

LOCAL CHAMBER BEST PRACTICES

**Open Forum
2005 AGM**



**The Manitoba Chambers
of Commerce**

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INTRODUCTION:

Jack Wilson (Moderator), MCC Board: I circulated a bit of an agenda. We don't have to follow it, but the first topic is 'Government and the Chamber'. We are looking for ideas and comments from your perspective. For example, for local chambers there are issues as to whether and how government should be on your Boards or what funding, if any, we should get from government.

'Government and the Chamber'

Neepawa & District Chamber of Commerce: We were significantly funded by our town, and acted more as a community-based organization. We used a lot of chamber resources, both dollars from the membership and the manpower, to operate the chamber and fulfill the obligations that we committed to. It slowly worked the chamber to the point where few people were left and we weren't getting people to meetings and people were questioning the value of membership.

I have just started my second term as president and we have completely revamped what we do. We have gone away from the community-orientated chamber initiatives and are there to work for our members. We have started a campaign where we listen to our members and get involved with our government to lobby for our members and the betterment of their enterprises. We have also focused our revenue on things that are tangibly beneficial to our business members. We have some ideas for advertising campaigns and different ideas for promoting the business community.

It has received a very good response from our membership. More members have renewed earlier than ever before. A lot of questions and issues are now coming to the chamber. It has created an update feeling with our membership.

Of course, every chamber is going to have to judge its own situation, but it might be something you may want to look at.

It seems a lot of chambers get into economic development and then a CDC comes along and now it is almost in competition with the CDC for public dollars and over a community development focus. We had that in Neepawa and we did quite well when we set out in our own.

Peggy Davies, Selkirk & District Chamber of Commerce: For Selkirk, the bottom line was this last year I call it 'in transition', because of the lack of communication sometimes between the executive director and the executive that is voted in, or you drop everything that you should be doing in the lap of your executive director.

Plus, we now have a shop Selkirk district gift certificate program which our executive director started in November 2003. One of our main employers just bought into another

\$33,000 worth of gift certificates and that means spending that will happen in our community and district. We are over I think \$60,000 now. That's money that might not normally have made its way into our community. So you may want to think about a shop local gift certificate program.

The Pas & District Chamber of Commerce : I was talking to the person from Neepawa earlier and he put an idea into my head. In the Pas the municipal government has said that they need to wash their hands of tourism right now, it's a money issue and an infrastructure issue, so they are looking to the chamber to take this up. We agreed to take the long distance tourism phone number but now I am wondering, we are sort of maxed out on our hours and what we can afford and we need advice because I am not overly thrilled about taking it over in that sense. I am really wondering whether our membership will support us devoting so much time to that issue.

Jack Wilson (Moderator), MCC Board: Where is your funding going to come from to support those efforts?

The Pas & District Chamber of Commerce: Well, that's exactly the problem. Years ago they did give the chamber a grant to do that kind of stuff, but then they hired a tourism coordinator – which they can no longer afford. So they are now looking back to the chamber and we were seeking assistance looking for a grant. But I have a concern as to whether this is really the direction to go in.

Beth McNabb, Minnedosa Chamber of Commerce: In my time in Minnedosa there hasn't been any direct funding from the town for the chamber. I have a four-year history with the chamber. Over that time we have had the full development of a CDC in the community and communication is the key to the whole process. At that table we have our three participating RMs, we have the town and the council represented, the chamber has a chair, tourism has a chair at the table and so does a representative from Healthy Minnedosa, which is a community-based group. We are now at the end of year one, each of the RMs and the town have made a commitment and we are looking to move forward. But even there, tourism remains one of the hot potatoes.

I would caution that the role of tourism, although we all touch on it, has to be a separate and distinct function.

So communication is important and the chamber has to have a chair at that table.

Pat Turner, Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce: The Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce will eventually run into those issues too in terms of funding. I really hope that we do not have to go to our communities and get funding from them but I do ask for their support. I think the biggest things the chamber has to do are lobby, lobby and market, market your membership.

