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.”

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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.

In 1964, companies on the S&P 500 averaged 33 years old, dropping to 24 years in 2016. By 2027, the average of S&P 500 companies
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 Statmeister 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 Statmeister 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.

Find Power in Connection

Brandi Pulliam, a second-generation owner at Agnew Sign & Awnings, 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.”