

SAMRA Chairperson Report presented to the Annual General Meeting on 31 August 2021

Prepared by Arnold Samuels

Thank you for joining us at the annual SAMRA AGM. It has been an honour and a privilege to serve as Chair over a time period that, quite frankly, I am at a loss for words to describe.

The New Normal

It is now common place to refer to the position we find ourselves in, after almost 2 years of Covid 19, as the new normal. To this I respond, is perennial uncertainty and an ever changing social; economic; and political landscape not indeed what has always shaped us as South Africans?

Starting further afield, the inauguration of Joe Biden will usher in significant changes.

Firstly, the global arena seems to have returned to more familiar levels of diplomacy. At the same time, developments in Afghanistan offer us a foretaste of major changes in foreign policy as we have come to know it, the most perceptible consequence likely to be that of large scale migration and peopling of major cities around the world.

Secondly we may also expect a significant shift back to the going green agenda. Renewable energy, sustainable food supply, carbon neutral production, and ethically sourced resources will all be the yardsticks by which products and services are measured.

Locally Ramaphoria seems well and truly gone, replaced with a somewhat more galvanised call for an end to systemic corruption and political patronage; as well as greater accountability in, and more competition for, our state owned enterprises. Achieving these seemingly lofty goals will drive our economy in the right direction, failing to do so may prove catastrophic.

Closer to home in the research landscape, we have not been exempted from this new normal. SAMRA field regular queries of how to engage respondents face to face during lockdown. Apprehension grows almost daily concerning the very real operationalization of the POPI Act. Further to these new challenges, we face the ongoing threat of our industry being rendered obsolete in the minds of our clients by Social Media giants; AI and advanced data analytics; and interdisciplinary “strategists”.

Many traditional research organisations are left questioning how they will keep the doors open with their current business models. The old adage of “if you do what you’ve always did, you’ll get what you always got” does not hold true in the period we find ourselves. I firmly believe that the organisations that survive this trying time for our industry are the ones that embrace change, display agility in meeting client needs, and innovate new ways to engage end users of products and services.

It is also becoming increasingly clear that through our association with ESOMAR we will be required to more noticeably leverage the “Southern African” part of our name. Global brands continue to see value in operating in Africa, but the major deficiency in their value chain is access to integrous data for the region, more so than affordability or scope. SAMRA will with time play a greater role in setting a gold standard for research on the continent by which research organizations will be benchmarked.

Context Matters

And so, we move on to SAMRA. It would be somewhat remiss of me if I failed to mention that not only is this my first year as a board member, but it is also the first and only year I have been a SAMRA member in 13 years working in the research industry.

One could argue that my brief was simple, how do we make SAMRA membership more appealing to non-members, and return real value to existing members. Given my relative lack of context, my focus was primarily to understand the state of play at SAMRA.

SAMRA is a board of volunteers not an active executive body. In my opinion, with the outgoing board members, existing board, and even the potential incoming board members, SAMRA has sufficient, if not excellent strategic capability. Where SAMRA is lacking is in its implementation capability, simply put we do not have enough staff or volunteer members to functionally do the work required to drive our strategic initiatives.

SAMRA was not geared for communicating with its members during a period such as the current pandemic.

Our most efficient channel of communication with our members, and the one that is responsible for most of the fond memories members have of SAMRA, was in person conferences and breakfasts, the last of which was held in 2019.

Our SAMRA Website was, for want of a better word, defunct. Its design was geared towards form submission, a feature that went largely unused. Added to this, a non-existent social media presence meant that email newsletters were our only real means of digital communication. Not having a CRM strategy meant that while we sent out communication, we only had a sense of who was reading it when members responded.

Retention of organizational memory seems to have been a challenge for SAMRA at multiple levels.

Whatever knowledge SAMRA has acquired in 50 years of existence, as I type this, currently sits on a hard drive backup of the laptop of Catherine our Administration Manager. There is no central sharing and archiving of documents by incumbent board members. Handovers from outgoing to new board members tend to be largely informal, with previous board members filling more of a mentorship roll as and when called upon.

When putting myself in the shoes of my predecessors, a rather illustrious group, I imagine they would be most saddened to know that SAMRA can no longer claim to have an active membership base. In the last 12 months, I have actively engaged members who have raised concerns, invariably with no solutions proposed. In the last year, I have yet to engage a member who has volunteered or taken ownership of any initiatives.

Exciting Times Ahead

Thankfully where we find ourselves as an organisation is not where we have to stay, and along with the board we have managed to formulate a number of initiatives that will reap immediate dividends but also meet SAMRA's long term goals.

Future board members will be nominated and assigned to one of 10 KPA's, each of which require past experience in that portfolio. Individual KPI/Job descriptions have been, and will continue to be developed for each portfolio. Over time we believe this will allow for a more focused field of activity for board members and greater accountability in their delivery.

In the absence of employees, the board will largely look to provide an oversight role, while we expand a committee membership structure, with several members assigned to each portfolio. Committee members will mostly fulfil the implementation of tasks set out by board members.

Upgraded IT infrastructure is now being rolled out.

A network attached storage device will allow staff and board members a central repository for all SAMRA document storage, sharing and archiving. Alongside a hard drive backup, a cloud based network storage solution will allow us further protection against loss of data.

All staff and board members, and future committee members, will be migrated to a Microsoft exchange account where they will now have a dedicated SAMRA email account (e.g. Marketing@samra.co.za). When an incumbent ends their tenure, they hand over all emails to the new member taking over their portfolio.

We are opening so many channels for communication you might get sick of hearing from us.

We hope you've visited the new website. It has been streamlined for ease of communication and will be our official source of communication to all members.

Social media will be used for echoing website communication, but the main function of our social media pages will be for the sharing of member driven content. We have sent out an email recently asking for you to share your social media handles. If you click on the form link you can submit your Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter handles. When you have something you'd like us to share, let us know.

Webinars are here to stay. They allow us to reach a substantial audience at little to no cost across geographic boundaries. We urge members to take the opportunity to share content via these webinars and SAMRA will gladly facilitate the organization required.

Email tracking via Hubspot will help us to keep track of emails to see who has opened and read them. If you haven't received an email from us in a while, check your junk email, or search for an email from Hubspot asking you to authenticate our right to have you on our database.

When the pandemic is finally a thing of the past and we are able to meet again in person, events will be used as brand building opportunities and carry the bulk of expenditure. Breakfasts and conferences are at the top of member wish lists, and still a great way to network. We will hire speakers from outside of our industry that offer insight into how to improve our careers, businesses, and important elements of our lives.

Our Mantra

Inspired by members, governed by SAMRA. In the coming year, as we engage our members with greater frequency, we hope to see this mantra realized. We are an organization committed to offering our members value for money. To do this, to a large degree, we rely on your volunteering, suggestions, and engagement.