

SPECIAL REPORT

Business and Trade Associations Make It Work

Leaders Find Connection and Creative Solutions for Members, Community

■ By NATALLIE ROCHA

Even while social distancing and pandemic restrictions have shuttered events, San Diego County's many business and trade associations provided members a point of connection. These industry specific groups fuel the innovation and synergy of the community's change makers.

The **San Diego Business Journal** connected with leaders from a variety of business and trade associations to hear how they are keeping their members informed, inspired and working to move San Diego forward.

Impacting San Diego

There's power in numbers and by bringing together the brightest minds of the life science industry when they have been needed most, **Joe Panetta**, president and CEO of **Biocom California** has been able to help businesses create and advance the life-saving innovations needed to combat the coronavirus pandemic.



Joe Panetta
President & CEO
Biocom California

Biocom California represents over 1,400 members in the life science industry to promote policies and provide information that enables innovation.

"The value of membership changed and grew during the pandemic, deepening across our value chain," Panetta said. "We led in policy developments and advocacy at the state level, ensuring everything from determining "essential worker" status for our member companies and advocating for testing, to distributing PPE, to creating a rich collection of COVID-19 resources on our website, and creating an action plan with best practices for our members as they continued to keep their labs open and perform mission-critical pandemic-related work."

This past year living through the pandemic has shown **Matthew Fehling**, president & CEO of the **Better Business Bureau (BBB) Serving the Pacific Southwest** that while many things are out of our control leaning into your organization's value and mission are key.



Matthew Fehling
President & CEO
Better Business
Bureau Serving the
Pacific Southwest

With more than 5,000 local members, the BBB Serving the Pacific Southwest is supported by over 20,000 BBB Accredited Businesses and is one of the largest BBB's in the nation.

"One year ago, I sent a note to the BBB team a day after we closed our facilities to

the public and sent people to work from home," Fehling said. "During the past 12 months, we've seen some things...both uplifting and horrifying. One thing we can say for certain is that Better Business Bureau was a trusted resource for many."

Betsy Brennan, President and CEO of the **Downtown San Diego Partnership** has taken many angles to helping businesses thrive and providing free, virtual webinars has helped keep them up to date on the changing business environment.

The Downtown San Diego Partnership is a non-profit organization that serves as the principal voice and driving force behind the economic prosperity and cultural vitality of Downtown San Diego through membership, advocacy and public services.

"During 2020 we realized we could have a greater impact in the Downtown community by making our virtual webinars free," Brennan said. "Through 15 virtual programs we were able to connect more than 3,000 people to more than 40 different regional experts to talk through the latest available information, best practices, and available resources to help organizations and businesses adapt and survive."

One way they helped during the pandemic was through the Downtown Loyalty Program – an economic development tool which turned philanthropic investment into more than \$50,000 of direct revenue to struggling downtown businesses through the sale of discounted gift cards and promotions.

Building Community

With current health restrictions barring gathering of any size, especially large networking events, **Christina De Vaca**, CEO of the **Corporate Directors Forum** has honed in on making her members not feel alone during the pandemic.

Corporate Directors Forum was founded in 1991 with the simple premise that boards of directors could perform better and the group provides board-focused peer networking and director education in corporate governance "best practices" for those committed to continuous learning.

"We immediately pivoted to online presentations and included panel discussion,



Betsy Brennan
President & CEO
Downtown San Diego
Partnership



Christina De Vaca
CEO
Corporate Directors
Forum

educational workshops, fireside chat formats, our annual 3-day conference and our Director of the Year gala event," De Vaca said. "We've experimented with a variety of platforms to ensure that networking is always included and easy to use."

Judy Susser-Travis, executive director of the **Association for Corporate Growth (ACG)** said that in addition to making video networking and webinars work for her members, they can also attend virtual events of any of ACG's 59 chapters, "expanding their regional and national connections safely without leaving their couch."



Judy Susser-Travis
Executive Director
Association for
Corporate Growth

ACG promotes public policies that foster and incentivize the formation of private capital, investment and job growth for the middle market by bringing together San Diego's dealmakers.

"Initially we rushed to provide content via Zoom webinar panels on pivoting during the pandemic," Susser-Travis said. "Several months in, we realized it was the interaction that our people most craved. So, we decoupled the networking portion from our programs to create our new "Deal Maker Network" ... one hour with three sessions of purposefully-assigned smaller breakout groups to get people talking and listening to each other."

New Events and Opportunities

It's no secret that a year of staring at a computer screen for countless meetings has left people feeling "Zoom fatigue," but **Renée N.G. Stackhouse**, president of the **San Diego County Bar Association** said it's been crucial to facilitate these virtual gathering spaces so her members don't have to face the challenges of the pandemic alone.

Since 1899, the San Diego County Bar Association has worked to support the success and inclusion of lawyers and today the local chapter has more than 9,000 members.

"Zoom fatigue' is real," Stackhouse said. "Honestly, some of the events we've hosted in the past year did not reach the attendance levels we had anticipated. On the other hand, 12 months in, we continue to be amazed at the sustained healthy attendance at many of our educational programs and networking events. The need to

learn, grow, and connect remains as crucial as ever."

For **Karen Burges**, executive director of **NAIOP San Diego** — a group that represents the local real estate industry — said that this past year has shown her the resilience of her industry and member base. NAIOP San Diego is comprised of 640 local commercial, industrial, mixed use real estate professionals and Burges is optimistic about the opportunities ahead.



Karen Burges
Executive Director
NAIOP San Diego

"With a year in the pandemic, I can clearly recognize that NAIOP San Diego remains a strong leader in the industry and continues to support its members by providing unparalleled business opportunities, educational programming and real trending information," Burges said. "We will continue serve up superior events that can be achieved via a virtual platform, we will invite new city council members to our Civic Engagement Campaign, we will address the age gap in our industry by providing a stellar mentorship program, we will provide many networking and educational opportunities while we wait for the go ahead for in person events."

While the pandemic has been challenging to the local tourism industry, **Julie Coker**, president and CEO of the **San Diego Tourism Authority** said that "the pandemic has cemented what we knew to be true – that we are stronger together."



Julie Coker
President & CEO
San Diego Tourism
Authority

According to the organization's website, tourism is the second largest segment of San Diego's economy and employs approximately 194,000 people. With this in mind, Coker is leaning into the virtual tools at hand to prepare San Diego's tourism economy for the future.

"The San Diego Tourism Authority's membership programs provide businesses of all sizes the opportunity to reach new audiences, connect with travel industry experts and leverage the power of San Diego's world-renowned brand," Coker said. "We'll continue all this and more going into the future, and as travel returns, demand will be high and competition will be fierce. We're committed to providing members with the tools and opportunities that will help set them apart in the eyes of future travelers."

For more information on Business and Trade Associations, refer to our list on pages 15 and 16. ■