

Industry MAY 2019 TRENDS



ISA's 75th anniversary provides an opportunity to reflect on the changes the association has made since it was founded. The name is a good place to start. Founded as the National Electric Sign Association, ISA now encompasses partners from around the world—and signs are far more than just electric.

It's not just the association that has changed. Some of ISA's longest members have had to adapt through the decades as well. Here, they offer some insight into evolving and changing in a constantly moving world.

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THE INTERNATIONAL SIGN ASSOCIATION

Lessons Learned from Long-Term Members

1 *Take a Long-Range View*



YESCO Custom Electric Signs has been an ISA member since 1953 and Jeff Young, senior vice president, is among the third generation of owners. Whether working with his customers or in the industry, he finds that he often is "associating with some of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren" of ISA founders. "Because of the long history of many

companies, it's not just about 'signing the deal today.' It's not just about competing for the bottom-line buck. It centers more on the challenge and question of, 'What sort of industry are we going to leave for our children and grandchildren?'"

Much of YESCO's work has been in Las Vegas, where Jeff's father and grandfather would drive hours in a sedan to satisfy the terms of maintenance contracts.

While the work may be easier these days, the stakes are a bit higher. He notes that other multigenerational companies exist in the business and figures there will be a day soon when their kids are all "sitting in a room together, trying to figure things out."

That longevity allows—or forces—him to take a longer view. "We're not really looking five or 10 years out, but 80."

With that longer-range view, he sees a future in which there is a continued supportive relationship between regulators and the sign, graphics and visual communications industry. He also believes that the industry will "adopt all the technologies that allow the industry to grow and flourish."



2 *Be Ready for Change*



John Yarger, a third-generation owner of North American Signs, grew up at ISA International Sign Expo, attending his first at just three months old. The association was then known as NESAs, the National Electric Sign Association. The business was founded by his grandfather as South Bend Neon.

He worked in the business, now known as North American Signs, throughout high school and college before coming on board fulltime in 1996.

From his vantage point, the industry has changed dramatically over time. “We were founded before LEDs and plastics and vinyls,” he said. “The materials have shifted and we’ve adopted a lot of new things. I like to think my grandfather would recognize the company and what we’re doing today as very similar to what he was doing, but say, ‘You’re doing it differently, with different materials and manufacturing techniques.’”

He pegs the industry as a “gradual implementer of new technologies,” noting that it “took a long time for LEDs to come down in price and be adopted.” So when he looks at the future, he sees some existing techniques growing in impact, such as 3D printing and advanced LEDs. “We’re a visual product, so whatever visually will look good, we’ll find a way to incorporate it.”

North American Signs has been an ISA member since 1946—just two years after the association was founded. Yarger believes ISA involvement is imperative. “There is nothing else that someone can do to so easily understand the industry better and stretch their horizons. Other companies solve problems that I haven’t solved and they’ve adopted technologies that I haven’t considered. To see them and what they’re doing is invaluable. There’s nothing like being steeped in other people’s challenges and other people’s innovations. We don’t have to solve everything ourselves. That exchange of insight and support that ISA provides is a big part of what inspires me to have a better company and to create a better industry.”

3 *Use Expertise to Help End Users*



As he nears 40 years in the industry, Kevin Stotmeister, CEO of Federal Heath Signs, thinks not just about the way change is coming to the industry, but also to the impact it will have on end users. Sign, graphics and visual communications companies have an important role to play in helping them adapt to change, he believes. Federal Heath has been an ISA member since 1946.

“The relationships between the providers of the sign companies and the end users are becoming extremely sophisticated.”

They’re hiring project management companies or architectural engineering firms to handle that aspect of their business. “The industry is evolving into a very highly professional relationship service. It may or may not be the manufacturers; it may just be relationship people coordinating the manufacturing of signs.”

It is a far cry from when Stotmeister entered the industry, when work was “all done on handshakes.”

It will be up to sign manufacturers to “help end users learn and know what they don’t know. It’s going to be very, very important to understand their strategic objectives and bring them solutions that will help the engagement of their own customers. It will be our role to bring solutions for problems they don’t know they have, or things they don’t know they need.”

While Stotmeister anticipates big shifts in how the work is done, the reliance on relationships will continue to be significant. Federal Heath has been an ISA member since 1946 and that involvement has proven invaluable in helping make connections, particularly with local sign companies who act as “subcontractors or agents of the national companies,” he said. In the 1990s, he was instrumental in helping ISA develop some of the programs that have brought the two groups together. ISA Converge, which brings national companies together with vendors, also has been important.

4 *Find Power in Connection*

Brandi Pulliam, a second-generation owner at Agnew Sign & Awning, has seen her small family-run business benefit from the connections made through ISA. Agnew has been an ISA member since 1953.”

Networking provides an important connection to wholesalers that allow Agnew to offer more products and services to customers than it can handle.

Pulliam serves on the Mid South Sign Association board and knows that “ISA is always going to be there to help us. I have always equated ISA with help when it’s needed, in whatever way that it’s needed.”

The power of being connected to a larger entity like ISA has helped expand her understanding of the industry. “We think of the sign industry as a small sector, but you go to ISA International Sign Expo and it’s mind-blowing how many people are in the sign industry.”

