





IRWA: The Brand Influencer for Right of Way

An Interview with International Marketing & Membership
Committee Chair Jake Farrell, SR/WA

BY FRED EASTON, JR., PLS, SR/WA

Recently, the International Marketing & Membership Committee has made great strides in growing IRWA's brand. With exciting initiatives like the Social Media Presence Award, which will be given for the first time at conference this year and establishing the importance of the SR/WA designation, I asked Jake to sit down with me and have a conversation about how we have been and will continue to market the Association to the right of way industry.

F: We've come a long way since starting our leadership journeys with IRWA, and you're now in your second year as Chair of International Marketing & Membership Committee (IM&M). I thought it would be nice to talk a bit about the importance of marketing and IRWA.

J: Marketing is crucial for the Association. As I reflect over the Association's 90-year history, marketing was simpler in the past, right? We had direct mailing, phone calls and word of mouth. Now, it's gotten more complex. Social media has changed marketing strategies and shortened the amount of time we have to capture the attention of our audience. The increased amount of information flowing pushes us, as an Association, to hone our message and be quicker and more precise with our communication strategies. With so many avenues for communication, we need to be intentional in choosing which platforms to use, like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. to draw people to us.

F: That's a great observation. Can you tell us a little more about the Social Media Presence Award?

J: Yeah, I'm really excited. I want to do a special shout-out to Anthony Alderman, SR/WA, Vivian Nguyen and Stephanie Riley for the work and efforts put into this. We looked at recognition within the Association and asked, how can we recognize members' efforts in bringing awareness of IRWA's member value to potential members? Social media is a large player in this. We currently have a Newsletter of the Year award and a Website of the Year award. Not to take away from the importance of those two great awards, but how do we complement them and show the growth of IRWA and the industry in general? Social media has become very influential, and we have members doing really amazing things to deliver valuable information. We wanted to recognize those efforts.

The rollout of this award is going to be unique. There are multiple platforms and factors to consider with each one. How do you measure that? How do you measure engagement? So, over the next several years, IM&M will handle the award recipient selection and work out any kinks to ensure that there's a robust policy and platform for how to select the Social Media Presence Award. Our goal is to hand this off to the International Nominations & Elections Committee (INEC) in three years as an annual sustainable award.

For information on the application process, please visit the Awards Form page on the IRWA website: <https://www.irwaonline.org/about-us/awards-forms/>

F: IM&M has definitely been busy this year!

J: We're in the third year of reviving the IM&M that was active many years ago. A big lesson learned is that there's a massive amount of work needed for marketing within this Association to ensure we're continuing to provide great member value. But how do we turn this Association to face outward to the rest of the industry?

F: It's especially difficult for us, as we aren't a specific association of just one profession, we cross many professional lines.

J: Right! So in response, IM&M created three subcommittees. The first one is the Leadership Subcommittee, led by current IM&M Vice Chair D. Wade Brown, SR/WA. His committee is working on initiatives to benefit International, Regional, and Chapter leaders of IRWA. The second is the Marketing Subcommittee, led by Stephanie Riley. She was instrumental in helping us get the Social Media Presence Award across the finish line. Her committee is focusing their efforts on advertising IRWA's courses and webinars and encouraging outreach via tradeshows like CLEANPOWER 2024. The third subcommittee, the Membership Subcommittee, is led by past Region 6 Chair Matt Harris, SR/WA. He and his subcommittee are ensuring that we provide member value internally, increase member engagement and grow member renewals.



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F: Right, I get so many emails now that it's hard to keep up, and important messages get lost in my inbox, so I have to go look at Member Network to find the information I'm searching for.

J: Exactly! There isn't going to be a one-size-fits-all solution. There are members who join just to be a part of this Association, and then there are members who want to be more involved and become leaders. Those are different communication paths. As a committee, we are working on different approaches to engage members in a way that will make them want to stay and obtain professional education, which will help grow the Association's presence in the industry. We are finalizing initiatives like these and aligning with the strategic plan that the International Executive Committee (IEC) put into place this year.

