CONSOLIDATION:
The Staff View

By his own customarily understated admission, iaWCC/GDCI’s Executive Vice President Joe M. Baker, Jr., thought he was going to die right there on the spot.

Given an ordinary type of person and aided by conventional circumstance, that might be cause for alarm. But no one yet has produced a descriptive adhesive strong enough to label Joe Baker as “ordinary”—and for the veteran association executive conditions are seldom conventional either.

The motive for Joe’s most recent irreverent reference to the hereafter was supplied by a contractor’s ballot involving the recent consolidation between the international association of Wall and Ceiling Contractors and the Gypsum Drywall Contractors International.

After two years of on-again, off-again negotiations between leaders of the two associations, the issue has received overwhelming approval first at the GDCI convention in San Diego and then at iaWCC’s London convention. The only major remaining hurdle was the required mail ballot of all active iaWCC members.

When the first mail ballots arrived at iaWCC headquarters in Washington, D.C., Joe scooped up the top envelope and—confident that the impending consolidation would receive the same near unanimous support—pulled out the contents.

It Happened

That’s when it happened. The contractor voted “no” on the consolidation, “no” on the necessary bylaw changes, and in a penciled note at the bottom happily indicated he was prepared to vote “no” on any other matters of any subject at any time.

Sudden death or not, for a man who has spent the last 22 years as the acknowledged spokesman for the wall and ceiling industry it came as something of a jolt. Not until the entire membership’s ballots came in—approving of the consolidation at better than a 95 percent rate—did Joe relax.

Facts are, he’s been after drywall as a service function of the association for the past 12 to 14 years and the consolidation, to his way of thinking, is an expression that contractors are better served by pursuing profits than products.

It’s this same kind of thinking that has allowed the peripetetic native of Asheville, N.C., to vault his association onto the cutting edge of construction industry affairs, giving it a role and prominence not enjoyed by many other industry groups with greater numbers and finances.

Solid Communications

To be a member of a Joe Baker administered association is to receive communications—whether in person or by telephone or mail. To one GDCI contractor-leader, impressed with Baker’s energetic grasp of matters during the delicate renewal of consolidation negotiations:

“Let’s face it, we’re all in the same business. And with someone like Joe, it’s strictly a matter of the right man in the right place at the right time. For a long time, we’ve viewed him as the ‘symbol’ of the
"enemy," but he was being loyal to his own association—and now the new organization has call on that same loyalty and energy."

If Joe Baker really is the right man at the right place, he did not come by it easily or in a straight line. The son of the late Joe M. Baker, Sr. and Julia H. Williams Baker, Joe attended elementary and secondary schools in Atlanta, Canton (Ohio), Arlington, and finally Baltimore before graduating.

Later, he graduated from the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, Kings Point, N.Y., in 1947 and spent the next half year as a Third Mate for the Lykes Bros. steamship company, sailing out of New Orleans on the South African run. Seeking a foreign service career, he quit the merchant marine in 1948 to enroll at Georgetown University’s Foreign Service School, but six months later went into the U.S. Navy as a full Lieutenant, skipping the ranks of Ensign and Lieutenant, Junior Grade.

Another six months later the Navy shoved through its big Reduction in Force and in 1949 Joe was again a civilian. He enrolled in the University of Tennessee, graduating the following year.

In 1951 he went to work as a salesman for a Washington, D.C. building supply company and impressed his contractor customers so much that they recommended him for an available opening as eastern field representative for the Contracting Plasterers International Association while sharing promotional duties for the National Bureau for Lathing and Plastering. The latter organization was headed by his father.

**Popular Myth**

And contrary to myth, Joe Baker, Jr. did not succeed his father as Executive Secretary of CPIA. Joe Baker Sr. never spent a day in his life as an employee of CPIA. While he solidly promoted CPIA and CPLIA, he was always a Bureau man, moving into that position from what is now Inryco where he had been national fireproofing sales manager.

Joe Baker, Jr., while the third or fourth executive head of the old CPIA, went to work for the association when its functions were being carried out by a part-time office girl, Ruth Rosenthal Ward, and the then current president, Floyd Jennings, Sr.

His selection occurred at the 1955 convention in Pittsburgh where both Joe and the association’s western field representative, Wally R. Stabbert, were considered. Stabbert, “better qualified” according to Joe, opted for locating the association in Takoma, Wash., while Joe’s Washington, D.C. connections gave him the geographical advantage and the job.

Once Joe moved in as full-time Executive Secretary, the association started to move in earnest. The next year, the “L” was added for Lathing at the behest of newly elected President Lloyd Peterson, a partner of Arnold Hede, of Minneapolis.

By 1964, the diversification controversy was running through the organization like a Western brush fire. Drywall, as a new product item, was coming on fast and many traditional contractors more interested in business profits than product defense were moving into the new line. Acoustical ceilings were finding receptive contractors.

At the ’64 Convention in Phoenix, and with the help of Lloyd Yeager, executive director of the Gypsum Association, Joe drafted a resolution on diversification. Despite an earlier head count that showed the resolution would be approved, it was withdrawn before the vote because Joe, as a staff member, had drafted it, and also because some prominent members threatened resignation if it carried.

The issue remained alive. In 1967, then President William J. Goodson, of Detroit, and Joe visited each of the eight regional conference meetings and obtained approval of a Goodson-Baker resolution on diversification as association policy.

At the convention that year in Washington, D.C. the resolution passed by a four to one margin, but the 1968 convention in Chicago adopted a resolution questioning the diversification movement and demanding another study. The resulting survey confirmed the wisdom of diversification, and at the 1969 convention in Las Vegas the association’s name was changed from CPLIA to iaWCC.

