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2009: A busy year for chamber

BY ANGELA HOLMAN | Editor

The Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce closed out a challenging year with a 20-member increase over 2008 and a 28 percent increase in the number of services and opportunities it offered its members.

As with most chambers in California, the Carlsbad Chamber lost some members. But unlike most, the Carlsbad Chamber welcomed more than it lost.

While last year's economy was tough on everyone, the chamber was able to increase its member benefits. To help its members thrive in 2009, the chamber hosted more than 300 meetings, workshops and events.

"When business is good, the chamber is busy. When businesses are struggling, that is when the chamber GETS busy, doing even more to create opportunities for success for our members and the community," said Toni Padron, executive vice president and COO of the chamber.



Last year, the Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce offered more than 300 workshops and events, including 5 Minute Networking.

That figure breaks down to 25 happenings each month. Considering each month had an average of 22 working days, the chamber staff rose to the challenge, providing these services as additional member benefits.

These figures do not include the two days each

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BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT

AutoClaims Direct's unique business model fuels growth

AutoClaims Direct has been on a meteoric 1,100 percent growth trajectory over the past five years and was recently selected to *Inc. Magazine's* prestigious list of the fastest-growing privately held companies in America.

The company ranked 14th nationally in the Insurance category and was No. 33 in all industries from the San Diego Metro region. AutoClaims Direct is a claims services and business solutions provider for the auto insurance claims industry.

The company's team of claims professionals, meshed with its industry-leading claims management technology solution, provide a timesaving, efficient platform. The firm's advanced technology and business methods allow insurers throughout the country to leverage its tech savvy suite of cutting-edge services to streamline their own internal operations.

"Our growth can be attributed to three basic focal points," said CEO Ernie Bray. "Hire the best people, maximize your technological solutions and maintain a tireless work ethic."

Also integral to the success of the corporation are Chief Technology Officer Adam Nazar and Vice President Tara Esquivel.



Ernie Bray, CEO of AutoClaims Direct, is an expert in the insurance claims industry.

"Collectively, we form the core nucleus of AutoClaims Direct, and have made this company what it is today," said Bray, a 15-year insurance professional whose wife also is an executive with the firm.

What makes AutoClaims Direct unique is the company's willingness to utilize unorthodox methods to fuel growth and employee job satisfaction. The company adopted a "green virtual office" five years ago before being green was fashionable.

"We are able to achieve some amazing

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accomplishments with the use of our technology. First and foremost we are, for the most part, a paperless company. With the exception of items that periodically must be sent via the postal service, we work in a paperless internal environment," Bray said. "Secondly, without a large brick and mortar operation we are able to hire and retain the best talent across the country regardless of their location, eliminating unnecessary overhead and lengthy office commutes. Thirty percent of our virtual office staff is based right here in San Diego County and we plan to grow that percentage even higher."

The executives at AutoClaims Direct are huge proponents of utilizing new and emerging technology, which includes video conferencing, instant messaging and an array of social media tools to create a web of communication that often exceeds the network of a traditional office setting. The company's



AutoClaims Direct is a claims services and business solutions provider for the auto insurance claims industry.



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employees are compensated at a higher level than the industry average, creating good morale.

During economic downturns, many companies overlook their most valued asset: Their staff. Instead of looking to reduce employees, AutoClaims Direct takes the opposite approach.

"We concentrate on offering additional training programs and professional development in order to increase our team's job-related expertise. This training initiative has paid tremendous dividends by raising the overall employees' knowledge and skills base, which ultimately means our clients receive even better service," Bray said.

Bray is a recognized expert in the insurance claims industry and a published author of various trade journals. He is a member of the Society of Claims Law Associates, American Bar Association, Risk & Insurance Management Society, Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce and the Carlsbad Charitable Foundation.

Bray and his wife also support the Challenged Athletes Foundation, Batiquitos Lagoon Foundation and Friends of Carrillo Ranch.

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week the chamber offered free SCORE counseling through its Small Business Success Center. An average of 10 counseling sessions took place each week last year, assisting close to 300 businesspeople.

The numbers also don't reflect the three subcommittees that met once a month at the chamber or the four ribbon cuttings the chamber averaged each month.

On a regular basis, the chamber also attended City Council, Planning Commission, County Board of Supervisors and state meetings to advocate for public policy that was beneficial to business and the community. Those meetings were often lengthy and some required hours of travel time to Sacramento.

In addition, the chamber published a 60-page "Small Business Success Guide" for the first time. The chamber also published a glossy magazine commemorating McClellan-Palomar Airport's 50th Anniversary.

That piece received an Excellence in Journalism Award from the San Diego Press Club, as did the chamber's monthly newspaper, the *Carlsbad Business Journal*. Also last year, the chamber redesigned its annual 160-page "Business Resource Guide," revamped its Web site, redesigned the *Carlsbad Business Journal* and began using Facebook and Twitter to promote its events and services.

"We're a busy staff, but we get our inspiration from the industriousness and determination of our members" said Ted Owen, president and CEO of the chamber. "It's a pleasure to work hard on their behalf toward a prosperous 2010."

Check out the lists below for a snapshot of last year's chamber happenings.

Major 2009 events (12 total):

- Annual Business Awards Dinner, Feb. 20.
- Business is Green Showcase, March 17.
- An Evening with Martin Garrick, April 30.
- Carlsbad Village Street Faire, May 3.
- Outstanding Educational Program Awards Dinner, May 8.
- Chamber of Commerce Day at Camp



The chamber and Santa helped welcome home Marines from Afghanistan at a Dec. 12 event for their families.

Pendleton, May 15.

- McClellan-Palomar Airport 50th Anniversary Event, June 27.
- State of the City, Aug. 28.
- Chamber Board of Directors Retreat Weekend, October.
- Carlsbad Village Street Faire, Nov. 1.
- Job Fair & Business Expo, Nov. 12.
- Welcome Home World Famous Vipers HMLA169 From Afghanistan, Dec. 12.

Some of 2009's other events, workshops and seminars included:

- 5 Minute Networking – 2.
- CEO Roundtable – 2.
- Chamber 101 (new member orientation) – 2.
- Committee Meetings – 95.
- Disaster Planning Workshops – 2.
- Eco Bus Tour – 1
- First Friday Breakfasts – 11.
- Industry Roundtables – 3.
- Lunch Bytes – 12
- Meet the Chamber – 2.
- Networking to Netweaving – 4
- North County Young Professionals – 10 planning meetings and 8 events.
- Pathways to Success – 20.
- Netforce 1 (referral group) – 45.
- Small Business Roundtable – 4.
- Social Media Workshops – 9.
- Sundowners – 12
- Sustainability Workshops – 10.