Tough Get Going

When times get tough, New England contractors got going by forming the newest AWCI chapter.

The Association of the Wall and Ceiling industries of New England is off to a fast start under the leadership of (from L.) President George Parker, shown here with Directors Ray Daly, Jr., of Daly Drywall, Inc. and Dennis Gavin, Gavin Associates, Inc.

After nearly a decade of double-digit growth, the New England building market has seen a marked downturn. Yet into these tough times comes the AWCI New England Chapter—the association’s newest chapter, chartered in June 1989, and also its third largest at 105 members. How did the group get started?

PARKER: Our predecessor organization was the old New England Drywall Association, started in the 1950s as an independent group not affiliated with any national association. But by last year, most of its members were getting on in years and retiring, and the association was about to disband.

So the contractor who was president of the New England Drywall Association, whom I know professionally, came to me and we started talking about ways to revive the organization. We got together a committee, planned an organizational meeting, and started calling people to attend.

The meeting was held last March, and practically everyone who was invited showed up. Altogether, we had 175 people attend—including contractors, suppliers, and manufacturers. Of course, that didn’t represent 175 companies, since many firms sent two or three representatives.

PARKER: We passed out a survey and asked two main questions: would you join? And should the group remain independent, or affiliate with AWCI? As it turned out, virtually everyone...
joined—and virtually everyone endorsed affiliation with AWCI.

In June 1989, three months later, we had elected new officers and adopted our constitution and bylaws. Then at that point, we were accepted by AWCI as its New England Chapter for the geographic territory of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine.

**DIMENSIONS:** What programs and activities has the chapter gotten underway since its founding?

**PARKER:** Our first annual convention and trade show was held in October at Plymouth, Massachusetts. It was a weekend event, and the response was great! We sold 42 booths, and had more than 150 people attend the trade show.

The chapter board has 16 members, and has been meeting monthly since the group was started. Right now we’re planning to start quarterly general membership meeting, so our people can get together regularly and hear programs of interest.

**DIMENSIONS:** Your chapter covets such a wide geographic area—six states in all. How will you get around the distance problem when conducting general membership meeting?

**PARKER:** It’s true that, right now, most of our membership is concentrated in the Boston area. Our plan is to form regional subchapters—particularly for the Boston area, for western Massachusetts, and for Connecticut—that can have their own general membership meeting.

**DIMENSIONS:** Is geographic expansion going to be the chapter’s primary means for gaining new members? Or are you doing other things to recruit new members, also?

**PARKER:** For the time being, we’re relying on word-of-mouth to bring in new members. But very soon, the chapter is going to put on a push to open up Connecticut and western Massachusetts. Those two areas are ready for an association, and I think will provide the New England Chapter a lot of growth in the future. Already, the preliminary response from those two areas has been very positive.

However, we’ve had very little response from the not-them sections—Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. I think contractors from those states, even if they can’t attend membership meeting, can benefit from all the services AWCI provides—insurance, educational and technical materials, lobbying, and so forth. But because the northern areas aren’t very densely populated, and don’t have so much building activity, it’s doubtful the New England Chapter has many potential members there.

**DIMENSIONS:** How are the chapter’s day-to-day affairs managed at the present time?

**PARKER:** As I mentioned before, the board of directors meets monthly. But on a day-to-day basis, right now the chapter offices are kept at my own place of business in Brockton, Massachusetts. That’s where the mail comes, and where the records and
documents are kept. However, by January 1990 we plan to hire an association management firm to run the New England Chapter. We need to do that soon, because it’s already getting to be time for us to start planning the chapter’s 1990 annual convention and trade show. It takes a while to sell the booths, and you’ve got to plan ahead to get the convention location you want.

DIMENSIONS: Once the chapter has its management team in place, you should really be in a position to expand your programs and services. PARKER: That’s right. The chapter plans to sponsor seminars and training programs. In addition, we’ve already gotten a graphic artist to start putting together a chapter newsletter for us, that should be coming out soon. You know, I’d also like to add how valuable the support we’ve gotten from AWCI has been. The international office in Washington has been a big help. But at meeting like the recent AWCI Committee Week in San Diego, I’ve talked to a lot of other chapters for advice about what programs and techniques really work.

