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## BOMA-ATLANTA: AGAINST THE ODDS

Finding success through increased member contact



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# BOMA-Atlanta: Against the Odds

Finding success through increased member contact

BY SHERYL S. JACKSON

**SHRINKING BUDGETS, LOWER** levels of revenue and decreasing asset values are challenges that nearly all industries have faced during the most recent financial recession, and owners and managers of commercial properties are no different. However, faced with these far-reaching recessionary effects, Building Owners and Managers of Atlanta (BOMA-Atlanta) has actually seen an increase in membership, as well as significant increases in attendance at educational and networking events. Really.

"The effects of the recession showed up first in the construction and development side of real estate in 2008. Then, in 2009 and 2010, the owners and managers of existing buildings felt the full impact of the recession," says **Gabriel Eckert, CAE**, executive director of BOMA-Atlanta, a trade association representing building owners, property and facility managers, building engineers, and allied companies that support the commercial real estate industry. "Vacancy rates increased and asset values declined," he added. This resulted in lower rental rates and a reduction in income and budgets for real estate companies.

Because professional memberships, travel and educational conferences are often the first items to be cut from budgets as company revenues decrease, BOMA-Atlanta leadership faced the dual challenges of communicating the value of membership and education to member company leaders and continuing to serve members while keeping costs reasonable.

## By the Numbers

To put it simply, BOMA-Atlanta's efforts were successful; educational enrollments grew by 66 percent; attendance at networking events rose by eight percent; membership is up by two percent and; revenue increased by three percent between January 1, 2009, and December 31, 2010.

Although the membership and revenue increases may not be huge, Eckert points out that they are indeed significant because they occurred during the height of the recession in his industry. "A two percent increase in membership means that we were able to retain most members while also expanding our membership base," he explains.



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"The significant increase in educational attendance shows that we are making more contact with members and potential members, and providing valuable training that benefits them.

"To address the communication issue, we developed a quarterly communication campaign that targets decision makers within member companies," Eckert continues. "We describe educational opportunities, as well as our government advocacy efforts." To make sure that BOMA-Atlanta's message is seen, the association produces the quarterly communication in both electronic and print formats.

"We find that it is best not to rely solely on email communication," Eckert explains. "Everyone is bombarded with emails, so if you rely only on that form of communication, your message may not stand out."

He adds that reaching people with email and print communication reinforces the message and increases the likelihood that it will be read.

One-on-one communication with decision makers within key member companies is one of Eckert's primary responsibilities. "I've increased personal contact with key members through telephone calls, lunch meetings and informal conversations," he explains. Topics discussed don't focus solely on BOMA-Atlanta, but on the member's company and the challenges faced by the company.

"The conversations are a chance for me to get to know more about our members' needs and gives them an opportunity to put another face with BOMA-Atlanta," he says. Building and strengthening these relationships makes it easier to communicate BOMA-Atlanta's value to decision makers by letting members know that "they are not facing these challenges alone," he adds.

BOMA-Atlanta is also increasing contact with decision makers by hosting regular roundtable meetings—at which senior-level management of member companies are invited to discuss common issues. "These meetings create an opportunity for peer-to-peer discussions at a high level," Eckert says. "The first roundtable meeting's topic was environmental sustainability and gave members a chance to share best practice ideas with each other."

## Cost Cutting

To address members' shrinking budgets, BOMA-Atlanta has created free and low-cost educational programs to increase the level of service to members without increasing costs.

"We use meeting space donated by members, and we often use members as our speakers," he says. One of the first free meetings for members was a three-hour seminar on the impact of healthcare reform on the commercial real estate industry. "The only expenses for the meeting were marketing and snacks."

An added benefit to using local speakers—especially BOMA-Atlanta members—to lead the low- and no-cost educational programs is the opportunity to spotlight some of the industry's "thought leaders," Eckert says. "We have a wealth of expertise within our membership, and speaking at these events gives them a chance to give back to the industry."

The timing of these programs has a strategic goal in mind.

"We schedule and promote the educational programs during dues renewal periods and at times we are offering discounted memberships," he says. "This timing enables members to see increased value in their membership dues and from a potential member's perspective, the free seminar is an immediate benefit of joining at that time."

Partnerships with other organizations to enhance attendance at educational meetings and reduce costs to all participants are another route taken by BOMA-Atlanta.

"We collaborate with other associations whose members are in the same or similar industry to present educational programs that are beneficial to both groups," Eckert explains. "We choose organizations with memberships that don't overlap our membership base too much."

BOMA-Atlanta offers a Human Resource Certificate Program—a series of five seminars that focus on key human resource issues faced by managers. "We partnered with the Council for Quality Growth to offer their members access to this program," Eckert says. The program

directly benefits members of both organizations, and as an added benefit, the Georgia Real Estate Commission awards continuing education credits for the seminars. This partnership not only increases attendance at the BOMA-Atlanta seminars, but it strengthens both organizations.

Another example of a win-win educational partnership was a program on BOMA-Atlanta International's revised standards for office building measurements, says Eckert. "We invited members of the American Institute of Architects Atlanta Chapter to partner with us for the program, because both organizations have a shared interest in these standards," he says.

Eckert is pleased that during tough economic times, BOMA-Atlanta was able to grow its membership base, increase educational and networking opportunities, and increase revenue.

"I strongly believe that the teamwork among our board of directors, staff and members made our success possible," Eckert says. "Our success during a recession positions us to remain strong and continue to grow as the economy strengthens." <

## Recession-Proof Your Association

### 4 tips to survive tough times

When the members of Building Owners and Managers of Atlanta (BOMA-Atlanta) began to feel the effects of the recession, association leaders and staff worked together to develop a strategy to increase contact with members and communicate the benefits of membership. The success of their efforts can be seen during the past two years by the 66 percent increase in attendance at educational events; the two percent increase in membership at a time when many associations saw a drop in membership; and a three percent increase in revenue.

**Gabriel Eckert, CAE**, executive director of BOMA-Atlanta, attributes the association's success to the following strategies:

#### 1. Increase member contact

"The typical response to budget constraints is to cut expenses and reduce the number of programs offered by the association," Eckert says. "We did the opposite. We increased the number of educational and networking programs we offered in order to maintain contact with existing and potential members."

#### 2. Maintain focus

"Keep on track with your strategic plan and vision for the future even if you are changing the way you reach members," Eckert says.

#### 3. Seek and form partnerships

"Find organizations that make sense for joint promotion of educational programs," Eckert says. "Partnerships increase attendance, cut expenses and improve benefits to both organizations' members."

#### 4. Think beyond the recession

"Don't just think about today," Eckert warns. "Think about how you want your association positioned when the economy strengthens," he says. "You want to be ready to capitalize on growth opportunities that will exist when the recession ends."



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