

in the final analysis

“The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

In many ways, Emerson’s observation on the purpose of life applies not just to responsible individuals but also to organizations that seek to pursue the greater good. It certainly applies to nonprofit organizations like TMS. Annually, TMS endeavors to be useful in many ways: By convening the materials community to network and collaborate on tasks that serve the good of the order, by building excellence in education, by helping industries be more efficient, by enforcing rigor in technical communication, by advancing professionalism, and by inspiring the pipeline of future professionals. Coming into 2020, we had many strategies, tactics, programs, and initiatives to do these very things. As always, they would be powered by members, volunteers, staff, and other stakeholders.

But, one strategy that we lacked was how to be useful to our materials science and engineering community in the event of a pandemic. No tools in the TMS toolbox for that one. But tools we did need, and we needed them the day before yesterday. What could TMS do during those early shutdown days of late March and April . . . something useful? Something honorable? Something compassionate? Something that made a difference? As I’ve learned, I think that we have answered “yes” to all.

The first order of business was to keep our business in business. Like many associations, the 2020 TMS calendar of activities was run through a shredder during March and continuing into the second quarter. Through the work of our volunteer and staff leadership, we have worked to leverage new government programs, dial back on discretionary activities, and generally recalibrate our plans for 2020. The Society is still conducting its essential business, is restructuring its events calendar, is planning for future disruptions, and is retaining our staff. The goal: When COVID-19 is ultimately suppressed and the deep bruises to our global establishments are healed, TMS will be in the position of continuing and growing its mission to serve the community as set in motion 150 years ago next year.

Knowing that the lights would stay on, the second order of business was to look toward what we could do quickly to serve our membership meaningfully and altruistically. We couldn’t do anything about two-ply shortages, but we could help members connect with the professional community and access professional development tools. Inspired by member requests, we launched the free-to-members Webinar Library, which gathers a number of past educational webinars (that were either too hard to find on our web site or that had paywalls). In complement, we rapid-developed a timely new webinar, Transitioning to Online Instruction: Tips, Tools, and Techniques. We also created the COVID-19 Resource Portal, promoting virtual networking by using TMS tools available to members (e.g., the membership directory and the committee listservs) and engaging social media (e.g., using the #GoodNews hashtag to promote how the materials community is contributing to the fight against COVID-19).

Our third order of business, as of this writing in mid-April, was to look beyond the traditional boundaries of TMS and toward the greater good of our world at large. Again, by leveraging member inputs, we launched the TMS COVID-19 Materials Needs Exchange website. COVID-19 is a problem that is reflexively thought of as a challenge for the biological and health sciences. However, as with so many problems, materials science and engineering can play a significant role in defeating it and maybe help save lives in the process. The Materials Needs Exchange acts as a clearinghouse to connect organizations and programs on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic with TMS members who are willing to render materials or manufacturing assistance, resources, and/or expertise.

Useful, honorable, compassionate, and making a difference . . . I hope that is how we judge our collective response to our era’s pandemic. If so, perhaps we will add “happy” to that list.

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