



The quest to be “funny”

I read an interview last week with comedian Jerry Seinfeld who was outlining some of the least understood challenges in his profession. One in particular, from a Chamber perspective, hit home.

Seinfeld admitted that it was especially difficult for him to come to grips with the fact that what he considered to be among his funniest lines often fell flat with his audience. Paraphrasing Seinfeld, “It didn’t matter if I thought it was funny if the audience didn’t. They were the ultimate judge.”

A couple months ago, the Chamber issued a survey to its members asking their opinions on programs and events that we have been offering, in some cases for an extended period of time. As you might suspect, our staff and our board have been quite satisfied with what we offer or we wouldn’t be offering it. The purpose of the survey, to reference the Seinfeld situation, was to determine if we were “funny.”

The overall synopsis of the survey was mostly positive. Of the 118 people who took the time to share their opinions, a high percentage felt the Chamber was making an honest attempt to do what its members indicated was important. The survey questions were asked to elicit feedback on certain areas where the Chamber at least had an inkling that something wasn’t quite right, based on lack of attendance or participation.

The comment page, however, didn’t provide an indication of where we might be coming up short. We did have someone share that “a lot of events and programs feel a little dated.” That’s important to know, even if it was non-specific. A good old program review periodically is always a good idea. Our Chamber staff and our Membership Committee will be conducting that review.

In terms of comments that appeared multiple times, members indicated that the Chamber needed to increase our social media presence, should provide more consideration to small businesses in terms of recognition and leadership opportunities and might consider more effective ways to let members know all of the Chamber benefits that they are entitled to but of which they are likely unaware.

The hiring of our new Digital Media Manager should address the social media concerns. The other two recommendations will take some research and some creativity and we’re generally pretty good at those.



Joe Hurd

Blair County Chamber of Commerce

Seymore’s pass-on the recipe for success

Family businesses account for 64% of the U.S. gross domestic product, generate 62% of the country’s employment and account for 78% of all new job creation, according to the Conway Center for Family Business.

None of those statistics come as a great surprise to Travis Seymore. As general manager of Alto Markets, located at 5933 Sixth Avenue in Altoona, Seymore has played an integral part in helping build a successful small business in which 40% of its 15 employees all carry the Seymore name.

“I’ve grown up around a lot of family businesses so the environment is not a foreign one to me,” he pointed out. “When it’s done effectively, it’s a good thing. When it’s not, it can be a disaster. The key is to understand how to deal with the challenges that will undoubtedly come about at one time or another.”

One of the biggest challenges, according to Seymore, is managing the roles and expectations of each family member.

“In my opinion, trusting and adding responsibility to the younger members

Working Together

and giving up some of the responsibilities for the older members is one of the main reasons most family businesses prosper or fail,” he disclosed. “Another is not allowing disagreements at work to spill-over to home life. One of the worst things that can happen to a family is allowing business decisions to invade the house. I think you really need to compartmentalize when it comes to running a family business.”

And focus as often as possible on the positives. “It’s essential to be able to bounce ideas off each other,” Seymore explained. “Our staff is very good at reining-in some of my more robust ideas. It’s also a huge advantage to know that there are people who have your back, if needed. I think a family business can bring families closer together, if done properly, especially if there are multiple generations of family in the business. We have that here.”

Alto Markets is a grow-



Alto Markets in Altoona is truly a family affair as seven of its 15 employees carry the same last name — Seymore. Pictured left to right are: Jeff, Marilyn, Sylvia, Travis, Amy, Christopher and Seth. Working together has been a challenge and a blessing.

ing mash-up of specialty grocery store/deli, take out restaurant, caterer and wholesaler. It offers everything from hot meals and hoagies to personal or corporate caterings and a full specialty grocery store with a large supply of homemade products.

“We take pride in doing our best to offer products from local small businesses,” Seymore acknowledged. “As a small

business ourselves, we understand how important that is to our local economy.”

