remember the last time you saw a TV commercial about the SHE profession? The only one I recall was developed by Liberty Mutual Insurance to promote its loss prevention group. This does not mean that the profession is never promoted. For example, the ASSE Foundation and Board of Certified Safety Professionals jointly published *Career Guide to the Safety Profession*, which ably explains the profession and describes the various career paths it offers.

Creating an identity for a product/ser-

vice—using a distinctive name or symbol—is an essential part of promotion. Now consider the many (and varied) titles used to identify SHE professionals: safety manager, safety technician, safety engineer, ESH manager, SHE manager, loss control manager, loss control consultant and loss prevention manager. Without a distinct identity, it is no wonder that gaining recognition continues to be a challenge.

Public Relations

Public relations can be defined as a set of activities intended to enhance the image of a product/service in order to create interest or goodwill (Burnett, et al). Typical activities include news conferences, company-sponsored events, open houses, plant tours, publicity stories and special events. Such activities are designed to influence people’s attitudes about a product/service. Unfortunately, most news conferences and publicity related to safety seem to involve negative events (such as workplace accidents and fatalities).

“Life cycle” is another important marketing concept to consider. Any product/service goes through a life cycle, which includes its introduction, growth, maturity and decline (Burnett, et al). One could argue that safety and health services were introduced in the U.S. in the early 1900s with creation of a workers’ compensation system and the birth of professional organizations such as ASSE and NSC. The SHE profession experienced tremendous growth in the 1970s following enactment of the OSH Act and other federal SHE-related standards.

This raises the question, “Is the SHE profession now in the maturity phase or has it already started to decline?” During the decline phase of the life cycle, a product/service faces a period of obsolescence where it no longer meets customer needs. The good news is that a life cycle need not end during this phase; instead, a product/service can be reformulated to meet current needs, thus starting the life cycle over. (Perhaps this marketing principle explains the convergence of the safety, health and environmental fields to a new role as SHE manager.)

HOW CAN THE PROFESSION BE MARKETED?

First, safety practitioners must recognize the need to establish a specific identity—in other words, a specific name—for the profession. In the author’s opinion, all

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SHE professional organizations must collaborate in this process. To achieve this, they must get past “political differences” that often prevent such partnerships.

Second, the profession must clearly identify its customers, both internally and externally. The next step is to identify customer needs and determine whether the profession is meeting those needs. If not, it is time to reevaluate the services provided and make appropriate changes.

Third, in order to grow, the profession must be promoted to high school students who are in the process of making career choices. This requires an understanding of this audience. Here are some key facts to keep in mind.

- They were born around 1983; they were eight years old when the Soviet Union broke apart, so they do not remember the Cold War.

- They are too young to remember the Challenger explosion, and Three Mile Island means nothing to them.

- The expression “you sound like a broken record” has little meaning because most have never owned a record player.

- In their lifetimes, stamps have always cost at least 30 cents.

- On average, they watch 25 hours of TV a week; few have seen a black-and-white TV set or one with only 13 channels; and most cannot imagine not having a remote control.

- They have grown up using a personal computer and surfing the Internet.

These facts serve to remind readers just who it is that must be sold on the SHE profession. Two common questions prospective students ask when considering a career are “How much will I make?” and “Will I get a job?” With the rising cost of education, these are both legitimate questions. Graduates of IUP’s Safety Sciences program have an average starting salary of \$32,500 (among the highest at the university) and current placement rates are 90 percent or better. Other academic safety programs likely have similar results. Thus, it may be beneficial to use salaries and placement rates when marketing this profession to prospective students.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

Following are a few simple suggestions that practitioners can use to market the safety profession.

1) Many SHE practitioners are members of professional organizations. In the author’s opinion, it is time to encourage

these organizations to develop a marketing plan that includes the development of promotional materials which target high school students. Some organizations have developed brochures and books on the profession, but these have limited value if they are not part of a comprehensive marketing plan and are not distributed in some systematic way to reach prospective students.

For example, during the past year, IUP faculty sent 150 copies of *Career Guide to the Safety Profession* to local high school students and guidance counselors. Other promotional approaches, such as videos and radio/TV commercials, have not been widely used, however. Although these activities are expensive, they can reach a broad audience.

The Internet is another way to reach the target audience. Take a few moments to visit the websites of various safety-related professional organizations. Try to think like a 17- or 18-year-old and ask these questions:

- Is the site easy to find and use?
- Does it have a section specifically devoted to high school students?
- Is the site interesting and interactive?
- Does it provide information that explains what an SHE professional is?
- Does it provide references for additional information, such as a listing of colleges and universities that offer safety-related degrees?

2) Marketing within employer organizations to promote the profession. SHE professionals must sell not only themselves but the profession as well. Do most human resources managers or plant managers know what ASSE or CSP stand for?

In addition, parents of prospective students often focus on the negative aspects of safety—such as accidents, workers’ compensation and OSHA enforcement—rather than its positive attributes. Are prospective students likely to choose a field where the focus is often negative? This image can be improved by focusing on positive aspects within employer organizations. Promotional materials discussed earlier should be displayed so that all employees can review and share with interested parties (e.g., sons and daughters).

3) Participate in high school career days. Many schools have career days; some even allow students to take the day off to shadow a professional in order to observe, first hand, that individual at work. In the author’s opinion, all ASSE

chapters should visit a select number of high schools within their region each year to promote the safety profession—not only to students but also to guidance counselors. Students interested in exploring the career further could then be invited to attend a chapter meeting and develop a mentoring relationship with an SHE professional.

CONCLUSION

The suggestions presented here are not new ideas; however, little has been done to put them into action over the past 20 years. This is a wake-up call to all SHE professionals. Our future could very well rest on our ability to market and promote the SHE profession. ■

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