



# WORKING TOGETHER

## Getting Involved in Your Affiliate

by Susan Buser

If you are not currently involved in a local AOBA affiliate, you are missing out on a tremendous opportunity to learn volumes about alpaca care, to connect with other outstanding people in your area, and to improve the profitability of your farm. I think that involvement in an affiliate is essential to succeeding in the alpaca industry. Let's talk about why that is the case.

Many of us (probably the majority) come into this industry with little or no prior experience raising livestock. We desperately need training in the care of these unique animals, which our affiliate can provide for us locally, and at a reasonable cost. We also need the opportunity to meet other farmers in our area, the opportunity to interact with them regularly, to ask questions, to get different opinions, and to grow in our knowledge. Even after we have been in the business for several years, we still have so much to learn about – alpaca health care, fiber, marketing, nutrition, pastures; and our affiliate and its members can provide us with this ongoing education. Plus we need to have friends in the business we can call in an emergency, when we need good advice or even hands-on help. Trying to manage entirely on our own is an unnecessarily tough way to go. Pooling our knowledge and resources allows each of us to succeed much more quickly than we could on our own.

The alpaca industry is very different from many other industries. Although there are those few cut-throat competitors out there to whom the bottom line is everything, and nothing and no one else matters, that is the exception rather than the rule in our industry. The vast majority of alpaca owners are friendly, open to sharing information and ideas, and enjoy working with other farmers to meet group goals or even to help other individual farmers succeed. This positive and generous attitude of our industry is something we should be very proud of. I think it is one of the reasons the alpaca industry is succeeding where others have failed. We are working together and we are all benefiting from the effort.

So what exactly is an affiliate? An AOBA affiliate is a non-

profit corporation with a focus on alpacas, with certain requirements for meetings, educational events, membership, etc. which you can read on the AlpacaOwners website under the Affiliate Grant Committee information.

One of the most basic things you need to understand about your affiliate is that it is a non-profit corporation, with legal obligations to the state in which it is incorporated. The bylaws of the organization are not suggestions for the running of the organization, they are legal requirements for the running of the organization and the officers of your organization are obligated to uphold them. Many people seem to not understand this, and want to act fast and loose with the rules of the organization and try to run the organization as if it were their own private business. Read and understand the bylaws of your organization so that you can be an informed and competent member. A lot of your questions and concerns will be answered by knowing the rules and procedures contained in your bylaws. Make sure that you as a member and potential officer are supportive of those in leadership positions who take their obligations to enforce the bylaws seriously and are protecting your organization from legal trouble by running your affiliate in a correct and orderly manner. This is vital.

Recognize that your affiliate is YOU. Most affiliates are incorporated as a 501(C)5 non-profit, which is a “mutual benefit” organization, and that pretty much says it all. I think many people who join an affiliate see it as if it were a business (with employees) that they pay a fee to each year that in turn should provide them with a long list of services. I think we have all been at that place where we did not understand the concept of a mutual benefit non-profit. Mutual benefit means: we all contribute, and we all benefit. We have to realize that nobody is on the payroll of this organization. Absolutely nothing gets done without our volunteered time. We cannot treat our officers as employees and make endless demands on them. They are simply members who have agreed to take on a heavier work load and specific responsibilities for a limited period of time, and then to turn

the leadership back over to other members.

While we should certainly expect our officers to fulfill the obligations of their office, we are way out of line to complain about wanting more member services, more educational events, etc. if we are not contributing a substantial amount of time to the organization ourselves. WE are the ones who can get these things done. Once again, no one is on the payroll to carry out your wishes. Every member and officer who is working in the organization is contributing their free time to help you.

Ideally, every member should make an equal contribution, and we all should benefit. But you can look around your affiliate and see that there are some people contributing huge amounts of time (some as much as 20-30 hours a week) and on the other end of the scale, some who are doing nothing at all. Don't be that person who is letting the other members carry the entire load. Make a reasonable and regular contribution of time to your organization. You will find in the long run that you have greatly benefited yourself while helping others.

We each have different skills and schedules that affect the type and timing of our potential contributions. But each of us has some time we can contribute on a fairly regular basis and we certainly all have skills that can be beneficial to the organization. You may not be a public speaker, so leading a seminar at a meeting may not be your strong point, but you might be a great behind-the-scenes organizer who could put the event together. Or you might be great at building things and could put together the obstacle course for your show, make signs for events, etc. You might be able to work on a committee or assist an officer with some of their work. Sometimes someone who will handle a mailing, or make some phone calls, or help organize some paperwork can be the biggest help in the world to an overworked officer. Find your niche in the organization and start helping out and you will begin to reap the benefits of the organization.

In addition, consider taking on a position of leadership in your organization. If you don't feel confident that you are ready for leadership, start with something like organizing a mailing or assisting another leader and observing them. Then maybe move up to offering to organize a meeting or helping to head a committee. As you learn the procedures of the organization and learn how to lead, people will begin to know you and will recognize if you are a hard worker and are committed to helping the organization. Ideally we should be constantly training new leaders within the organization, so that they can move up through the ranks, and allow the

people who have been carrying the heaviest load to be able to step down and turn the leadership over to new people. This way we avoid overworking anyone plus we get the advantage of fresh ideas and new energy constantly flowing into the organization.

