

# VEGAS INC

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As he scanned the Henderson Chamber of Commerce's financial records during the immediate aftermath of the recession, Scott Muelrath saw an uncertain future.

The chamber was hurting financially. Membership had dropped by almost half since the pre-recession boom days, and attendance at the organization's mixers was dwindling.

But Muelrath, then a member of the chamber's board of directors, also saw opportunity amid the gloom.

And when the chamber's CEO stepped down in 2011, Muelrath, at the time manager of the Galleria at Sunset, rose to the challenge.

Determined to restore the chamber to its glory days, Muelrath changed the group's mission. No longer would it be an organization to host barbecues and get-togethers. It would be a business.

With a team of about six, Muelrath restructured the chamber to help businesses grow and business leaders connect with one another. Changing the chamber's image was risky, but Muelrath said it was the only option.

Today, the chamber has close to 1,300 members, up from 750 during the recession, and Muelrath has a team of 10 employees working to refer businesses to potential clients, volunteers and partners.

Muelrath recently spoke with VEGAS INC about how he helped the chamber grow and make new plans.

### **Why did you join the Henderson Chamber of Commerce?**

It was a good way to give back to the business community. The chamber runs the Henderson Business Resource Center, which is the longest-running resource center in the state. There is a lot of mentoring that we do at the center, so as a member, that's what I really got engaged with. I found a lot of matches for my skill set and a lot of opportunities to talk to business owners so maybe they didn't make the same mistakes so many people that went out of business did during the recession.

### **What did the chamber do right and wrong during the recession?**

It was in September 2011 that I took over here. And certainly the economy still was very weak. There were signs that things were starting to improve, but everything had to remake itself. At the time, the Henderson chamber had not done that. I saw an organization that was struggling with its past identity, but I knew what it did well and where it could go. It was really embracing the concept of community within an advocacy organization.

We really made this into a sales organization. The product is helping somebody grow their business. So you develop the services. You develop the customer service. You develop your personal service for the members built around creating opportunities to grow their business. If you lose sight of that, that's problematic. You have to be able to answer the return-on-investment question regarding membership every year.

That's something we've done for the past four years now. We've really remade some of our programming, everything from our logo and marketing to membership services to our events and our advocacy and our economic development.

### **What role did the chamber play before the recession?**

It was very community-oriented in the sense of doing a parade or a barbecue. We really converted it to fully focusing on business and business advocacy. Not that community events aren't important. They very much are.

### **Walk us through the strategies you've used to help the chamber grow.**

We handle every aspect very personally. We're a team of 10 here. All 10 of us get to know our membership as well as we can so we can refer and connect. We are the conduit. We help figure out what you need, and we put you together with the right type of business so you can grow a relationship. That could be business-to-business; it could be a large corporation looking for partners. As a team here, we're very passionate about creating those connections and maintaining them. If you don't establish connections for your members, they're not going to renew. They'll go somewhere else.

### **Why did you want to be CEO?**

I love to help people. Coming here wasn't about the money. It was about an opportunity I saw to do something great with an organization that had a good foundation. I wanted to take an organization and remake it from the bottom. I didn't want to take something that's up and continue it. I think it was a pretty unique opportunity in that sense. I just had to have faith and confidence that we could develop and then execute the plan.

### **Were there days when you said, "I don't know if I can do this?"**

Yes, during the first probably four months. But there were many more days when I would begin implementing what I thought

was going to be a strategic plan and I'd start seeing the results. It started building the momentum back. But certainly, those first four or six months were really challenging.

### **Is it difficult maintaining the organization now?**

It's feeding the machine. It's definitely a different time. There's much optimism. There's much belief. There's much desire to be involved from the business community. It's channeling that energy and connecting the points of opportunity. It's evaluating different things, planning for growth.

We just hired a government affairs director, thank goodness. That will allow us to be much more active in those arenas. Before, it was entirely me with the assistance of the committee or the board. Now, we've got dedicated staff that can work on legislative issues and local advocacy.

### **What lessons did you learn from the recession?**

People have short-term memories, which is kind of scary. People forget lessons quickly. The recession was brutal, though. For a lot of the businesses that made it through, those lessons won't be lost too soon. Generally, people are a lot more conservative.

### **What are your goals?**

Short-term, it's continuing to ride the momentum and create the momentum, which we have done. The trick is, as we continue to grow, to keep our organization personal because that's what sets us apart. If we lose sight of that, we're not going to be able to continue to grow.

### **How do you stay personal with 1,000-plus members?**

I answer my phone. I don't care if it's a small business on Water Street or the big sponsor. We treat all of our members the same. It's being accessible, and that's hard. We're going to be aggressively bringing back our government affairs, our political action committee, our issues committee. They're going to be much more visible. The PAC is

going to be endorsing candidates that help the business community. The committee is going to be discussing topics and issues that assist the business community. You've got to keep your eye on the prize. You can't lose what made your business successful.

### **What are the chamber's most pressing issues?**

The commerce tax was a tricky one. We were the only chamber that didn't sign on in support of it. We felt strongly about the need for additional revenue, but we didn't feel like that was the right way to do it. We separated ourselves a little bit with that position.

The city is evaluating Henderson having its own school district. That's going to be a really tricky process. We'll be tracking that closely.

Also, supporting manufacturing. The manufacturing we have in Henderson is something you don't see in all of Southern Nevada. There are a lot of things made in Henderson.

Interstate 11 also is going to be a big one. How is that going to come through our community? One of the alternatives that was proposed was it going around Henderson, but it needs to come through here. We want to be able to track the best method of it going through the city. We can influence and impact that in the best manner for Henderson.

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