

## **The Founding of the Specialty Advertising Association of Arizona**

as related by Bert Williams, Williams & Associates, July 2016

Sometime in 1982 Glen Holt was in Tucson as a supplier rep for Hazel making a presentation to Williams & Associates. After it was over he asked if he could tell me about an idea he had. We went into my office and he told me that he felt Arizona was now big enough in terms of quality distributors to consider starting a state-wide advertising specialty association and wanted to know what I thought. He had been in similar associations in the past and now, as a supplier rep, he had the advantage of getting to know all the distributors.

“Count me in...!” I told Glen. He then said that he had several people in mind as the founding board and would I consider being one of them. Again, I said yes.

Glen and I talked over the next year or so, and soon we had decided upon five founding members: Glen, Russ Johnson Sr., Rob Friedman, and myself. Then we proceeded to develop the usual requisite details: Bylaws, a place to meet, member target lists, etc.

Glen was truly the ramrod for the entire project and why not? He had MUCH more experience than anyone else in such matters and he knew everyone.

Glen never had any desire to become President. He suggested, and we all agreed that Rob Friedman, Goldberg Advertising in Phoenix, would be the initial President to get things rolling. His term was from 1984-85. At the time Goldberg was probably the largest specialty advertising company in Arizona. They occupied an office of approximately 1,500 square feet near downtown Phoenix. I was impressed with Rob, who was also an attorney, because he took over his father-in-law's company and seemed to know what he was doing.

We set about building membership by making phone calls and visits. I wasn't able to get anyone from Tucson to join that year but later we had a small, limited success when Chuck Heller joined and became a Board member during my term. Several other Tucsonans joined, but were not actively involved.

One humorous anecdote pertained to the naming of the new organization which ultimately was called the “Specialty Advertising Association of Arizona”. The acronym chosen was “S.A.A.Az”. And while most were in agreement with the name (Specialty Advertising Association of Arizona) there was a controversy about the acronym. I fought long and hard but MY preferred acronym, S.P.AZ., was voted down by the majority. 😊

One of the original members was Leba Dawkins. Hers was a premium distributorship. In those days there were two branches of the industry “tree”. There were advertising specialties ...decorated items given away with no strings attached. And there were premiums... items that had to be earned by doing something (sometimes logoed and sometimes not). Since Rob was in the advertising specialty industry the selection for the second president was “fixed” by the founders. We decided to choose Leba as the second president ('85-'86).

The association struggled to find its way forward during that 2<sup>nd</sup> year. When I was named as President for the following year, my goal was to erase any negativity from the previous year.

We moved forward and established various committees that year and got to work. We began to create a foundation that could offer the basis for measured growth for the future. We all jumped into the task with unreal drive and enthusiasm. It was a fun, fun, fun year.

My term was from 1986 through 1987. I seem to recall that the years “began” in the late spring or early summer.

In the summer of '87 Williams and Associates had our first Trade Show/Open House in Tucson. We invited suppliers to set up their wares for review by the clients we invited. It was a huge success. As a result, when Tim Holt became president the following year ('87-'88), S.A.A.Az had its first trade show. Both entities have continued with this concept of showcasing advertising specialties ever since (the terminology changed to promotional products in the 90's).

I think of those days with great fondness. I made some life-long friends. And was blessed beyond measure by being the beneficiary of hundreds of “kindnesses” (not sure if that's a word).

Back in those days I would go to Phoenix at least once a month for the monthly meetings. Leaving Tucson around 3 PM and getting home around midnight meant some long days.

When our good friend, and Williams and Associates' Vice President, Chip Headman, became a Board member in '96, I dropped out to make way for him and his ideas. One time I calculated that in the 14 years I was active I spent 1,512 hours on going to meetings in Phoenix... not including time spent on projects or committee work. That's nine and a half months in a regular job. I'm proud to say that the current Board and Committees seem to be doing a better job that we ever did.

Ah, but now I'm older.

It's hard to believe that I was only 33 when I got into this industry. I had a full head of hair...! September of 2016 marked 40 years, and I don't regret a minute of it. There were *Six Times* that I thought we were going to go out of business. Were it not for my wife Anne, our kids, and our amazing staff over the years we definitely wouldn't have made it. I'm sure there are many in our industry who can say the same thing.

I am so blessed to have "stumbled" into this industry in 1977. I am definitely a square peg in a square hole.

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*More personal musings from Bert....*

**"Things I'm Proud Of..."**

Well, this is hard. It's not cool to be boastful or brag. But anyone who has been in the Promotional Products industry will be a witness as to how hard it can be. I don't think we are any better than anyone else but, coming from Irish root (Sullivan), it has been said that the Irish are hard-working, stubborn, and consistent. Therefore, I suppose I've been consistent in trying to harvest as many of the wonderful benefits that can be afforded anyone by the promotional products industry. Rather than the following being interpreted as boasting I would prefer that it was simply a narrative of factual items.