F: You know, you mentioned the outreach, and years ago, you and I identified that as an Association, we were only communicating who and what we are to our own membership, rather than reaching out to those outside of IRWA. With the help of the other leaders and our staff, we have made such great strides since then.

J: I know you and I have had many late-night talks about this very topic, and it's one of my favorite discussions. As an Association, we need to get comfortable with short-term, long-term and stretch goals, right? If I could hold the crystal ball and look at where we should be in the future, it's not just about how are we making sure we present our Association in a positive way, but how are we utilizing our resources to influence the industry? We react to a lot of things that are happening in right of way, but it would be even better if IRWA was at the forefront making those decisions as they are happening. I think those are the goals that we need to strive for. There are a lot of steps to get there, but we need to be a brand influencer in this industry.

F: Yeah, I also think this applies to our SR/WA-designated individuals who are, in a way, our ambassadors for IRWA. Elevating the designation in the industry has been a focus and a passion for the International Executive Committee and the International Governing Council. When I see a professional with SR/WA behind their name, I know this is someone I can rely on, whether it's an appraiser, a negotiator, a surveyor, it doesn't matter. I know this is someone who understands the project, laws and different professions involved; I don't have to educate them on any of the individual parts of what we do. I can lean on them to help me on my projects, and we'll be able to work together fairly and ethically if they are representing an agency or landowner I'm negotiating with.

J: I'm 100% aligned with you, Fred. The SR/WA has really grown in importance to me, as it has personally elevated my career. I was pushed into obtaining the SR/WA by the mentors and champions of my professional growth —powerhouses in this industry who talked to me about the importance of growth in my education, experience and ethical practices. In my professional career now as a leader at Omaha Public Power District (OPPD), I've implemented this into the requirements of employment. Though you may not have it when you're first employed, you're allotted a time period to achieve your SR/WA designation, and when you do, there's an elevation in role and pay. Also, any company or vendor that works for OPPD must have their SR/WA or be working towards it. As somebody who spent a significant amount of time in leadership and IRWA, I feel it's crucial that we convey the importance of the SR/WA designation as leaders in our fields as well.

F: I agree completely. Many employers, including my own, acknowledge the SR/WA the same way as they do professional licensure. How do we communicate the value of an SR/WA designation to our internal and external stakeholders?

J: This has been a discussion for many years. As an Association, we can market and push the SR/WA more as the elite designation in this industry. I think we have made some strides in it. We put out a one-page marketing piece last year that was used in social media and distributed to our Regions and Chapters. I think it's upon the SR/WA-designated professionals themselves to help elevate the designation. At the end of the day, there is a certain amount of presence an SR/WA individual should have, and they need to hold themselves to a higher accountability and level of respect.

In my experience, other industry professionals speak about their designation as a highly important, sought-after certification. It's vital that we mirror that respect internally to convey the importance of obtaining your SR/WA.

F: Agreed, and while it's unfortunate that there are still some employers that don't value the designation or acknowledge it, being the loudest voice in the room talking about that isn't the best way to effect change.

J: I also believe that. We will continue to work with our agencies to have more acknowledge the designated professionals and the expertise they provide so that having an SR/WA can become an industry professional requirement for more agencies. It's a long-term initiative and part of the brand influence I mentioned before. After all, in some states, a real estate license is required to acquire private property for public use, right? So in lieu of that, one of the things IM&M has been working on, with the assistance of the IEC, is for the SR/WA to be recognized in lieu of a real estate license for those states with that requirement. These are some of the things that I think would elevate the SR/WA and bring a higher importance around what we're trying to accomplish.

F: You and IM&M are doing great work! Keep it going, and I really look forward to continued growth this year in meeting our purpose and bringing all we have to offer to the industry professionals that don't know about us yet! 🙌