

A Year in Review

Small firms with fewer than 500 employees represent 99.7 percent of the 27.2 million businesses, employ half of all private sector employees, and pay nearly 45 percent of the total U.S. private payroll, according to the most recent data from U.S. Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy, 2009. They have also generated 60 to 80 percent of net new jobs annually over the past decade.

That's just one of the reasons that the Berks Chamber has placed such emphasis on the programs that enhance the networking – and growth – opportunities of our own small businesses, which account for 80% of our members.

For example, our Business Resource Center:

- ◆ Engages key partners that provide technical assistance to small business in the formation of a formal network (GRESA) with a monthly meeting to review referral opportunities. As a result, the number of entrepreneur referrals increased from 78 to 101 from 2008 to 2009;
- ◆ Initiated Small Business Matters, a monthly electronic newsletter with technical assistance tips that also reminds members of assistance available; and
- ◆ Increased the Outreach to Trusted advisors (accountants, lawyers, bankers, etc.) on the availability of resources for entrepreneurs to strengthen our community's start-up rate.

To enhance technical assistance, the Chamber re-engaged the PRP (Professional Resource Program), utilizing members to provide one-hour free service to other members.

For the fourth quarter of 2009, our website revamp included branding of the Business Resource Center, adding more interactive and real-time resources, and incorporating more social networking opportunities.

The Chamber's economic development initiatives have taken on greater importance in fostering a positive environment in the Berks business community. One notable effort was to reestablish an active Transportation Committee, which is now playing a leading role in addressing such vital issues as improvements to Routes 222 North, the R6 commuter rail service to Philadelphia, Streetcar on the Penn Corridor and general improvements in traffic flow.

The 28-member committee lobbied state legislators and State Transportation Secretary Allen Beihler on efforts to improve 222 North as a major transportation route. Members also wrote letters, initiated a Call to Action grass roots alert, and took part in a major press conference that garnered major media coverage.

Another of the Committee's priorities was moving the Streetcar Study, which was completed in the Fall of 2008, into the public engagement stage. During the public input stage in March/April 2009, a municipal council meeting was held, the Study was the focus of a Chamber breakfast meeting, a Chamber blog was established, and committee members kept in active contact with elected officials. The Chamber will continue to gain input from the community through 2009 on the viability of the streetcar in tying together an entertainment corridor from Wyomissing to downtown Reading.

Of course, the ongoing redevelopment of a "Safe and Clean" downtown Reading business and social community remains a Chamber priority, particularly as it relates to revitalizing the 400 to 500 blocks of Penn Street. We need to expand on the success of the Goggleworks and IMAX theatre and the "Entertainment Square" concept.

GRCCI: a business ally and advocate

Among its many roles, the Chamber acts as the business community's primary advocate with elected officials on the local, state and federal levels. And the issues addressed are diverse, ranging from improving traffic flow on our major transportation routes to energy and health care on a national level.

Initial Chamber goals on behalf of its members at the start of the year were ambitious, but many have already been accomplished or are close to being met; long-term objectives are naturally ongoing.

For example, the Chamber held a series of forums on issues like energy and workforce concerns, health care and higher education, to obtain valuable member insight. Six forums have already been conducted, attracting 280 participants.

Our popular legislative breakfast, where members have an opportunity to hear from and directly address key legislators and legislative issues, drew 150 participants.

Advocacy goals that have already been met include:

- Formalizing a grassroots network of members who will play an active role in supporting the interests of the Berks business community. More members are welcome to participate.
- GreaterReadingVoice.com, our advocacy website, helped our members stay connected and allowed them to take action on pertinent policy issues.
- Expanding the Government Affairs Committee to 20+ members and included more young professionals in the mix. The committee now totals 28 members and meets on a monthly basis.



- Endorsing a series of pro-business candidates for elected office. Of seven candidates endorsed in state and local government races last fall and in subsequent special elections, six ran successful campaigns.
- Developing a regional consortium of Third Class Cities to address fiscal issues of mutual

concern. Cities participating include Reading, York, Lancaster, Harrisburg and Lehigh Valley.