- In the first year, 1977, I wrote \$119,000 in sales. In 1978 - \$239,000. This would equate to approximately \$450K and \$900K in today's dollars. I didn't think it was anything special: I simply had a mortgage, a wife, and 3 kids to support and didn't know any better.
- Early on it became clear to me that this industry was much more than a trash-and-trinket business. The Creativity that it offered was the secret weapon and was what motivated me: I wanted to be a marketer. Back then people only wanted to buy "items". So... I sold 'em items!
- From the very first, I set a goal to win a Gold Pyramid. In 1984 we won the first. Then another in 1986. Then another in 1989.
- Education: Around that time our business was growing. We had brought on salespeople because others wanted to join us in the business and my time began to slowly shift into the realm of management. Always trying to learn as much as possible we earned enough education CEU's to receive both a CAS and an MAS. In fact, ultimately I learned that I had accumulated over 52 CEU's while

only 17, at that time, were required for MAS. I continued taking education courses but haven't turned in a seminar sheet for credit in 20 years.

- Always alert for opportunities – and prepared to expend whatever effort necessary to bring that opportunity to fruition – we created businesses in first Hawaii (1988) and then Phoenix (1991). We were able to do this ONLY because Anne is gifted beyond imagination in Operations abilities, gifts and skills.
- Any kind of endeavor, I think, should be measured on the scales of “Quality vs Quantity”. “Quality” seems to be measured by a company being able to win a Gold Pyramid. (Note: Last year 350 movies were made and 29 Oscars – the top award in the film industry – were given out. In our industry the GP is the top award. How difficult is it to win one? Over 80,000 salespeople in our industry and only 18 Gold Pyramids are given out each year.) “Quantity” is addressed by sales. To this it can be said that Williams and Associates is in the top 1% in the country.
- Longevity: Our average salesperson has been with us 27 years.
- Our family: In 2001 all three kids came into the family business. They were all doing different things in three totally different regions of the US. Two are in sales and one is in Operations with Anne as her assistant learning the ropes. We all get along wonderfully and love, help and encourage each other.
- Finally, the most amazing thing of all: We were chosen to be Counselor Magazine's (ASI) Family Business of the Year for 2016. The award was presented at the Summer Chicago Show in July. (See the article on the following page.)



## DISTRIBUTOR FAMILY BUSINESS OF THE YEAR 2016 WILLIAMS & ASSOCIATES

**THE LOVING MARRIAGE** of two high school sweethearts forms the foundation of a successful family-owned promotional products distributorship.

Bert and Anne Williams were barely out of high school when they tied the knot. Some 52 years later, they're the co-owning patriarch and matriarch of Williams & Associates (asi/360450), a Tucson-based firm with annual sales that put the company in the top 1% of distributorships in the U.S. The success is made all the more sweeter by the fact that their three adult children – Kim, Mike and Jeff – work for the company, playing prominent roles in everything from sales to operations.

"It can be harder being a family-owned business because of the emotional family dynamics that come up," says Bert Williams, a straight-talker with a friendly voice that resonates with the Southwest. "However, it's a real tribute to our family that we work through the difficult patches and love one another – that we've managed to be what a lot of people would say is successful."

The Williams family story is one of serendipity and persistence. Bert and Anne didn't jump right in to ad specialties. In his 20s, Bert worked in credit management. From there, he started a business selling silver and turquoise jewelry, making \$300,000 in 18 months. While the jewelry business eventually came to an end, the experience revealed something: Bert loved being an entrepreneur. "There was a real adrenalin rush," he says, "that came with working for myself."

Only now he and Anne had to determine what their next venture would be. Bert's brother several times suggested that he and Anne get involved in promotional products. Bert waved him off. "I said, 'Sell pens and pencils? That's the last thing I want to do,'" Bert recalls.

But Bert's older brother stayed persistent, urging Bert and Anne to attend an industry trade show in Las Vegas in the summer of 1977. The young couple went, and it proved to be a life-changing experience. The Williamses admired the organization of the industry. They marveled at the creativity. They felt an energy they liked, and they saw potential for a lucrative business. "I remember saying, 'Anne, I think this is what God wants me to do with the rest of my life,'" says Bert.

Apparently, he was correct: For the last 39 years, the Williamses have been in the promotional products business. Their children didn't begin their careers with the company, but after pursuing other ventures, all three returned to work for the distributorship around the same time about 15 years ago, says Bert.

Things haven't always been easy. No less than six times over the decades the Williams family feared they would go out of business, but "we just dug in, clawed and stubbornly decided it wasn't going to happen," says Bert. "And we're still alive."

More than that – they're thriving with offices in Tucson, Phoenix and Hawaii that serve more than 3,000 national and international clients, including household names like American Airlines and Marriot. "What we're most proud of," says Bert, "is that our average salesperson has been with us for 27 years" – a testament to the firm's family atmosphere.

As the Williamses work to expand their online sales business and improve on the already well-honed consultative sales approach that's won them blockbuster clients, Bert is optimistic about the future and thankful for the life his family has earned through ad specialties – thankful especially, too, for Anne.

"She is a truly amazing woman – not just because I love her and we're married, but because she has a calming influence, steadiness and capability in business that is invaluable. We wouldn't be where we are today without her. We complement each other."

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