One of the things we are doing is forming a partnership with Aboriginal Tourism in Manitoba. It really is a win-win situation for everybody in Manitoba. We will promote from Winnipeg right up to Churchill, and to the east and west.

That is just one of our initiatives. More are hoping to make progress through the year and get our offices established, and yes we are having a new home at the Carlton overpass.

I am hoping that all chambers here will work with us, in particular in the area of tourism.

Chris Dyer, Portage & District Chamber of Commerce: I agree with Pat, lobbying and marketing are the keys. One of the snags we run into, because we do receive money from the city and the RM, is lobbying the City and RM after we have just received a check from them.

Dale Stambuski, Morden & District Chamber of Commerce: I meet with council one on one over coffee – and that is huge, you have to sit down and talk, you have to let them know what you are doing. Our council wanted to force us into a fee for service position. They have backed off of it now, but they may bring it up next year. Provide them with what you are doing and what it is worth. Are you looking after the festivals, are you looking after tourism, and are you taking calls from people outside the community?

The fact is we are representing business people. Let them know who you represent. Our council indicated they gave \$1 million to community groups which included us. Now we received funding, of that \$1 million we are receiving 5%. If we are representing business we are paying a higher tax rate for the benefit of that community. Let them know that what you are getting is not a whole lot when you are looking after the business community which, in turn, funds the community.

Participation in the MCC AGM:

Jack Wilson (Moderator), MCC Board: Another issue that we want to throw out there is convention participation. This is an issue for the MCC as much as you. Do you have any suggestions as to how we can improve participation at the conventions?

Grant Nordman, Assiniboia Chamber of Commerce: Charge everybody and their membership for attending the AGM excluding meals on the annual MCC membership renewal .

Ken Wilk, MCC Board: I was just going to play devil's advocate. As the MCC treasurer, one of the biggest fundraisers is the AGM. We constantly have to balance the necessity of having this function out in various geographic locations in Manitoba to demonstrate that we aren't just stuck in Winnipeg in an ivory tower. If we continued along that line but set minimum profit margins on the convention for the areas that wanted to hold it in the future, what would the reaction be?

Susan Eyolfson, Riverton & District Chamber of Commerce: Just like with a business environment, if you try to impose too many stipulations or regulations you will lose people wanting to do it at all. There was a few years ago where you had a hard time finding anybody who wanted to host the event. By all means look at some requirements, but don't make it so restrictive that a chamber that isn't huge won't be willing to take it on.

Lee Jebb, MCC Board: One way to increase the attendance is to find a meaningful role for our corporate members. They don't have a really meaningful role here. I am not saying let them set the policies, but there may be other meaningful roles for them to play.

Bob Curle, Dauphin & District Chamber of Commerce: Another idea to explore is to package the annual meeting with regions as opposed to an AGM, and have two to three regions co-host the AGM.

Membership:

a) Youth:

Jack Wilson (Moderator), MCC Board: One of the issues we have is membership. In rural Manitoba about 30% of businesses belong to the chamber. In Winnipeg it's about 10%. And when you go to chamber meetings you do not see a lot of young people. How would you engage the younger people to get involved in the chamber, because if they are interested in the chamber they are interested in business, and if they are interested in business they may stay in our communities?

Ted Kelly Falcon/West Hawk Lakes Chamber of Commerce: We just talked at our last meeting of holding a chamber scholarship where some of our funds would go into a pot for one of our youth to go to university.

Julie Turenne-Maynard, St. Boniface Chamber of Commerce: I think education is the key just as it is with so many things. If our teenagers don't know what a chamber is and what they can do for them as they get older, then they will never be engaged by it. There are a lot of entrepreneurial courses in high school where we can make the teachers of those courses aware of how integral the chamber is to business. If it could start at that level it would be a huge step. We should also integrate into the university and solicit all business across Manitoba to champion it.

At the St. Boniface Chamber we have a minimum of 8 high school children that come to each and every one of our monthly meetings. We also have a reduced membership for all university students and new businesses. That has made a difference.

Peggy Davies, Selkirk & District Chamber of Commerce: Neepawa in 1994 was the first time I went to an AGM. I brought one of our students. The student council paid for

the membership, and a student would come each meeting and we brought them to the AGM. By approaching the student council you will get them to come out.