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Diversification had won. And, now consolidation—the bringing together of an entire industry—has also won. Contractors from both associations have ended the product fight, and stand ready to promote the industry.

Responsibility Falls

And to Joe Baker falls the responsibility of bringing the new organization to the forefront. He has the know-how.

A member of the prestigious Capitol Hill Club of which he is a Governor and former chairman of the nominating and membership committee, Joe was this year elected vice president of the Washington Society of Association Executives. He is also a member of the national group, the American Society of Association Executives.

In 1957, he was named the Outstanding Alumnus of the Merchant Marine Academy, having served on the Academy’s alumni board and as its First Vice President for four years.

To some of the nation’s powerful and near-powerful, the 49-year-old association head is a trusted cohort with a unique sensitivity to their needs and demands. His acceptance in the inner circle came when Joe, a’ Republican convert, served as Republican Chairman of his Maryland county for 4 years, was the Republican nominee for Congress from his area in 1962, and then served as a delegate to the Republican National Convention for Barry Goldwater in 1964.

Since last July 2, 1976, Joe, who lives in nearby Annapolis, Md., and is the father of four, has been following a crushing schedule. Even prior to the effective date, he jumped from one airline to the next with typical Baker-style intensity, visiting with drywall groups, contractor and government groups, allies, and unions.

On paper, a consolidation appears a simple matter and a date. In the office of the Executive Vice President of the new organization it’s something else.

Between telephone calls and travel, from redesigning the association’s letterheads to notifying the Yellow Pages, his 6- to 7-day schedule, 10 to 12 hours a day is spent between cementing down an organization that is to spreading the word about an organization that can be.

Of the consolidation, he has little doubt. It can produce one of the most influential associations in the history of the wall and ceiling industry. But it will take work.

In his headquarters office, Joe recently slapped a telephone back into its receiver and mused:

“All of this competition in the past was simply loyalty to a product rather than to a profit. And for a businessman, it has to be profit. Instead, they gave highly emotional loyalty to a product. Now, I think all that’s behind us.

“There’s now a new open and honest dialogue between this office and the industry staff members. The old suspicions are gone and we’re working together, all of us trying now to promote an industry and the profit system, regardless of the product.

“The thing that will really help this industry are the good relations that are being developed with local and state drywall people such as California’s Bob Gulick, Ron Becht and Homer Bartels; with Dave Green, in Minnesota; Jerry Shields, in Detroit, and Bob Knight, in Denver.”

Busy Telephone

The telephone rang again. He picked it up, chatted for a few minutes, while checking off a stack of correspondence that had piled up while he was away on a recent trip. He signed two letters, slipped a brochure into his ever present brief case. He looked up again.

“There’s some feeling—I’ve heard it said—about this consolidation being a so-called ‘take-over.’

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BAKER

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“You know, if there’s one thing that proves the falseness of that assertion, it’s what our president, Vito Arsena, did immediately before assuming office.”

There was a pause while Joe studied another typed letter, affixed his signature to it, and dropped the completed sheet onto the pile in his “out” basket.

“Without any request from anyone, purely on his own, he named co-chairmen from both previous organizations to 90 percent of all iaWCC/GDCI committees. I can’t think of a more valid demonstration of unilateral good faith than that.

“Arsena further accepted T. J. Vogle’s suggestion that ex-officio chairmen be named for each of the eight regions.”

Again the telephone rang. The conversation this time was longer, more involved. When it was finished, the iaWCC/GDCI executive picked up the conversational thread precisely where he had left it moments earlier.

“There’s a great spirit among our contractors,” he continued, “and that is to close ranks as businessmen and go on to represent their industry the way it should be done.

“Certainly, one of the most impressive things about this consolidation has been the enthusiasm of such GDCI leaders as Bob Mitch-ell, Bill Marek, Jack Craig, T. J. Vogle, and Vern Raymer, among others. They have a definite gung-ho feeling and enthusiasm about the positive gains that can be achieved for all contractors—and that’s just great. With that kind of feeling, shared by both sides, we can truly accomplish great things for this industry.”

As hopeful as he is about the benefits that the new iaWCC/GDCI organization will offer, though, Baker is a realist and one familiar with the way things are viewed and accomplished in Washington, D.C.

“Don’t get the idea that we’ve ended the fragmentation problem. This consolidation will certainly make us stronger, but eventually—and this may be somewhat of a red flag to some contractors but I think they know it’s true—there are talks that must be initiated with the Ceilings and Interior Systems Contractors Association.

“Our industry is still viewed as fragmented and this will continue so long as there is no single source for continuity and communications. There were three and now there are two organizations providing the same services and competing on a costly one upmanship basis.”

The challenge now is on demonstrating that iaWCC/GDCI membership is worthwhile. To that objective, Joe and his staff are fully committed.

“I consider an iaWCC/GDCI membership to be the best and most economical $250 insurance policy available today. When there is a problem and a contractor calls for help, he knows one thing: he’ll get the best help we can provide.

“The first thing that this staff will need to do is prove to incoming members that they’ll get full service, absolutely equal treatment and consideration. Until we get a chance to prove we can do this—and the burden is on us—contractors have every justification for wondering if membership is worthwhile.

“But we accept the challenge. In the past, we’ve developed the most highly involved membership in the industry. Our members understand it’s their association and they run it. Our No. 1 goal is to show the GDCI contractors the benefits of this involvement and National Committee Week, next October, is where they will find just where things really happen.

“It’s often been said that association membership gives an individual a chance to have a voice in his industry. In iaWCC/GDCI we have that; it didn’t happen by accident. All I ask is that the contractors from GDCI make an effort to take part in National Committee Week next October and they’ll see—and participate—in setting direction for an industry.”