We encourage all of our members to share their views on local, state and national issues, with both the Chamber and directly with your elected officials! To do so, visit GreaterReadingVoice.com



Efforts attract and retain members

Retaining existing members and attracting new ones are two of the greatest challenges facing Chambers of Commerce across the country, particularly during difficult economic times. That's why the Greater Reading Chamber of Commerce & Industry constantly strives to improve the value of the programs and services it offers, resulting in greater than average retention rates compared to similar organizations.

In fact, the Chamber has achieved a 12-month rolling retention rate of 91.5 percent, versus a national chamber average of just 85%! In addition, new member retention rates reached 57%, compared to an average of just 50%.

This has been accomplished thanks to the determined efforts of the Chamber's staff, board and committee members. For example, during the past year alone they made more than 300 retention calls and 45 personal member visits. New member retention has been enhanced through the efforts of our actively engaged, 27-member Ambassador Committee, which focuses on encouraging new members to get and remain active in Chamber committees, activities and affairs, which has spurred both

member growth and retention.

Other committees have enjoyed greater member participation as well. The number of Chamber standing committees grew from 11 in 2008 to 14 in 2009, with greater input from new members. Overall member participation in committees grew from 169 participants to 244 in over the same period.

We've also continued to use state-of-the-art technologies to give members a greater ability to share information through new blogs, and

video and audio podcasts – as well as a revamped website and instantaneous information sharing through popular “social” websites such as Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook!

Of course, the greater our membership base, the more resources the Chamber has available to invest in developing programs to improve the overall value of membership – to the benefit of both new and longtime members!

Chamber enhances communication to members, individual employees

As the Chamber has continued to expand the number and variety of services and programs it offers, so has the level of communication it provides to its members and their employees.

For example, more than 5,200 individual employees now receive targeted messages of value, depending on the size of the company, the industry its serves and the function of each employee.

Targeted publications, such as Small Business Matters, HR Matters and Legislative Matters, have also been developed to give



in-depth updates to the person at each company who can put that information to best use!



Women's Symposium event



Networking opportunities

Chamber promotes partnerships, training

At the Chamber, we realize that one of our most important roles is to serve as a liaison – not only in bringing members together with other members, but also in helping those same members find outside sources of technical, management and even financial support.

We've found that one of the most efficient and effective ways of doing this is by increasing member involvement in industrial partnerships and custom training opportunities. For example, during the past year we:

- ◆ Assisted member involvement in Food, Plastics, Logistics, Advanced Materials, and Diversified Materials (AMDM) industrial partnerships;

- ◆ Received approval for Toyota Way and Patrick Thean (Rockerfeller Habits2) training programs for partnership funding; and

We've worked to strengthen the Greater Reading Young Professionals Network, which now boasts 350 active members – 35 of whom are actively engaged with GRCCI committees. GRYP reps serve on the Chamber Government Affairs Committee, the Streetcar Taskforce, the Women's Committee, and more.

One of the Chamber's most important goals in the past year was to assist in the establishment of a countywide intern website –

www.berksworks.org – that would make it easier for companies to find qualified employees. Chamber focus groups contributed to the development of the site, which has already received nearly 4,000 employer contacts, 66 job postings

and 33 registered students.

Greater Reading KIZ placed college interns funded through the Wall Street West KIZ internship program.

GRCCI receives five-star U.S. Chamber accreditation

The Greater Reading Chamber of Commerce & Industry was honored earlier this year with a 5-Star Accreditation by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. This prestigious honor places the GRCCI among the top 4% of Chambers nationwide.

The U.S. Chamber examining committee noted excellence in the following areas:

- ◆ The Chamber has a strong Human Resources program that offers employees significant training and benefits.

- ◆ The Chamber's Legislative Agenda is noteworthy for its ability

to act quickly on any issue affecting the business community.

- ◆ The Chamber is a Leader in regional cooperation, participation and chairing several coalitions and task forces.

- ◆ The Chamber's Training Center provides state-of-the-art training programs designed to help member businesses grow.

- ◆ The Chamber should be recognized for its positive work in the community, for example its work with the city police force to reduce crime and reward officers' outstanding performance.



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