Morris Chamber & District Chamber of Commerce: One of the biggest problems is succession of a business. I think the reason a lot of kids don't become chamber members is there is not a lot of opportunity for them to take over the family business. AMM was looking at ways to ease this type of business succession.

Dale Stambuski, Morden & District Chamber of Commerce: We have the education system on board with the chamber. That has helped. The other thing we are looking at is a round table with students, where we ask what they are thinking when it comes to entrepreneurship.

Jean McClellan, MCC Board: A lot of time young business people don't feel valued – they feel that that don't have the experience to contribute to a Board. So the key is to communicate to them that they can indeed make a contribution.

Grant Nordman, Assiniboia Chamber of Commerce : We do two things. We give \$600 worth of scholarships every year to second year graduating students in the Red River Business and Marketing Program – we make sure they have made it through 1st year. The second thing we do is we ex officio appoint students to our board from the two school divisions in our trading area. They don't come often but at least there is a connection.

Jack Wilson (Moderator), MCC Board: One suggestion I heard was about being a mentor, where certain businesses can bring along a member of their business that is younger and you could mentor them about the chamber movement. In a way, groom them to replace you as an active contributor to the chamber movement.

Unidentified: Our young people told us they were tired of being with old people that were so negative. And every time they had an idea it was shot down. We dragged them to the chamber and it worked out fairly well. It is important to bring in young people as they have lots of energy and they do have great ideas. They will bring up stuff that has been done and tried, but you don't want to break their spirit either.

Ken Wilk, MCC Board: If you don't target them in your marketing plan, you're never going to have them in your organization. A lot of organizations have a tiered memberships, a special 'under 30 or 40' kind of rate.

Membership:

b) Attracting New Members:

Jack Wilson (Moderator), MCC Board: Another area is new approaches for attracting membership.

Ted Kelly Falcon/West Hawk Lakes Chamber of Commerce: The largest attendance we have at a meeting is when we have a wine and cheese.

Dale Stambuski, Morden & District Chamber of Commerce: We are promoting a series of e-commerce seminars in Morden. It is free to members and \$10 for members. We offer the first year of membership free anyway. The seminar is one of 8 that we are offering so in essence you can get an \$80 value for signing up. That has led to 8 members so far.

As regards youth, we have given 16 tickets to the local school for students to attend and they were very warmly received.

Grant Nordman, Assiniboia Chamber of Commerce : In September of last year at the CCEC there was a gentleman that said one trend right now in the U.S. is to give two year memberships – it gives new members a chance to really get to know the chamber. This is our 75th year and we are doing a ‘75 and 75’ – if you join for \$75 you get the rest of this year and next year. Normally for two years it would cost \$225.

Peggy Davies, Selkirk & District Chamber of Commerce: We have a senior’s rate. We are going to try if we can get the grades 10 to 12 and see if we can have a business sponsor their attendance at events. We also pro-rate, so if you join with only six months left in the year, you only pay for six months.

Jack Wilson (Moderator), MCC Board: Anybody have 70-80% of the businesses in their community as chamber members; a show of hands please. So that is Falcon Lake, the Pas, Neepawa, and Minnedosa. What are you guys doing to get that?

Beth McNabb, Minnedosa & District Chamber of Commerce: I think part of it is our fee structure. For us, the challenge is to get them to be active.

Marnie McGregor, Brandon Chamber of Commerce: We made a point of going back and review all the issues we have taken a stand on over the years. Sometimes you lose members when you take a stand on an issue. So we approached them again, and after the issue had blown over and they had seen the other things we had accomplished, a lot of them were willing to rejoin. A lot said, ‘You know what, if you hadn’t called, I probably wouldn’t have rejoined.’”

The Pas & District Chamber of Commerce: Keeping in touch with members has helped. Communicating through the website and newsletter is huge too.

Dale Stambuski, Morden & District Chamber of Commerce: We have a breakfast meeting once a month that we host and invite members and non-members so that we can deal with issues on a one-on-one basis. We start off with the pros and cons of the chamber and then let the issues come up.

