



Ken Newton,
CEO. VASA

Knock, knock. Who's there?

If Labor, the political party which currently runs Oz, can lose more than 10,000 members between 2002 and 2010, what hope is there for a relatively tiny volunteer organisation representing aftermarket technicians working in air conditioning and electrics?

The dear old Labor party put itself under its own microscope at its national convention recently, when it was revealed that paid up members were leaving the party like rats leaving a sinking ship, with numbers nationally dropping from just under 50,000 to just under 40,000 in those few years. Add to that the fact that most of those who stay on do so out of loyalty and are the older members of society, and you have a recipe which is being copied in pretty well every club, association and not-for-profit society that you could name.

VASA is no different, although the numbers don't look quite as bad. Since it was born in 1993, VASA has always maintained around a 300 workshop membership.

In the early days, when VASA only represented the air conditioning installers and repairers, this number probably represented 80 percent of the workshops in Australia which specialized in climate control systems, and actually knew how to install, repair and maintain them. These days, since VASA merged with the auto electricians, the numbers can be watered down considerably.

VASA still has just under 300 members and the vast majority of those are people with grey hair or no hair at all, and a heightened sense of loyalty, a quality hard to find in the younger generation. Now 300 members might not seem a lot to you, but remember that Australia's entire population is roughly the same as America's top nine cities. And I remind you that America has 275 cities with a

population in excess of 100,000, so you can begin to understand the scale of what I'm on about.

This trend away from structured social interaction is universal. You can blame any number of things. The Internet cops most of the blame, along with apathy, selfishness and a hedonistic streak in society generally. The local scout troop has lost its numbers, if indeed any still exist, and so too has the school parents and citizens associations, trade unions and every other committee and association you like to name.

Against this rather dismal background, VASA is holding its own. It might be small, but it has incredible power. VASA is your modern David of the biblical fable. The current Directors, led by Adelaide workshop owner Ian Stangroome, believe that if VASA did not exist, the industry would lose any clout it might have in the setting of regulations, training standards and workshop professionalism.

So Ian came up with a growth strategy, which the Directors have embraced with enthusiasm. The strategy is underpinned with the simple theory that if they can't see you, you don't exist. You see, VASA has no physical presence. Its affairs are run totally by volunteers. Its CEO (me) is a part time worker, the secretariat in Sydney is a filing cabinet in the aftermarket workshop run by treasurer Jeff Smit.

Board meetings are held at the stately home of the Royal Automobile Club of Australia in Sydney. The annual general meeting is held wherever the annual training convention happens to be at the time. Being faceless for most of the year is not healthy.

The Board's bold plan is to put its directors on the road, so to speak. As part of their general running around for their own business, they have volunteered to make personal calls on existing members

at the rate of two a month for each director, and on non-member workshops at the rate of one a month. They have been armed with a kit of VASA information and deeds and a sheet simply called "What's in it for me."

Working on the principle that potential members would rather hear why VASA is worth joining from the rank and file members than from the directors, we asked some old timers why they stayed connected.

Their responses just wrench your heart out, don't they?

"What a great lifeline VASA is when you are deep in the mire and no one seems to want to help or you require someone to talk tech to, or run an issue by someone who understands. The VASA team are "it" – a fantastic organisation and great networkers. We have been financial members for 15 years." – Steve McCarthy in New Zealand.

"You just cannot put a monetary value on meeting other professionals and listening to their views. Learning that there is more to the industry than your own little world and finding where you fit in can be very rewarding."

– Peter Stubbley, now a technical trade teacher.

"Networking has provided us with great contacts, many of whom have also become good friends. VASA members know how to enjoy themselves, too."

– Paul and Carolyn Henderson in New South Wales.

"The benefits of being a member of VASA are knowing you are part of a national organisation with knowledge and values that are for the good of the whole air conditioning industry." – Keith Davis in Western Australia.

Where do I join? ❄