

Stay Focused Amidst the Turmoil

By Steve Browning, chairman, Metal Building Manufacturers Association

An unresolved future creates uncertainty

What a strange and unprecedented year this has been! As I sit here writing this article in July, I can't predict if Alabama will win a single game this year because we don't even know if there will be a college football season. Football fans, like business leaders, are walking a path they never intended to tread.

For most of us, the ramifications of the pandemic hit like an atomic bomb. One day, we were joking around in the office and talking about the big bad flu across the ocean; a few days later, our schools were closed, businesses had sputtered to a halt and the bad news just kept mounting.

As the president of my own company and as chairman of the Metal Building Manufacturers Association (MBMA), I'll share with you what I've learned, and I hope this message will give you some tools and tactics for getting your own businesses through this strange time. All of us are forced to change—because we have to; definitely not because we want to. Short of a vaccine or a treatment that will tamp down the spread of this virus, we're all in this for the long haul. So, it's up to us to make the most of it as best we can.

First, Let's Plan

Since we can't necessarily control what happens around us, we need to prepare. If a vaccine becomes trustworthy, we may return to life as we used to know it; if not, we have to plan for and address the potential long-term implications. The metal building industry has been through many challenges and crises, particularly in the last 20 years, and this is another crisis from which we'll have to learn. We need to be deliberate in our business strategies and be adaptable to changing conditions. It's important to look for opportunities. For example, while some sectors of the

economy are slowing, others, like health care and warehousing/distribution are growing. Exploring options may lead us in new directions.

Then, Let's Change

If something good can come of this era, then perhaps it will be that we will become more focused on an America first mentality. For too long, we have depended upon foreign nations, especially China, for everything from face masks to pharmaceuticals to technology. Hopefully, we will recognize that such dependency is not in our best interest. If we move toward bringing businesses back to America, we should see an increase in activity in the manufacturing sector and be building more plants, corporate campuses and support buildings. In a perfect world, the U.S. Congress will incentivize manufacturing to come back. This would be great for our industry and for the U.S. workforce if the jobs we've lost through outsourcing truly return.

And Let's Keep Learning


While none of us want to be in a position where control is illusive, we do need to arm ourselves with as much information as we can. Knowledge is power. We need to explore and learn. MBMA has been working with its legal counsel, Venable LLP, Washington, D.C., to inform members of how best to get back to business safely.

We have made some of their resources available via the MBMA blog at blog.mbma.com. These materials are extensive and cover quite the gamut. There are a variety of topical COVID-era videos relating to issues such as employee medical examinations, insurance policy considerations related to first- and third-party losses, liability for non-employee safety, planning for post-COVID labor relations, and how to evaluate your current leases and loan documents

to assess potential pitfalls and opportunities. Venable also offers many relevant articles on topics such as considerations for re-opening and operating a business in the wake of COVID-19 and real estate issues that may have an impact on re-opening. There are a number of other industry websites that offer COVID-19 resources, including the COVID-19 resource pages on the websites for the Metal Building Contractors and Erectors Association (MBCEA), the Metal Construction Association (MCA), the Steel Erectors Association of America (SEAA) and the American Institute of Steel Construction (AISC).

The value of the trade associations to which we belong cannot be overstated. Groups like MBMA open up opportunities for collaboration, connections and education. There are so many benefits of being part of a group, especially in times like these. There truly is strength in numbers, and we can learn so much from our peers.

The Bottom Line

As you plan for the future, I encourage you to remain flexible and make structural business changes so you can handle whatever comes next. Talk through your company's immediate and long-term challenges. And, by all means, don't put your firm in a position where it may lose creative talent. Smooth out your company's future by creating a solid plan that protects your people and resources during the inevitable ups and downs. Through it all, remember that the only real constant you can count on is change. 

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

