

Interview with Daniel Martinage, CAE, IDSA Executive Director

# RE-ESTABLISHING IDSA'S RELEVANCY

**W**elcome to IDSA, Daniel. IDSA leadership decided to hire a professional association manager rather than a designer, what expertise do you bring that makes you uniquely qualified?

The position announcement was posted on the American Society of Association Executive's job board indicating that a Certified Association Executive (CAE) was preferred. I've been a CAE since 1987 and virtually my entire career has been in association management. Prior to joining IDSA I was executive director of three membership organizations and associate director of another. I've also coached and consulted to dozens of associations and professional societies as the principal of Association Coach.

In addition, I spent five years on the selection committee of *The Washington Post* Award for Excellence in Nonprofit Management. This was a relatively high-profile volunteer position that gave me a unique glance into nonprofit best practices. This understanding interested the IDSA search committee, and a lot of discussion ensued about what moves an association from good to great.

**When we met several months ago, we talked about your understanding and view of design and how it comes into play in your role as IDSA's executive director. I found your ideas interesting. Can you share your thoughts with our readership?** When you are not a designer you wonder what industrial design is—the design of industrial plants? I was able to grasp what industrial design is pretty early on, and it occurred to me that there is a connection between people and design because of the extent that design impacts everything we do every day. When I first started at IDSA, I found myself looking at products differently. I now have a better awareness of what went into the design itself. Tim Brown has made a career of saying and writing about the concept of being a designer and thinking like one. In



Rob Hart Photo

Daniel Martinage (left) and Matthew Marzynski, IDSA at the IDEA 2013 ceremony in Chicago.

some respects I feel I have always thought like a designer. I appreciate the design process—for example, look at my role at IDSA. What makes products and services successful and relevant to the public is that they are innovative. As designers you follow a process: brainstorming, prototyping, developing the product, putting it out to the market, gauging the market reaction, fine-tuning it, coming out with versions of it and eventually it might morph into something else.

When I was interviewing, I thought that since this group understands the design process, they would understand that in order to achieve success IDSA would need to follow that same process, particularly around the area of innovation—for example, by getting rid of products and services that are no longer relevant and rolling out products that relate to IDSA's changing demographic. I think—with the utmost respect—that the association has been slow to adopt the design process. Right now we find ourselves left with many products that have failed to advance. The result is that our relevance to our membership is not as strong as

it may have been 10 years ago. I'm emphasizing to the staff that our responsibilities are shifting and as we move forward as a team we must adapt and innovate our offerings to our members and nonmembers alike.

**IDSA has experienced a period of nearly 10 years of shifts in staff and internal leadership that have in part led to this stagnation.** The lack of continuity certainly has had a destabilizing effect. I think it is important as the management leader to provide that continuity between the Board and the staff so programs continue to evolve and discussions don't repeat when new volunteer leadership is elected. Just as it is vital to build a highly functioning staff team, it is important to develop those qualities in the elected leadership team so they can focus on the actions needed to be taken within the given time frame. Developing these skills is essential to accomplishing our goals.

Charles Austen Angell, IDSA, is the right leader for this time in IDSA. He has an excellent view of the Board's role and has placed his trust in me to guide the staff to carry out the Board's objectives.

**Can you discuss the report—Valuing the Art of Industrial Design: A Profile of the Sector and Its Importance to Manufacturing, Technology and Innovation—recently released by the National Endowment for the Arts and its importance to IDSA and the industrial design profession?** I can't impress upon our membership and the leadership enough how significant it was that the NEA chose our International Conference in Chicago to release this very important study (available for order or download at [www.arts.gov/research/research.php?subj=Design](http://www.arts.gov/research/research.php?subj=Design)). Press releases were coming from the White House and the Office of Technology Assessment at the same time. It is very important that we maintain relationships with these vital government agencies. The NEA gave IDSA the opportunity to react to the study before it was published. Most notably, George McCain, FIDSA raised a few minor points that the NEA incorporated into the final version.

My master's is in the areas of science, technology and public policy. Government's link to manufacturing and public policy was an area I studied. I've also contributed to testimony for congressional hearings on housing policy and helped create self regulation processes for the coaching profession. IDSA has the potential to play a much greater role in advocacy.

If you look at IDSA's Medical Section, one thing that attracted me to this association was the possibility of certification opportunities. There is a move in the government to further regulate medical device design and manufacturing because of the effect of such devices on the public. There are currently IDSA members involved in these discussions but not as a result of an IDSA-directed initiative. There is huge potential for IDSA to be more proactive so we don't

find industrial designers forced into a position they don't want to be in because we haven't taken the initiative to help write regulations governing practices that impact the society and the profession. For example, a lack of understanding as to what industrial designers actually do can create a tendency to group industrial design and design engineering.

A major reason people join associations such as IDSA is to promote their businesses and have others appreciate the value of what they do. The more that IDSA promotes the value of design and the contributions it makes to business and life, the more relevant IDSA will be to our existing membership and to those who may become members in the future.

**You mentioned that the Conference was your first opportunity to attend a major gathering of the membership. What were some of the major takeaways for you?**

Our conference in Chicago had the largest attendance—over 800 people—in recent history. You really needed to be there to feel the energy. It was a terrific experience on many fronts, but I think my biggest takeaway is that the membership and the profession overall are looking for IDSA to make profound changes to the way it serves and interacts with our membership. The social media explosion and changing demographics have dramatically changed the membership value proposition for all associations and professional societies. IDSA has been slow to react to this change, and we're seeing the results in stagnant or declining membership. I sense impatience among the membership. They're tired of hearing about how IDSA is changing; they want to see these changes. IDSA needs to do less planning and more implementation. At the same time, I was deeply moved by how warmly I was welcomed into the IDSA fold and the number of offers I received for help and advice in redesigning IDSA around our 50th anniversary in 2015.

**Looking ahead, what is your big-picture vision for IDSA?**

There are a number of aspects to my big-picture vision for IDSA, but it all boils down to relevance. I see IDSA providing relevant and critical information and experiences to our members as they progress through their careers. To do this, we're going to have to have a genuine connection to our members that gives us insight into what they need and when they need it. Just like the design process, our products and services must constantly evolve to reflect changing member needs and expectations. I want IDSA to be the go-to place for professionals and consumers of design.

This is a really important time for industrial design. The fact that the NEA released its report on the relevance of industrial design and the contributions it makes to the manufacturing sector and society overall is a significant milestone. IDSA has a tremendous opportunity to help the profession raise its profile. The Society needs to capitalize on its 50th anniversary in 2015 and to use the intervening time to redesign itself, listen to the membership and move forward.

*Note: Karen Berube, IDSA Sr. Creative Director, conducted this interview. Martinage can be reached at [danielm@idsa.org](mailto:danielm@idsa.org).*