

SPECIAL REPORT

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



Bret Schanzenbach
President & CEO
Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce

"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 video networking are here to stay, it's crucial to facilitate engaging meetings that encourage member participation.



Debra Rosen
President & CEO
North San Diego
Business Chamber

"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.

Groups such as the **Central San Diego Black Chamber of Commerce** were able to deliver around 300 grants to Black-owned businesses over the past year, totaling more than \$1 million. The Chamber's President and CEO, **Donna DeBerry** said the goal of their chamber is to "support the business, career and financial success of our chamber members which results in the economic empowerment of our communities."

Increase in Members

Many of the chambers experienced a

growth in membership numbers between February 2020 and 2021, based on the SDBJ survey and chamber leaders shared their thoughts on this trend.

Among the biggest jumps was the **San Diego County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce** which went from 250 members in 2020 to 450 members in 2021. **Christina Rounds**, vice chair of the chamber who oversees membership said people can see them doing the work, plus they have been able to increase their offerings of virtual events, called "Cafecitos" and expand it to regularly have a networking event all in Spanish.



Jaymie Bradford
Executive VP and
COO
San Diego Regional
Chamber of
Commerce

Jeremy Wilson, president of the **San Diego Equality Business Association (SDEBA)** — the second oldest LGBTQ Chamber of Commerce in the nation — said they made a strategic decision early on to retain all members including those who didn't have the resources to pay their dues. As a result, the organization grew by 35 business members during COVID.

"I believe what you put into this organization is a reflection of what you receive," Wilson said. "Some of our members have built entire businesses through referrals and marketing within the SDEBA. Others join our board of directors and obtain leadership skills and experience in running a non-profit. Still others value the social aspect of our group and find value in the relationships built."

For **Jason Wells**, CEO of the **San Ysidro Chamber of Commerce**, he sees their uptick in membership as a reflection of people who may have lost work but decided to start their own small business.

Advocacy and Info

Another key function of local chambers is advocacy on behalf of businesses and providing accurate information, especially during the pandemic when everything changed so fast.

"If our businesses didn't have us, they would have all ceased," Wells said of border businesses struggling during the pandemic. "But at least we're advocating for some measures... We're working hard right now to get to get some form of relief for our business as far as our customers getting to them."

Jaymie Bradford, executive vice president and COO of the **San Diego Regional**

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



Jerry Sanders
President & CEO
San Diego Regional
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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 Regional 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.

Similarly, **Rick Wilson**, president & CEO of the **San Diego East County Chamber of Commerce** 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 **National City 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.

"So a lot of what we've been doing is helping business survive throughout COVID," Matkowski said. "When we get out of COVID, it'll be more back into how do we thrive again?"

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