I have found that most of the complainers in an organization are people who are not involved in the work of the organization. Getting involved is the best possible cure for someone who has a tendency to complain. Someone who is contributing a substantial amount of their own time has something invested in the success of the organization and so has no desire to tear down the work of the organization or damage the reputation of the other hard-working people around them. You can pretty much count on the fact that if someone in a position of leadership is constantly complaining and running down other people, they are not doing any work. Being involved gives you a whole new perspective.

What if you say, "I've tried to volunteer with my affiliate, and didn't get anywhere". I would suggest approaching a different person. Occasionally you may have an officer who doesn't know how to delegate, but I think you will find most officers will be thrilled to have you volunteer to help and will be glad to help you find something you can do for the organization. If you find after several honest attempts to volunteer that your organization is "clique-ish" and won't let new people participate, I would suggest that you find some new blood to nominate in the next election cycle and help see that some new people get into positions of leadership. After all, the affiliate belongs to the entire membership, not just to a few "old-timers".

If you are part of an affiliate that has just become too monolithic to meet the needs of its members, you always have the option of starting a new affiliate and setting it up in such a way as to meet the needs of the farmers in your area. Just recognize that starting a new affiliate is going to take a huge input of time and labor. If you are committed to taking this on, you certainly can, but it may be easier to stay where you are and help fix the problems, offer to develop new educational programs, help develop additional services for members, etc. Evaluate the situation carefully before you make a decision.

Anytime you see a problem in your affiliate, the best course of action is to become part of the solution in whatever way you can. Realize first of all that there may be more to the picture than what you can see, so it is best to go and talk with someone in leadership privately to see if you can gather some accurate information about the situation before

criticizing things publicly. You may find that procedures are already in place that will in time solve the problem, or, you may find that the problem can easily be solved by you volunteering to help. Many times officers are pulled in a thousand different directions--- from the many aspects of running the organization to putting out fires created by trouble-making members – and just don't have the time to deal with everything. The issue that is most important to you may already be on their "long list" of things to do, but it is just not humanly possible for them to get to everything. If you approach them with an offer of help rather than more criticism (which they are constantly dealing with) they will likely be relieved and grateful for your help.

Another good way to positively affect your affiliate is to lead by example. If you think other people need to be more calm and rational about issues, harder-working, more concerned about the needs of others, need to act as peace-makers rather than trouble-makers in the organization... then you conduct yourself in that manner. You can't ask others to do what you are not willing to do yourself.

Of course some people will react badly to this – the more calm, rational, kind and long-suffering you are with them, strangely enough, the more difficult they will be with you. But these people are the exception; most people in your affiliate will be appreciative of your efforts to be easy to work with and will themselves be encouraged to work with others in a more positive manner. People in your affiliate who are consistent trouble-makers, see conspiracies in every innocent action, are constantly damaging other people's reputations and relationships, and people who are not interested in working to help the other members of the affiliate need to be marginalized. Officers have a responsibility to not let a few destructive people ruin the organization for everyone; members should also be protective of their organization. The peaceful hard-working members of the organization deserve to have an organization they can enjoy that is not constantly disrupted by a few people whose private agendas are contrary to the mission of the organization.

Now recognize that we are talking about specific harmful activities by certain members; what we are not talking about is personality differences. We as alpaca owners come from a wide variety of walks of life and differ greatly from one another in experiences and opinions. Our diversity provides us a deeper pool of knowledge to draw from and provides a healthy mix of ideas, but this diversity of personalities and ideas is going to make for some strong give and take when we are trying to hash out the best way to do any number of

things. Don't take business personally; work with others of diverse viewpoints to achieve the best solution for the organization.

Understand the difference between an affiliate member who supports his or her ideas strongly and passionately (but with rational support and a sincere desire to improve the organization), and someone who opposes and criticizes almost everything just for the sake of opposition. Understand the difference between someone pushing strongly for a change that they think is going to make the organization better and someone going around causing fights among members and running down the leadership behind their back. Good, hearty discussions can be healthy for an organization, if people know how to walk away from a discussion accepting the group consensus. We all need to have the maturity to throw our best idea into the mix, support it with facts, but don't be defensive about it (as if it were your only child!). We need to be willing to acknowledge if a better-supported idea comes into the discussion and be willing to support that better idea.

We should try to work with everyone in a calm, professional and efficient manner. Be careful not to waste anyone's time by making tasks harder than they need to be. If there is a simple solution that will take an hour for someone to execute and a ridiculously circuitous solution that will take someone 20 hours to execute, please, please don't vote for the 20 hour proposal! Take every opportunity to thank people publicly and privately for their contributions to the organization; a little recognition goes a long way.

Always, always, try to remember what we are trying to do here and the reason for your affiliate. We are here to help all of the alpaca farmers in our area get the education they need to be able to care for these wonderful animals. We are here to share information and help each other to prosper. And we are here to work in a positive way that will continually improve the national industry so that all of us benefit. It's not about personality, ego, or being in an "important" position. All members should be contributing, and all members should be benefiting.

Take a step back every now and then, take a deep breath, and regain your focus and you will help others to remain focused as well. Your affiliate is your organization and it will not go anywhere without you.

Let's get involved and work together on the local, regional and national levels. While helping others to succeed, we will reap increasing benefits for our own farms.