

## Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Contributed by David King, C. E. King & Sons

Having a grandfather who started his awning company in the 1920s and growing up with my parents' awning shop in our home, I can honestly say that I was born and raised in the awning business. A multi-generation family business, C. E. King & Sons, Inc. was founded in 1948, and we moved to our current East Hampton location on Long Island in 1986.

Sometime during the 1980s, I joined NECPA and gradually became more active, first serving as a member of the Board of Directors and then as President for the 2006-2007 term. I have remained a Board member, because I believe that the more active one is in an organization, the greater the benefits. In the case of NECPA, these include business-to-business networking, great learning opportunities, and camaraderie.

Like other awning businesses, our biggest challenge has always been the seasonal demand for our products and services. For my company, the peaks and valleys are even more pronounced because we live in a resort area. With that situation unlikely to change, we are grateful for progress in other areas, such as the tools and materials used in our trade. For example, the dimensional stability of fabric used to be a serious problem, but acrylic fabric has had a huge positive impact. If only someone could solve some of the other problems facing small businesses, like the costs of healthcare, gas, and insurance!

Discussions about these technical and business topics often lead to helpful solutions, so the NECPA Board puts a lot of effort into offering events that will give attendees good value. In 1997, we held our first tradeshow, and many of those vendors remain loyal participants in our annual Expo. Eventually, we wanted to grow so that we could offer even more. MassMutual Center certainly had the space and infrastructure, so we booked the smaller of their two halls for our January 2008 event. By 2010, we had 48 Exhibitors, so the following year we took the larger space. We then grew to 55 Exhibitors in 2012, and our reputation as a credible organization with a great show grew as well. Although our numbers dipped a bit for 2013 given the proximity of the IFAI show, we still processed more than 300 attendee registrations and received lots of positive feedback from vendors and visitors alike. As in the past, we will work closely with PAMA and MFA, who bring us highly rated seminars, to ensure more great programs in the future.

Just as businesses do, NECPA is enjoying the extensive reach that our website and email capability give us for relatively little cost compared with paper-based marketing. Now our Board can focus more on our events and less on mailings. Our biggest challenge, however, has been and most likely will continue to be having motivated and committed Board members to drive the organization. Nevertheless, we seem to have had the proper fit between people available and work to be done. So far, no Board member or President has been overwhelmed by the job, and we look forward to working together on the January 2014 event. In fact, every member of last year's Board wants to continue!

As I look ahead, I believe that our greatest strength as an organization will continue to sustain us: the leadership at the top and allowing Board members to tackle tasks in their own way. I am sure that we will continue to attract not only volunteers for our Board but also members to our organization. Last month, our membership reached 136 companies, up from 107 in 2010. Being an NECPA member has always given me the opportunity to interact more closely with others in my trade, in ways that we are typically unable to do at a local level, either because of not wanting to speak with competition or because there are very few in the same trade within our community.

Board members who work on the Expo & Conference events have even more opportunities to get to know suppliers and industry experts. Another benefit is our annual December gathering at the Red Lion Inn, where we dine amongst the holiday decorations and later hold a full Board meeting. We have forged many life-long friendships based on a history of these events. Actively participating at any level in the organization leads to many advantages derived from interacting with our peers and meeting new people in our industry. I know the future holds many more of these benefits and advantages.