

**Manitoba Chambers of Commerce
Annual General Meeting – 2007
Best Practices Session (facilitated by Dave Angus, President and CEO of the
Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce, and Dan Overall, MCC Director of Policy and
Communications)**

Dan Overall introduced the session. He said it was an opportunity to share ideas and experiences among chambers and invited everyone to participate.

He asked whether there was a disconnect between what we say we're doing and what we're actually doing, and if there things we should be doing. How are we to define our success? Are we tackling partnerships, motivation and knowledge as best we can?

Lee Jebb suggested we could be better if we had a tighter focus, not trying to be everything to everybody all the time. This, of course, would involve some tough choices. Certain issues may be important, they may be right, but they may not be part of our mission.

Dawna Atamanchuk observed that each chamber seems to be creating the same communications tools, websites for example. She said we need some templates that would work for every chamber and improve inter-communications.

Brenda Storey agreed that we should be partnering with each other to take advantage of each one's best practices. This would help us look after existing business members in such a way to attract new members. We need to find out their concerns and address them. A strategic plan is needed to address specific concerns of local business. Winkler has embarked on such a plan and would be willing to share their experience with other chambers.

Julie Turenne-Maynard reminded us that we have a provincial mandate and a lot of chambers with policy issues and as a result we have many resolutions each year. If we adopt just three or four focus issues each year we would need to advise chambers to propose resolutions in those focus areas. This would be a challenge because different regions have different problems.

Dan agreed that it is challenging. We are a grassroots movement and should not restrict local chambers from putting their concerns forward. Perhaps the Board could choose a few key targets to focus on in addition to the issues raised by local chambers. Our approach to Bill 41 was an example of how this might occur. We need to differentiate the chamber from other organizations and to show value added to our members.

Kevin Skinner asked how a chamber might help communications between the business and education communities, to ensure we will have appropriately educated and trained workers. We have a great workforce and we want to keep them here. Too many sectors are doing their own thing – how can the chamber help?

David Angus said the workforce and skills shortage should be a dominant issue for the Chamber. It is a long-term problem and the Chamber is in a unique position to bring together the players, including the immigrant and aboriginal communities. He said they are the source of tremendous opportunity but we have not created the strategies and linkages necessary. Chambers should be more active in schools and there should be more discussion on this issue. Seniors and youth are other resources we should be looking at.

Dan referred to the Partners for Prosperity Roundtable, a coming together of business, labour, non-profit and education leaders to seek ways to effect change. We need to watch for strategies like this that really work to achieve effective change. He referred also to the initiative in Toronto that works to keep youth in school.

Jeff Zabudsky suggested that a main focus for us should be to increase the number of students in post-secondary education. There is a decline in the number of students coming out of high schools, expected to be as much as 25% in the next ten years. Manitoba has one of the lowest rates of post-secondary education in Canada – only 26% of 18-20 year-olds go into university or college. Given the population decline there is a need to get a larger percentage of young people into post-secondary education. What we don't know is where those young people who don't get into post-secondary education wind up working. Colleges and universities can't do it alone and business must help with scholarships and bursaries.

David Angus agreed that we could do a better job of connecting private enterprise with post-secondary education providers.

Ken Thomas noted that the Winkler chamber is in the process of working with some of those ideas this year, stressing the need for regional partnerships. In Winkler 45% of the people do not have a grade 12 or GED equivalent. There is a high drop-out rate so the chamber has initiated working together with the high school on a stay-in-school program. In spite of a shortage of labour the chamber is urging businesses to give students incentives not to quit school. They are also working in the region to provide packages to immigrants to help them fit into the community.

Niel Kordalchuk said as a young person he noted that nobody in his community seems to be telling students to stay in school, to stay in Manitoba or to stay in the community. He suggested that we work harder to get youth involved in the chamber, perhaps as board members. We should be providing mentorship to entrepreneurs and providing scholarships based on local post-secondary education.

George Steciuk wondered what had become of Junior Achievement. He said chambers should be encouraging school boards to change some of their curricula to show young people how to benefit, how to become wealthy and prosper in business. We should be helping schools think outside the box and deal with the changes that have affected business and industry.

Chris Dyer referred back to the example Dan gave about Toronto. The Portage Chamber has had consultations with their school board and career guidance counselors. There is a need to incorporate parents into the discussions. Parents are discouraging students from going into the skilled trades – they need to be part of this discussion.

David Angus agreed that the skilled trades issue is huge one, partly because we have had a whole generation of parents who have talked their children out of the trades. That sector, he said, needs to promote itself better, especially the entrepreneurial aspect of it.

Julie Turenne-Maynard reported that the St Boniface Chamber has worked with CDEM to get an entrepreneur course in College Louis Riel, a local high school. The chamber gives the students complementary memberships in the St Boniface Chamber and invites them to participate in monthly activities. She said, however, that students find it very intimidating, especially to participate as a board member.

PriceWaterhouseCoopers employs summer students as a way to pick out the stars they want as future employees, Jean McClellan reported. MCC does it as well and there is funding available for this. Other chambers could try the approach.

Dave Wilkinson said Morden would run a career opportunity day in that city. They will bus students in from neighbouring communities. About 50 local employers will set up booths and another dozen will offer tours. He said this has been accomplished through partnerships with a number of organizations and he offered to share the template with other chambers. He added that rural business communities hunger for knowledge and suggested that video-conferencing could be used by MCC to offer on-line seminars to member chambers. He again stressed the value of partnerships.

A lively discussion arose on how best to share ideas like these. Many felt that the internet was an excellent way. The MCC website should be expanded as is the case in other organizations, such as the Canadian Chamber Executive Association. Chamber websites should be interconnected so we can keep track of the best practices of other chambers.

Dave Northcott reminded us that things are very complex these days and the non-profit sector is very important in Canada. He suggested there is a need to identify the few things we need to work on in the next year. It is just as important to identify the things we need to work on in the next ten years. We should be building the leadership now to do that work. He asked: “What does the volunteer sector need to do to support the economy?”

David Angus said he would like to know more about the other chambers. He always felt the organization was not well co-ordinated. We don't share information and we don't do things collectively. He wondered how we might help each other. He said MCC should be basing our success on our members' successes. We could collaborate on how to market the chamber and how to communicate. For example, he suggested, this session could be given more time. We should all be working together to get more members into the movement.

Dennis Brownlee suggested we have a roundtable in the fall devoted to best practices.

Ernie Nairn proposed that governments have a responsibility to initiate these kinds of ideas. They should be asking the same questions we are and they should be represented at this table.

Dan Overall said government is asking but we may not have the real answers and may not be able to suggest how to implement them. Business has to take responsibility too. The issues are complex and cannot be answered in the short term. We (MCC) should be the continuity.

David Angus explained how the Winnipeg Chamber develops its three-year plan. He said they do an extensive process of surveying Board members and staff. They develop a list of ten strategic priorities and then narrow the focus to a few. He stressed again the benefits of partnering and sharing. It was noted that Brandon and Winkler have used similar processes.