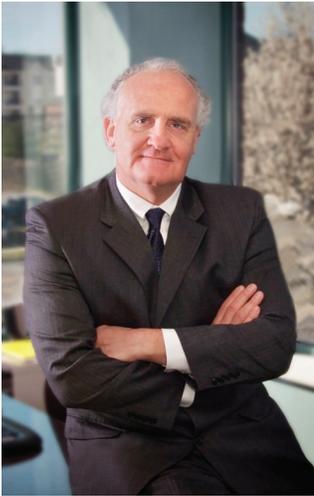


Chambers and the Other "R" Word



For a speech at a state chamber execs' association meeting last fall, the volunteer host promoted a title for my speech without first securing my approval. Hey! It happens! NBD.

The flyer said: "The Chamber as a Beacon of Hope in a Troubled Economy." I had no choice except to go with the flow, so I opened my remarks with this highly controversial line: "The only way chambers will be the beacon of hope in a troubled economy is if they actually ARE a beacon of hope." Judging by the stunned faces in the audience, this was not quite the speech they were hoping for.

More recently, during a meeting of a dozen large and mid-size chambers from around the country, I kept hearing the word "relevant" — as in, "Man, I sure hope our chamber finds a way to stay relevant."

Relevant? WHAT?! Of course organizations representing the private sector and leading the community toward greater prosperity are relevant. To quote my old friend Dave May of Fort Collins, "If the Chamber went away on Thursday, the business community would be meeting on Monday to start a chamber-like organization."

You are, however, risking irrelevance if you're not actually representing the employer community, driving positive change, communicating must-know information and enhancing business interchange through purposeful networks. The chamber of commerce brand remains strong in polling, but individual chambers are not protected from the high-risk environment facing every other enterprise on the planet. In fact, you are in a *more* precarious and highly public setting, where you must excel or shrivel. As Jim Collins asks in his book *Good to Great*, are you good, or are you moving toward great? Is your organization marginally valuable, or essential?

A recent Facebook posting from a chamber membership department boss really worried me. This long-time pro wrote: "Marketing is the most profitable activity of your enterprise. Everything else is just an expense." Lord, I hope not. Without authentic value, built on quality service, strong programs and gutsy representation, what's the point of investing in marketing?

It is true that almost every chamber is routinely under-pitched, but the marketing story doesn't consist of public relations declarations of "beacon-hood." Pointing to erosion of brand relevance as a reason for failure is a seductive path, but it's wrong. The most profitable activity for a chamber is the passionate commitment to a holistic advocacy, network and information product that investors, members and civilians find it easy to believe in. The ways that this commitment and passion play out in highly challenged communities and regions are changing rapidly. Thus the internal questions about relevance, mission and essence.

The recent pop leadership book warned us: "What Got You Here Won't Get You There." Do Marshall Goldsmith's words apply to the centuries-old chamber of commerce tradition and brand? I'm afraid so. In order for us to get "there," we must approach the classic chamber mission(s) with a new vision of how our members, community and organization find . . . and define . . . success. ☐

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Chamber Executive is published four times per calendar year, by ACCE. Circulation: 6,000
Online: www.acce.org/ce

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