

Welcome to a New Normal

By Steve Browning, Chairman, Metal Building Manufacturers Association

2021 is shaping up to be a reasonably strong year for the metal building industry

“Unprecedented. Once in a century. A new normal. There is no way we can reflect on the year that was for MBMA and not acknowledge how the COVID-19 pandemic made it unique.” That’s what Metal Building Manufacturers Association general manager Tony Bouquot said to me recently when we were talking about a theme for this article. His words sum it all up.

Who among us could have planned for such a colossal turn of events? Who would have envisioned that our homes would become our offices, plane rides would be replaced with Zoom meetings and even in-person meetings would involve face masks and awkward attempts at faux handshakes? It’s a brave new world, folks. Yet one that frankly is also exciting.

While the metal building industry has not been immune to the financial and productivity losses endemic in a pandemic, our niche has done better than many related business enterprises. New metal buildings are manufactured and erected every day, and I know our builders are very busy as demand continues to be strong. I’m personally confident that we’ll weather this season quite well and will have learned lessons and built more precise processes and procedures in reaction to the challenges we’ve overcome in this unusual time.

My Crystal Ball

With that in mind, let me tell you what I think 2021 holds for the metal building industry. Based on my decades of experience in this business, and the recent discussions I’ve had with customers, suppliers, fellow manufacturers and economic advisors, I believe we’re in for a reasonably good year.

For example, the pandemic has forced the growth of one business sector at a pace faster than we’d anticipated: e-commerce. While the e-commerce trend was already impacting the nationwide need for more and bigger warehouse

and distribution facilities, the pandemic gave the trend an overnight boost. Many MBMA member firms that manufacture metal buildings report exceptional growth in the demand for structures in excess of 150,000 square feet. I’m confident that e-commerce is a solid market in our future and that the trend won’t end very soon.

Another market that we will address as businesses adapt is the need for repurposing existing facilities. One thing we’ve learned from the stay-at-home scenario is that not all employees must congregate in corporate offices to be productive. In fact, the reduction in office chatter, impromptu meetings and general distractions inherent in a busy business have proved that some people are doing more with less just by being at home. So, as companies adjust, I think we’ll see them reducing office space, increasing warehousing, evaluating their parking needs, paying greater attention to energy consumption and evaluating the efficacy of their facility locations. Some may downsize into downtown high-rise structures while others may upsize into low-rise campuses in sprawling suburbs.

Inevitable Growth

I want to express my pride in the members and management of MBMA. In 2020, we witnessed both changes in our industry and our trade association membership. There were mergers and acquisitions, consolidations and retirements—all in an effort to stay strong and weather the storm. Yet, through it all, we persisted. We kept over 50 association projects moving forward, representing over three quarters of a million dollars in investment in metal building research, education and leadership. In addition, we rediscovered the value that comes from a community of friendly competitors working together to make a vital trade association stand strong.

We’ve worked without a playbook for

the better part of a year now; and our revised playbook in 2021 will surely include new paradigms, revised expectations and strategies we hadn’t previously considered.

Although change will be inevitable in the coming year, I know that one thing is certain—we’re all in this together. So, let’s help each other succeed. Let’s build a metal building industry that is stronger, more resilient and more adaptive than ever before. Let’s share knowledge, experiences, ideas, failures and successes to make 2021 a better year for our firms, our families and our future.

Bouquot has played and coached soccer for decades and I played professional baseball, so I hope you’ll indulge me as I close with a bit of a locker room pep talk. I believe that hope and perseverance are keys to our future. Things will get better regardless of how dark the times seem. Though we’re still working our way through the semi-darkness, there will be light at end of the tunnel. We will focus beyond the pandemic and create better times ahead.

Business leaders must believe that we’ll win and must translate that faith to inspire their teams. Be the coaches that help your teams to be the best they can be. Spread that message loud and clear throughout your company, then translate that enthusiasm throughout our industry—we’re going to overcome this. A time of change always equates to a time of opportunity.

If this message resonates with you, I’d like to hear your thoughts. Send your comments to mbma@mbma.com and type Steve Browning in the subject line. 



Steve Browning is chairman of the Metal Building Manufacturers Association. More information about the association is available at www.mbma.com.