

The American Association of Riding Schools®



Recent History of Marketing the U.S. Horse Industry

Prior to 1998, there were no initiatives within the U.S. horse industry designed specifically to market horseback riding nor ownership to the general public. The Horse Industry Alliance (HIA) was formed in 1998. From the get-go, HIA intended to be totally non-breed nor riding-style biased. Member representatives from many breed and riding style associations planned to develop a national advertising campaign (pre-Internet = magazine, billboard, television). I had just written the original business plan for the American Association of Riding Schools, and I joined HIA. We were asked to contribute large membership fees. I contributed \$1,500, and was not among the biggest players. HIA hired the national public relations firm that developed the highly successful "Got Milk?" campaign for the dairy industry. The sample television commercials were extremely professional and way-too-cool. But, the campaign never came to fruition, and over a period of about three years, the project imploded.

In 2002, the Western and English Trade Association (WETA) decided that, if the breed and riding style associations couldn't market themselves, WETA would do it for them. Their concern was that, if the horse industry continued to shrink, there would be no buyers to purchase their products (saddles, horse trailers, etc.). So, they re-enlisted the 'Got Milk?' people. By this time, the Internet had a greater presence; so they decided to develop a website.

WETA followed the example of the recreational vehicle industry, because that group had formulated a successful campaign called "Go RVing." That industry uses print and television ads to drive people to their "go RV-ing" website; where viewers can learn how to enjoy travel trailers and camping. Then, through paid advertising, the site directs the viewer to travel trailer manufacturers and dealerships, and commercial campgrounds.

WETA called its site, 'Horse Life.' However, *someone* had to pay to develop the site long before there would be advertising sold to support it. So, like HIA before them, they came to the manufacturers, retailers, and breed and riding style associations for money. And, when that happened, like HIA, everything came to a slow, sad stop. The effort had consumed so much time, money, energy, and emotion that WETA itself ceased to exist.

Shortly thereafter, there was a minor rumbling from the racing contingency and the U.S. Equestrian Federation (USEF) in the form of marketing seminars and workshops; but it is clear from their communications that their professional knowledge of industry marketing was light years behind the HIA and WETA initiatives. It seems that any initiative that requires the largest horse industry organizations and the biggest movers and shakers to come together with a common goal just wasn't going to happen. I call these efforts '*from-the-top-down initiatives.*' They ask industry associations to toss large amounts of money into a pool with no guarantee that the campaign will ever even happen. And, if it does, the payback is way down the road, hard to measure, and surely would be unequal

among contributors. As of this writing (early 2014), the American Horse Council (AHC), via a committee that appears to be comprised of the same associations and people who developed the HIA initiative, is attempting a new website called *Time to Ride*. Visitors can click to find locations for trail rides, lessons, fairs and rodeos, races, and horse events (shows). The site has been active for a year, and there does not appear to be a great number of listings. Possibly, the AHC has not yet moved forward with promotion of the site to horse business owners or the general public.

The bright side of these stories is that, way back when the 'Got Milk?' people were working with HIA, they conducted an unbiased national survey and learned that one-in-three U.S. households includes a person who was *born with an intrinsic interest in horses*. Now, *that* information is worth something; and the American Association of Riding Schools® knows what to do with it.

Unlike the HIA, WETA, and AHC initiatives, the AARS believes that only those of us *in the trenches* with the true beginners know what those riders want and how to serve them. And, unlike the board members of the industry's largest associations, many of whom operate their stables as tax shelters, we know how hard it is to run a small, profitable stable. We need a support system developed especially by us and for us - where we can pool our resources for advertising, find easy-to-administer teaching materials suitable for non-horse-owners, and receive much needed assistance with small business administration (bookkeeping, payroll, taxes, etc.). These three service areas are the first mission of the American Association of Riding Schools. It is our intention to build our base by assisting you, in a very specific and personal way, with the various day-to-day components of owning and operating a novice-level riding lesson business. It may be your only business or part of your larger stable operation; but it's those first time riders with which the AARS is concerned.

All of us are so busy keeping our own small businesses afloat that we have little time to look at the bigger picture. The Horse Industry Alliance and Western and English Trade Association invested huge amounts of time and money, and yet they could not succeed. One reason might be that they were trying to market an entire industry - one that has no logical infrastructure - in one fell swoop. And, in each of those efforts, each contributor had their own agenda - like politicians volleying for their own constituents. Another reason might be that at the high-end of our industry, most of the players don't really know what a first-time horse enthusiast looks like. If someone's child is enamored with horses, or an adult watches an exhilarating equine event on television, it does not mean they are ready to invest \$20,000 in a registered competition horse and trainer. At least the newest AHC website highlights activities suitable for beginners.

A third reason for failure might be that HIA and WETA were playing with other people's money. When a representative of a breed association writes a check, it's not from their personal checkbook. It's easier to not solve minor issues that are causing bottlenecks when it's not one's own money at risk. With the AARS, it's my money and it's your money. I cringe every time I spend another dime to take this project forward; and you cringe every time your liability insurance premium comes due. So, we know that when you join forces with us, you're making a small business commitment to yourself.

As you may know from reading other articles on this site, I worked for the University of Michigan-Flint, where I devoted nineteen years to customer service. I served the students trying to learn their way around campus; the faculty who just wanted their classes to run smoothly; and the administrators who wanted to advance their programs. Every day, I helped other people meet their needs - that's what good secretaries do. And, that's what the horse industry needs - one really big, really competent, administrative secretary serving as a conduit between people who want to learn about horses, novice level riding facilities, and the advanced horse industry. In one-on-one format, this is what the AARS does.

As the AARS grows, members will form committees and take leadership positions; and my own mark will disappear. But, what we are offering now are well-organized and affordable foundation products and services developed solely and specifically for novice-level riders.