Terry Brown, Thompson Chamber of Commerce: Something we do on a weekly basis is have presentations for our membership. What we do is send out an email explaining what the presentation is about as a teaser. It also works for new members or former members.

Daniel Paul Bork, Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce/MCC Board: Just a heads up, the Aboriginal Chamber will be looking to partner with other chambers. Principally in Thompson, Dauphin, the Pas and Brandon. We will focus on products and services, marketing as well as the creation of new products and services.

Chambers Working Together:

Jack Wilson (Moderator), MCC Board: Does anybody have other examples of working together?

Beth McNabb, Minnedosa & District Chamber of Commerce: This was a short-term relationship, but being a chamber with no staff one of our goals was to set up a website. As a result, we approached the business-ed of our local school to see if they would be interested in a partnership. A grade 10 student came forward who has totally embraced the project. It was set up at the school level as a work for credit on his part and we ended up with just a fabulous web page. It also helped enhance our relationship with the school.

Susan Eyolfson, Riverton & District Chamber of Commerce: We are trying to be involved with the Cattle Producers' Association in the Interlake. When they have their meetings I would like to be able to go there and promote the chamber, especially the group insurance.

The Pas & District Chamber of Commerce: We are just starting to partner with Manitoba Advanced Education to conduct an employment needs survey. Our business are complaining about having high turnover and not enough skilled workers.

Peggy Davies, Selkirk & District Chamber of Commerce: Each year we get a student to come in and help out with our parade in July. They get some money and we get some help, and down the line some of them come back.

Larry McIntosh, Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce: We did our three year strategic plan. Although it hasn't been approved by the board yet, part of that plan is to work with neighboring chambers towards the betterment of the region, and to worry less about competing for membership and such things.

Unidentified: When I started working with our chamber about three years ago members were extremely resistant and saw other chambers as a threat. We are trying to get over that and see ourselves as a region. It's starting to improve, but it has been a real challenge.

Peggy Davies, Selkirk & District Chamber of Commerce: Being a Regional Vice-Chair, what I have found is when I mention what other regions are doing they are very willing to share and discuss ideas on a regional basis.

Centralized Marketing and Administration:

Jack Wilson (Moderator), MCC Board: The next issue I have is centralized marketing and administration. We're trying to think outside the box and look at different ways of doing business. We know that a number of the smaller chambers cannot afford to have a full-time staff and administration becomes a challenge. Is there any interest in putting your resources together with three or four chambers so that you have a centralized administration office?

Ted Kelly Falcon/West Hawk Lakes Chamber of Commerce: On the marketing side, we have gone on our own and tried different things; we have done radio and pamphlets. But at our last meeting the consensus was we better get a marketing plan so I was wondering if it is possible, as a chamber, to get a package of what is the best way to market? I know that is a big task. But if the Manitoba Chambers could just give some direction on what works well or assist us in getting a better group rate on print or radio as a group.

Neepawa & District Chamber of Commerce: I kind of like the idea. We have the chamber benefits through MTS etc, would it be possible to put together a good deal with some advertiser so that the local chamber could tap into a better rate.

Ted Kelly Falcon/West Hawk Lakes Chamber of Commerce: We do a brochure every year, and they go like hot cakes. We think that is our best advertisement. We also have a website and do radio. We need to know if we are doing the right thing and we need to tap into the expertise to evaluate what we are doing.

Beth McNabb, Minnedosa & District Chamber of Commerce: We are working on a series regarding the importance of shopping local, specifically the impact of the dollar spent. If we could access that info it would be very useful.

Marnie McGregor, Brandon Chamber of Commerce: One of the most difficult things to communicate is the actual belief system and ideals. What I have found valuable is the 10 values of the chamber movement that is listed in the accreditation program documentation.

Grant Nordman, Assiniboia Chamber of Commerce: We have to strengthen the brand. The Winnipeg Chamber has done a good job of branding "The Chamber".

Graham Starmer, MCC President: The CCEC has a video developed on best practices for chambers across Canada. You can purchase one for approximately \$150.00.