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Lincoln Chamber surpasses 1,600-member mark as local economy maintains improvement

by Michelle Leach

Technology represents not only the types of businesses the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce is targeting, but also opportunities for the 125-year-old organization to further demonstrate value to its members.

"In the old days, you had a Chamber sticker for your front door and you got your name printed in our directory once a year," said President Wendy Birdsall. "Now, we communicate daily or weekly with [members] through Twitter, Facebook, and email.

"The digital world also allows us to offer more sponsorships, more ways for businesses to advertise in our digital marketing pieces and more ways to get their business name in front of more people."

Opportunities presented by digital are a world apart from when the membership organization was first founded in 1889. Lincoln was barely 30 years old. The cash register and fountain pen had just been invented, and the telegraph remained an important method of communication.

"The biggest trend on the membership front would be the shift in the way in which we communicate with our members and the new opportunities the digital world gives to them when it comes to advertising and promotion," Birdsall said.

Its membership growth has been consistent, and its base remains diverse.

"We have now grown to over 1,600 members," Birdsall said in June. "That includes large employers like Bryan Hospital, Ameritas, and Nelnet — all the way down to businesses like Parson's Public Relations, which is a one-man-band owner/operator public relations firm."

Via the Chamber's site at www.lcoc.com, member companies employ 300,000 people across Lincoln.

For perspective, in January 2013 Birdsall told the Lincoln Business Journal that the Chamber's membership roster had grown to around 1,570 — reflecting a 12 percent increase since 2009.

At the end of 2011, its membership was reportedly fewer than 1,550.

At the time, Birdsall also spoke to the city's very visible growth and development, showcased prominently with what is now known as the Pinnacle Bank Arena (the Chamber was one of its largest advocates) and surrounding West Haymarket activity as helping such membership gains along.

More recently, Birdsall highlighted the

2014 Business Conditions and Indicators Report, which was released in mid-June and reflects Chamber business surveys and research conducted by University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Bureau of Business Research.

"[The report] shows positive statistics," she said. "For example, various measures point to businesses meeting or exceeding pre-recession production."

These measures include an upswing in total sales, market share and international sales; product lines that are poised to be expanded upon; and consistent, private research and development investment.

"Fifty-eight percent of those surveyed plan to expand, renovate, or re-invest in the next three years," she said, adding that plans call for \$122 million in investment and around 800 jobs.

Birdsall said "worker quality" was identified as the community's top strength, while its weakness was characterized as "skilled worker availability."

Along these lines, the best business conditions highlighted were "strong employee work ethic" and "strong educational system," while "conditions that need improving" were transportation, community infrastructure and taxes.

Accordingly, the Chamber, via its website, is designed to promote a positive business climate, while serving as "the primary business advocate" for growth and as a partner

with the government and education.

Aside from "typical" Chamber services, it is also the umbrella organization for the Lincoln Partnership for Economic Development, Lincoln Chamber Economic Development Corporation, Lincoln Chamber Foundation, the Lincoln Convention and Visitors Bureau, Lincoln Young Professionals Group and Lincoln Specialty Care.

In 2012, it rebranded as a means of vi-
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President Wendy Birdsall ... Membership organization deepens outreach via technology, business incubator relationships.

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sually capturing momentum represented by the likes of the arena and West Haymarket development.

“The biggest changes we’ve seen in the past few years has been the focus on technology and start-up businesses that create software, apps, or other electronic services and sell their products worldwide,” Birdsall said. “We’ve adapted to this changing marketplace by focusing more of our resources on partnerships with business incubators like N-motion and Turbine Flats.”

She also said the Chamber has led task-forces to target and identify technology gaps associated with one of Lincoln’s largest employers — the health care industry.

“The end result of which led to contracts for two start-up businesses for their products,” Birdsall said.

Formerly, she highlighted Lincoln Health Care Connect, which gave entrepreneurial types the opportunity to compete against each other in the development of a product that would then be tested in a real-world, health care environment scenario.

“We are also focusing on the University and Innovation Campus and we will see where their push for breakthroughs in the food, fuel and water research lead,” she said. “The hope is there will be start-up tech companies that can spin-off private sector jobs.”

While the Chamber works closely with the likes of elected officials, it doesn’t endorse candidates, but rather issues and initiatives it deems important to the community, providing four different policy forums members can attend free of charge to learn about issues and provide input.