

Heads of States

Association directors are the ultimate multitaskers.

By John Dunlap

You know the old line that a bartender is one part drink maker and two parts psychiatrist? Take that notion and quadruple it for the state association director.

The person in this job must be a solid organizer, sociable, wise to every aspect of the industry, a good host, have sympathetic ears, be able to deal with legislative and legal industry issues and, oh, yes, be a part-time psychiatrist.



Texas SSA Executive Director Ginny Sutton signs up a new member at a recent trade show.

The job description of the state association director begins with being well organized and sociable. When it comes to priorities, there are many, with attention to legislative issues at or near the top. Right behind that is promoting educational gatherings to keep members up to date on the latest trends in the industry, encouraging new ways for members to market themselves and promoting the latest from vendors. Last, but certainly not least, is helping members understand legal issues.

Then there is that little matter of organizing gatherings in different parts of the state. In Texas, the TXSSA offers area luncheons in 12 to 14 cities throughout the state. In all, the TXSSA offers about 40 to 50 events a year. In California, the CSSA puts on two to three major events with 200+ people, four to five owner's breakfasts, five to six area coffee meetings and five to six education events.

"The best state association directors have to be able to multitask with the best of them," said Nichelle Nassif, director of state association management for the Self Storage Association.

Nassif works on behalf of the SSA with state associations around the country. "On any given day a state association director might need to be a marketer, lobbyist, meeting

planner, customer service rep, administrator, graphic designer ... and the list goes on. Flexibility is key."

What follows are the thoughts of four talented state association leaders about their jobs. They are: Ginny Sutton, executive director of the Texas Self Storage Association; Erin King, executive director of the California Self Storage Association; Lorna Bolduc, executive director of the Connecticut, Massachusetts and Florida self storage associations; and Brandi Gerew, who heads up the North Carolina Self Storage Association.

It's All About the Members

The state association director and his or her staff are constantly pumping out information to members about legislative, legal and educational topics, setting up meetings and conferences across the state, and working to help each and every member. In short, the best state directors have a wealth of talent, heart and the ability to shift attention and turn on a dime.



Lorna Bolduc, executive director of the Connecticut, Massachusetts and Florida self storage associations, greets members to a seminar for a state gathering.

"I think the right person for a role like mine has to bring many qualities to the table," Erin King said. "You need patience along with a sense of urgency. You need to know when to listen and when to lead. You need to be a good communicator. You must be flexible and a self-starter. You need to be creative. You must be straightforward and honest—one that honors commitments. In the end, you are there to serve the members. Every one of the members that sends dues to the California Self Storage Association is my customer. Whether they are a vendor or an owner, they are our customer and I must remember that."

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“The ability to see the big picture is so important,” said Brandi Gerew. “The details are important, but you have to know where you are going. I try very hard to listen to our membership and address their needs on an individual basis and, if warranted, talk to the association as a whole. Our members are active; they participate and give us feedback. We are here to serve them and their needs and I think we are at a place that our members now believe we understand that.”

Lorna Bolduc points out that you have to be able to move quickly in many directions.

“Knowledge about association management is top of the list,” she said. “The volunteers (or employees) are the experts in self storage, so with that covered the executive director needs to bring to the table everything else. In the office, I focus on the day-to-day, making sure the phones and email are answered, the financial accounting and member database work is accurate, the website and e-blasts are timely, contracts are fair or favorable, and that event details are being completed on time. I’m always thinking about what’s coming up: annual budget, nominations and elections, magazine advertising and articles, the next event, etc.”



The CSSA’s Erin King (center) converses with fellow California association members.

Ginny Sutton believes that any state director needs to be strong in four areas: discernment (the ability to see the big picture in terms of what is best for the organization overall); dedication (growing an association takes not only initiative and hard work but also a willingness to keep plugging away at achieving goals and helping members succeed); integrity and fairness; and having good staff and volunteers.

“I’ve been fortunate to find great, dedicated, customer-centered team members,” Sutton said. “If they have to pick between answering a question for me, their boss, as I’m standing in front of them, and answering a question from a member on the phone, they’ll choose the member first. And that makes me proud. Members always come first.”



Brandi Gerew, manager of the NCSSA, visits with the association’s president, March Chase.

They Love Their Jobs

In the end, against all odds, each of the state association directors said they love their jobs.

“I enjoy helping people,” said King. “This has been the most rewarding job I’ve ever had, as I have the opportunity to help small business owners in the state I love. I have really enjoyed working with Carlos Kaslow and the SSA on our legislative efforts. My efforts, and the efforts of our board, make an impact in people’s lives every day. I take pride in that.”

“The best part of my job is the people I work with,” added Bolduc. “I love interacting, assisting, righting a wrong... just being friendly and helpful to members and volunteers, and those with whom we do business.”

For Gerew, there is joy in working with others and seeing results. “NCSSA has an amazing board and the members are very responsive,” she said. “When you answer a member’s question, they are quick to offer gratitude and they’re always so interesting to talk to. The board always seeks to improve the association, so it’s a joy to work with them.”

Sutton feels the work is worth the effort, as well as the frustrations that sometimes come with the territory.

“Running any association, including a state self storage association, isn’t for the faint of heart,” she concludes. “It’s kind of like being a teacher. On the surface it might seem to offer many perks but it is darned hard work. At least some of your bosses (the board) will be turning over and you’ll have new ones to deal with each year.

“But if you’re going to pick an association to be the executive director of, I highly recommend the field of self storage,” she added. “It’s an industry like no other, with so many independent, bright and savvy entrepreneurial business owners involved. If you let yourself appreciate the light these people bring, it is a wonderful job.” ❖