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**T**he very first seminar ever hosted by the Association of Progressive Rental Organizations was held back in 1981. The seminar was hosted by Chuck Sims, then owner of Remco, who led a two-day event entitled, "Planning, the Process of Control." Sims considered it to be of overriding importance to the success of rental companies that rental dealers learn how to do strategic planning. Actually, he conducted that same seminar three times in quick succession, in Carmel, CA, Dallas and Atlanta in an effort to get this important message out to as many dealers as possible in those early days. The message of the importance of strategic planning was as vital then as it is today.

**THE PROCESS AND RESULTS OF APRO'S STRATEGIC PLANNING**

**A PRO'S  
FUTURE**

BY ED WINN III

There was certain symmetry then, in the affairs of the Association when the APRO board of directors met in October in Aspen, CO—at each board member's own expense—for a three-day strategic planning session with Sims acting as the facilitator. Sims graciously donated his time to the effort because of the importance of the work.

The purpose of the meeting was nothing less audacious than to plot the future of the Association over the next three to five years. Association leaders have long recognized the need to do strategic planning for the Association and have held sessions in 1989, 1993, 1998 and, now, most recently, this fall. The results of the previous planning meetings were not widely publicized and should have been. This board wants the membership to know that the board has been planning and what the results of those plans are.

A number of the current board members had never been through a formal strategic planning session with an outside facilitator, either with APRO or in their own companies, and so the process was new for them. The board spent roughly 20 hours together over two and a half days, coming up with the new strategic plan for APRO—and this does not include the time since spent in committees drafting action plans. Importantly, the board was not planning for the industry or for some idealized rental company. Board members made a plan for the trade association and reached important conclusions about the continued vitality and future growth of this 22-year-old organization.

On the last day of planning, the APRO staff attended during various planning discussions, since the staff will be primarily responsible for executing many aspects of the plan. It is important that staff members be personally invested in the plan details instead of having the plan handed down to them from on high.

While previous plans were not kept secret, they were not communicated effectively to the APRO general membership. Since it is the membership to whom the Association is ultimately beholden, this group of planners decided to do a better job of getting the membership involved with the plan than has been the case previously.

#### ACCESSING THE PRESENT >

The goal of strategic planning is to shape the future of an organization through an orderly process. Overall, the process assesses where the organization is today, in terms of its mission, where it wants to go in the next few years and how it plans to get there. At the meeting, Sims stressed that effective strategic planning requires more than one meeting during which the plan is created. It requires follow-up assessments and refinements at least quarterly and then every year the planning begins anew, pushing the plan out another year.

To determine where APRO is today, the board examined the world in which it exists from economic, political, tech-

nological and social points of view. The dealers examined the competition and the products that the Association offers its members as well as the markets that it is in. Board members assessed the key performance factors for success as a trade association and the strengths and weaknesses of APRO as it exists today. As part of the analysis of where the Association is today, the board reviewed the strategic plan developed in 1998 and measured how well that plan had been implemented over the past five years.

As part of the internal analysis of the Association, the board examined the organizational structure of APRO, the management style within the Association and the relationship between the board of directors and management and staff. An important aspect of the internal analysis was to identify the major problems facing the Association. Once those major problems had been identified and refined, the board identified the major opportunities that exist for the Association.

#### PLOTTING THE FUTURE >

Discussions were candid and spirited thanks in no small part to the open atmosphere that Sims created as facilitator. The APRO board is diverse and a lot of points of view were expressed in the room. It is the task of the planning facilitator to create an environment where participants are free to speak their minds. Initial thoughts on a topic are uncensored and all comments are welcomed. As the discussion progresses, the ideas are distilled by the group as the facilitator listens for and focuses the group on areas of common assent. Sometimes there is quick agreement about what is important or which ideas are better or more reasonable. Sometimes, there is no agreement.

Once the group had thoroughly conducted an external and internal analysis of where the Association is today, it began to look at where it wants to go during the next three years. The board reviewed the current Mission Statement to see if it would still fit in three years. After some discussion, the board modified the APRO's Mission Statement, which now reads:

"APRO is committed to being *the* national rental-purchase trade association by providing valuable member benefits, maintaining a benevolent business climate, and promoting professionalism in the industry with responsibility and integrity."

When assessing where the Association is today, the group sought objective data about the Association and, secondarily, the industry. When deciding where to go with APRO, the board left the comfortable world of facts and analysis and had to start making choices among a potentially infinite selection. Deciding where to go was harder thinking than analyzing

where it is. Figuring out how to get there required harder thinking still.

#### APRO'S STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES >

The end result of strategic planning is a series of strategic objectives coupled with action plans that are to be implemented to achieve the objectives. The APRO board developed a dozen specific objectives to be achieved by the end of 2006. They are:

1. Increase the member attendance at the annual convention/meeting to 800 attendees; increase the number of vendor companies at the show to 160; increase the number of booths sold to 300 by achieving increases in member attendance to 600 in 2004, 700 in 2005 and 800 in 2006.

2. Secure the enactment of satisfactory federal legislation before the current Congress adjourns.

3. Increase the number of member companies in the Association by a total of 25 net members for each of the years, 2004, 2005 and 2006.

4. Reduce the member dropout rate other than through acquisitions or leaving the industry altogether to 9 percent in 2004, 7 percent in 2005 and 5 percent in 2006.

5. Develop a weekly Internet newsletter publication that is sent to 6,000 e-mail addresses in 2004, 12,000 e-mail addresses in 2005 and 18,000 e-mail addresses in 2006.

6. Increase the number of Association-sponsored training courses on the Internet by two in 2004, another two in 2005 and by another course in 2006 for a total of 10 courses with 4,000 student users in 2004, 8,000 student users in 2005 and 10,000 student users in 2006.

7. Produce \$50,000 in advertising revenues from the Internet publications in 2004, \$75,000 in 2005 and \$100,000 in 2006.

8. Develop and test an e-mail server service for the Association by June 2004 and introduce the service at the 2004 Convention.

9. Develop a baseline of member satisfaction in 2004 and increase the level of member satisfaction to 90 percent by 2006. For the baseline analysis, ask the current members whether they are getting their money's worth from their APRO membership.

10. Increase the number of active state as-



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sociations from the current 23 to 40 and create six to eight regions for hosting educational seminars and vendor exhibitions by the end of 2006.

11. Increase the attendance at the Mid-Year Conference by 20 per year for each of the next three years.

12. Develop the APRO brand that is featured in all member stores and is available for use in advertising by the end of 2006.

Once the strategic objectives have been developed, the next phase in strategic planning is to write action plans for each objective. Action plans have individual steps necessary to achieve the objective. Each step must have a responsible party, a start date, a completion date, a cost estimate and sufficient detail in the step so that it can be measured and checked off once it is completed.

Due to the depth of the analysis during the planning session, the board did not have time in Aspen to write action plans for each of these strategic objectives. Since the meeting in Aspen, various Association committees have met to draft action plans. As of this writing, one set of action plans remains to be written. Staff and board members have already started working on a number of action plans. Several steps have already been completed. Others are well underway.

While each aspect of the plan has a responsible party, there is a lot of work to be done. If any member readers of this article see a project of particular interest or one that could benefit from the members' talents or resources, they are invited to volunteer by calling the APRO office for more information at 800/204-2776. The APRO board and staff are looking for increased member participation in the life of the Association. This is an excellent opportunity to get involved.

Once all of the action plans have been completed, copies of the full 2003 strategic plan will be made available to APRO members upon request. ■

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