Making great wine is hard enough, but layer on the marketing, compliance, employees, taxes, permits, distribution, vendors, receivables, etc. It’s easy to see how overwhelming it can get. There is much to take care of and often not enough time to learn what you need to know before you have to make a decision. Sometimes a little help is called for.

For many grape growers and winery owners, joining an association is the answer. In California alone there are nearly 60 winery and grape grower associations, each helping its members support and promote their region with pooled marketing efforts, training, continuing education, industry updates, and government lobbying.

Tapping the power of the collective, winery and grower associations coast to coast are proving the old adage that there is strength in numbers. Even if members are technically competitors, they share common goals and find that pursuing these goals together strengthens their industries as a whole.

“A wine marketing organization provides opportunities and exposure to its members that would be hard to achieve for an individual winery,” said Sara Cummings, marketing and communications coordinator for Sonoma County Vintners.

Ann Heidig, president of the 200-member-strong Virginia Wineries Association, emphasized that their association is helpful when it comes to promoting their industry to government representatives. “As an association member you have more clout when you approach the state legislature,” she said. “When you have one individual representing two hundred wineries instead of two hundred wineries going in individually, it saves everyone money because it’s a collective effort. It presents a more united front and helps coordinate the message.”

A united front is paramount to a successful winery or grower association, whether it is lobbying the government, creating a marketing campaign, or trying to brand its region in the minds of consumers. The most successful associations are able to agree on a common purpose, with common goals and a shared vision of what they are trying to accomplish. According to Julie Crafton, who serves as the communications coordinator for Napa Valley Vintners, this spirit of cooperation has been the hallmark of their association since its inception in 1944, and is one of the reasons the Napa Valley enjoys its reputation today as the premier wine region in the United States.

“The Napa Valley Vintners have a history of working together,” said Crafton. “We were founded by a group that realized they had to work together to improve the reach of Napa Valley wines. This is still true today with over 420 members.”

Granted, the Napa Valley may seem to be a region that has a leg up; it is already known world-wide for fine wines. But bear in mind that when Napa Valley Vintners was created, the Napa Valley was best known for prunes and walnuts, not grapes and wine. Its sterling reputation and growth was largely influenced by the cooperation of the original vintners, who banded together to help promote not only their own wines, but the region as a whole.

Winery and grape grower associations do more than promote their products to the world; they also provide members with resources and training to help them grow their individual businesses. With the variety of the sizes and needs of member wineries, it can be a challenge to creatively meet everyone’s needs. Miles Prodan, executive director of the British Columbia Wine Institute pointed out that they have members that produce 500 cases a year, and members that produce 100,000 cases a year. “Because of the great diversity,” he said, “there is no one set business model
for BC wineries.”

As Ann Heidig of the Virginia Wineries Association put it, “We all face the same problems. We have two-hundred wineries of all sizes. Trying to meet the needs of this diverse industry is difficult.”

Nevertheless, most associations work hard to provide relevant, timely information to their members, taking into account these diverse needs. No matter what size a member winery is, having a resource to which they can turn for answers, advice, or the latest news is always helpful.

Michael Kaiser of Wine America the only national wine association in the country said their members not only get great representation in governments on the state, federal, and international levels, but also have a wine-making committee that gets together to talk about technical issues, successes and problems, best practices, training ideas, and more. “They discuss wine-making styles, ideas, and promotion as well.”

Today, most winery and grape grower associations also offer regular newsletters, and group discounts on products, travel, and services such as insurance. They are there for their members to explore new promotions, leading-edge techniques, and to learn from tried and true methods that have been successful through the years. Napa Valley Vintners and others offer their members opportunities to participate in trade visits to different regions across the U.S., as well as visits to emerging markets in Asia and Europe. Programs such as these provide an opportunity to the membership as a whole to reach out to these markets without individual wineries or growers having to bear the full financial burden themselves.

Associations frequently sponsor events such as winemaker dinners, festivals, and auctions to help promote their members. Often these are to raise money for charity, but they serve the dual purpose of promoting the participating wineries and helping raise public awareness. The Napa Valley Vintners puts on the most successful charitable wine auction in the world, Auction Napa Valley. They recently passed a huge milestone, reaching 100 million dollars donated to the community over 30 years. This has not only benefited the community, but brought huge publicity to the Napa Valley wine growing region. The Virginia Wineries Association throws a large wine festival each year to promote awareness and boost sales for their members, as well as sponsoring programs such as “Virginia Wines Month” at restaurants and other venues.

“A direct benefit of joining Sonoma County Vintners,” said Sara Cummings, “is that we set the table for sales through each of our programs and events all of which engage key influencers: wine trade, media, and consumers. We co-produce Sonoma County’s largest food and wine event annually, Sonoma Wine Country Weekend, which generates hundreds of millions of media impressions for our region and our wines.”

Most associations have stepped up their marketing endeavors as of late to help counteract the change in the financial climate, putting collective effort into promoting their wines and their regions. These efforts are paying off. While much of the world struggles through the downturn in the global economy, many winery and grape grower associations are actually growing. Miles Prodan of the British Columbia Wine Institute reports 10 percent growth since April of this year and they’re not alone.

“We’ve grown during the last couple years,” said Julia Crafton of Napa Valley Vintners. “I think one of the reasons is that in our economy wineries that may not have felt the need to be a part of an organization like this are seeing that there are advantages.”

The Virginia Wineries Association has grown as well, according to Ann Heidig. “First, we have more wineries,” she said. “But our members see the financial benefits for insurance, products, regulatory issues, or trying to open a new company. We have people who know ABC law and can help you get started or answer questions.”

Winery owners and growers will get more out of their membership if they actively participate, according to Wine America’s Michael Kaiser. But either way they still reap the benefits.

“Most people in the industry realize that it’s important that they get involved in politics and policy since it directly impacts their business,” he said. “But we’ll speak for them if they don’t.”

During challenging economic times like these folks sit up and take notice and we at Sonoma County Vintners are happy to help,” said Sara Cummings.

Clearly, winery and grower associations provide a venue to work and network together, benefiting everyone. Members can share ideas, discuss problems, find solutions to those problems, see what others have done and learn from their experience, successes and mistakes. Membership in a winery association is like having a friend that watches your back, keeps you abreast of those things you need to know to stay competitive, and goes around telling everybody how great you are. In today’s economic climate, membership in your local winery or grower’s association may be the best investment you can make.

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