DIMENSIONS: What is the New England construction market like right now? And how is that affecting your members, and the chapter as it tries to grow? PARKER: The market is off right now—especially with winter coming on—so I don’t expect anything positive until the middle of next year. But looking at the broader view, I think the New England market is entering a leveling off period. We’ve enjoyed booming high growth for such a long period, much of it because of the high-tech industry, and now the market’s gotten overbuilt. Along with the overbuilding, add the Massachusetts state budget crisis and a slowdown in the local high-tech history, and you’ve got a bad situation. Right now, I don’t know what’s going to bring us back. So our members are going to hurt, some are inevitably going to go out of business, and as a consequence the chapter is going to lose some people.

DIMENSIONS: How can membership in an association like yours help contractors survive the tough times? PARKER: Houses aren’t selling. The banks aren’t releasing money. Since so many contractors are owed money, the big problem right now is bad cash flow. As a chapter and a national association, we can help New England contractors become better educated about how to manage their businesses, to collect the money they’re owed, and to negotiate better contract payment terms. Training seminars can help them generate more productivity, and AWCI benefits like insurance can help save them money. Also, the New England Chapter would like to get a consultant on board, so our members can gain access to credit information. Getting this information—though in a way that avoids antitrust problems—can help contractors be better informed about the people they may work for.

Finally, I think one of the best benefits of chapter involvement—according to what our members say—is the chance to fellowship with other contractor, suppliers and manufacturers. That way, they can exchange ideas and solutions about common problems, and learn from each other’s experiences. Learning from somebody else’s successes or mistakes can make or save you a lot of money.

DIMENSIONS: A slow market may be your members’ biggest problem. But certainly there must be state and local legislative and regulatory concerns as well? What are some of these issues in your area? Does the chapter plan to get involved in lobbying? PARKER: Yes, the New England Chapter plans to get involved on state-level legislative and regulatory issues. Some of our concerns are building codes, workmen’s comp, lien laws, and the high price of health insurance. I think one of the biggest issues in our region is the need to license drywall contractors. With all the layoffs in some areas, you’ve got a lot of amateurs who decide to “go into the drywall business.” I’d say 70 percent of the “contractors” here just work out of the backs of their pickup trucks. These people do shoddy work, don’t pay their bills, and give the whole industry a bad name.

DIMENSIONS: What about issues within the construction industry? Does the chapter plan to establish liaisons with the local and regional associations for general contractors, architects, engineers, building owners, surety
bondsmen, and others?

PARKER: Well, I first want to say that, on the issue of union versus non-union, our chapter plans to stay strictly neutral. We have members on both sides, and there are plenty of common needs the chapter can address.

As for relations with other segments of the industry, we’re held back right now by the lack of an office. But once we hire an association management firm and establish a headquarters, then the chapter does want to establish working relationships with the GCs, architects, owners, and others.

However, I think the chapter wouldn’t get so much into legal and contractual issues. The focus of our liaison would be more in the area of familiarizing GCs and designers with
the range of products and services our members offer—more like a form of marketing, you might say.

**DIMENSIONS:** Speaking of products and services, is the New England area seeing much in the way of innovative construction techniques? For example, we hear a lot lately about panelized construction.

**PARKER:** I don’t know much about panelization personally, though I do think its use is on the increase here. The biggest change I’ve noticed is that more contractors are diversifying. It used to be that companies only did drywall, and nothing else. But now you see the drywall contractors getting more into complete systems—interior, exterior, and insulation. I think this trend is because GCs prefer to deal with fewer subs, and have less to coordinate.

**DIMENSIONS:** So what’s ahead for the New England Chapter and its members?

**PARKER:** The chapter will certainly grow. In fact, I think we’ll double our membership once the Connecticut and western Massachusetts subchapters get going.

As for our members, I think the days of double-digit growth in the New England market are gone. But on the bright side, the 1990s should still be a period of steady, if not spectacular, growth. The comeback from the current downturn will be slow, but it will happen.

In the meantime, the benefits of joining with other contractors in an association will be more important than ever. Through the programs and services offered by the New England Chapter—and through such AWCI benefits as the annual convention and trade show, the insurance, and the Foundation library—members will certainly get much more than their money’s worth.