Selecting an industry or business association

An industry or business association (or group) brings together like-minded business people who are connected by industry or profession. The role of associations is to protect and promote the interests of their members and provide access to industry-specific information and training. Industry associations differ from chambers of commerce and business associations, the latter two representing the interests of businesses within a particular region, even though they may belong to different industries.

You are likely to need an association when:
- starting a business; or
- seeking information on the latest trends and regulations impacting on your industry.

Because:
- you want to be part of a larger network of people and businesses;
- you can use services you would be unable to easily access on your own or for a reasonable price; or
- you want be part of a group to influence government decisions.

Top tips

Undertake research and choose your association carefully. Some industries may only have one association, while others may offer a number of organisations, each with a slightly different focus.

Be clear on what you want to gain from your membership. Most associations have fees; you don’t want to pay for services or information you won’t use.

Seek opportunities to actively participate and contribute to the association so that you and your industry will both benefit.

Ensure they provide plenty of networking opportunities to enable you to maximise your business presence.

Make sure the lines of communication within the association are open and that they actively seek information and feedback from members.
Questions to ask

What are the aims of the association?
What value will you and your business gain from joining? Ask the executive what they offer and speak with members to discover what value they receive.

Do they offer discounted services or products to members?
Some associations have significant buying power and are able to offer reduced rates for their members, for example in relation to insurance, printing or industry-specific items.

Do they provide industry-specific resources to help systemise businesses?
Many associations offer online resources to help you establish your business, for example industry-specific operational systems or templates.

Do they offer training courses, workshops or seminars?
Are industry-specific training sessions available for their members? The SBDC, through its Industry Link program, regularly delivers tailored workshops to industry groups.

Do they have up-to-date industry research?
Industry associations sometimes conduct market research with the results usually available for members to access without charge.

How often do they meet and are members encouraged to attend?
Associations are structured around a committee that meets regularly to ensure they are operating smoothly and legally. As a member you should have the right to attend these meetings and to join the committee.

Are members allowed to promote their products and services to other members?
Member-based newsletters can provide you with opportunities to promote your products or service. Many associations also have websites and other promotional tools that you may be able to use to advertise your business.

Do they offer any accreditation programs?
Gaining accreditation for recognised industry standards is a great way to ensure long-term sustainability of your business and to highlight your credibility and commitment to customers.