Chambers Provide More Than Networking in Pandemic

Leaders Speak to Their Role Advocating for Local Businesses

By NATALLIE ROCHA

Over the past year, no business has been able to survive the pandemic without help from their neighbors. Whether it was quickly transitioning to virtual events or getting information on how to apply for federal PPP loans, San Diego County businesses of all sizes leaned into their local chambers of commerce.

The San Diego Business Journal connected with chamber leaders from across the county to hear about how they’ve been serving their members during the pandemic and the vital role their organizations have always played in the business community.

More than Networking

One of the key services that local chambers of commerce provide is the opportunity to network with fellow local business leaders.

Bret Schanzenbach, president and CEO of the Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce, said the purpose of networking goes beyond social gatherings.

“The thing I want people to think about when they think about their local chamber of commerce, is that the chamber is much more than just happy hours and networking,” Schanzenbach said. “The chamber is purposefully and intentionally seeking to increase every quality-of-life aspect that makes your community, worthy to live work, play, visit shop dine and vacation in.”

Similarly, Debra Rosen, president & CEO of the North San Diego Business Chamber, shared that while aspects of virtual networking are here to stay, it’s crucial to facilitate engaging meetings that encourage member participation.

“We began ZOOM networking in April 2020 and it was clear after a few months that ZOOM fatigue had set in,” Rosen said. “We really looked at why people were networking and it was to maintain and build new connections. Understanding this, we changed up our networking format every two months so that attendees would have something new to look forward to each time they joined us.”

Beyond meeting people to make future business deals, Ricardo Villa, Board Chair of the San Diego County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, spoke to the value of building trust with community members. For instance, the Hispanic Chamber team walked people through the loan application process, which Villa said raised the rate of minorities applying for grants from 5% to about 12%, based on people who reached out after completing the process.

Partnerships

In October 2019, San Diego County’s three largest ethnic chambers of commerce — the Central San Diego Black Chamber of Commerce, San Diego County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and the Asian Business Association of San Diego — formally agreed upon a partnership memorandum of understanding (MOU), forming the Strategic Alliance.

Jason Paguio, president & CEO of the Asian Business Association of San Diego, said that together all three organizations represent the interests of tens-of-thousands of local businesses throughout the entire region with a priority to share resources and foster outreach in the community.

“Together, the Strategic Alliance successfully advocated with the County of San Diego and City of San Diego in providing dedicated outreach to disadvantaged and minority owned businesses, helping thousands to receive no-cost technical assistance and tens of millions of dollars in COVID-19 disaster relief capital,” Paguio said.

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Jason Paguio, president & CEO of the Asian Business Association of San Diego said that many of the challenges they faced were related to the unknown and businesses not sure of what would happen after the stay-at-home order came down.

“Most held off on renewal of membership at the beginning,” Wilson said. “We had to show them value for their membership which we have accomplished. It has really given our chamber of commerce the opportunity to connect even more with our members and their needs. We turn every situation into an opportunity instead of an obstacle.”

Chad Matkowski, president & CEO of the San Diego County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce said that being a unified voice for business has been essential to advocating for quick solutions this past year.

“As the need for pandemic-related regulations changes, we will remain engaged to advocate for winding down regulations to ease the burden on business and work to keep new opportunities in place that kept business afloat (outdoor dining, street closures, regulatory relief),” Bradford said.

President and CEO of the San Diego East County Chamber — the region’s largest chamber organization — Jerry Sanders said that businesses want certainty. His chamber is advocating for policies that will help businesses recover after the pandemic and released a “Back in Business” report with guidance.

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Chad Matkowski, president & CEO of the San Diego County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce who joined the chamber in Feb. 2021, has offered information to connect businesses to lenders to survive the pandemic and now he is excited to guide businesses to different practices after the pandemic.

“With新冠肺炎’s effects, we have all had to adapt. We are looking at some new ways to work with clients and helping them adjust to new realities,” Matkowski said. “When we get out of COVID, it’ll be more back into how do we thrive again?”

For more information on area chambers of commerce, refer to our list starting on page 14.