High on his list of business priorities, Seymore emphasizes, is to never forget the incredible role that his “non-family” employees play in the ongoing success of Alto Markets. After all, they comprise the majority of the staff.

“I try to treat everyone as family so I don’t find it too

difficult to bring non-family members on-board,” he admitted. “At the moment, we have some of the best employees (family and non-family) I have ever worked with. There is a strong family atmosphere here among the staff. I believe our customers see and appreciate that aspect of business as well.”

(Alto Markets has been a Blair County Chamber member since 2018.)

Drenning joins an impressive list of Chamber Leadership Fellows



Gary Drenning accepts the Leadership Blair County Fellow award from Jodi Cessna. Drenning is the tenth person honored as an LBC Fellow.

When Gary Drenning moved back to Blair County after being away for more than 30 years, he set a goal of getting involved in something that was meaningful to the community. He chose the Chamber’s Leadership Blair County program.

Drenning made a good choice, both for himself and the community. On September 24th he was rewarded for his work with LBC as he became the tenth recipient of the program’s “Fellow” designation and the first one recognized since 2006.

“Gary has certainly exceeded the requirements for this type of honor,” acknowledged Donna Gority, herself an LBC Fellow. “He’s been involved in some meaningful way in

practically every aspect of the LBC program. He’s an active and positive example of what servant leadership is.”

Jodi Cessna, another Fellow, agrees. “Gary’s been on the Alumni Committee since its inception,” she pointed out. “He’s been the committee chair and the treasurer and has been extensively involved in the (LBC) youth sessions. He steps-up wherever he’s needed. That’s why the program continues to be successful.”

Drenning graduated from the LBC program in 2007. He recently retired as the local owner of National Property Inspections. He also served on the Chamber’s Board of Directors and was the organization’s treasurer for three years. The Fellow announcement



took him by surprise. “I was really caught off-guard,” Drenning admitted. “There are so many people who make an impact on this program that I never really considered that I might get an honor like this. I really enjoy LBC and I look forward to continuing my involvement.”

Previous LBC Fellows are: John Schraff, the late Tim Sissler, Reverend Paul Johnson, Donna Gority, Vicky Miranda, Philip Devorris, Jodi Cessna, Shari Rouch and John Brown.

(For more information on the Leadership Blair County program, call the Chamber at (814) 943-8151.)

Mayer named as new Digital Media Manager

Brittany Mayer of Roaring Spring has been hired by the Blair County Chamber as its new Digital Media Manager.

“It’s been an extensive search,” acknowledged Chamber President Joe Hurd. “We interviewed a number of outstanding candidates but we were very specific in what we were looking for. Digital media is a huge priority for our organization and we wanted someone who checked-off most of our boxes. Brittany did that.”

Mayer is a graduate of Robert Morris University with a B.A. in Communications and an M.S. in Organizational Leadership. Her previous job was as Social Media Manager for Moun-



Brittany Mayer

tain View Eye Associates in Altoona.

“The job description closely matched my interest and experience,” Mayer disclosed. “Not only the social media aspect but the design element and the website possibilities have really appealed to me. It’s exciting.”

Non-Profit Committee plans networking event

It’s been a difficult time for the non-profit business community in Blair County and the Chamber’s Committee of Non-Profit Businesses believes that a relaxing night-out will be an appropriate way to get everyone back on solid psychological footing.

The Committee has planned a networking event for this Thursday, October 7th from 4:30 to 7:00 p.m. at the Buccinese Society in Altoona. The event will include a Italian buffet of chicken, meatballs, rigatoni and salad. There will be a cash bar and an opportunity to enjoy an evening of



bocci and great conversation with other non-profits that have endured many of the same challenges.

“We invite for-profit business people as well,” emphasized committee chair Natalie Depto-Vesey. “We have a great deal in common.”

The cost is \$18 for Chamber members and \$25 for non-members. Call the Chamber at (814) 943-8151 to register.



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