Two young executives speak out

John Arsen and Carolyn Mason focus on convention, future

When the young executives of the wall and ceiling industries capped the business session of their convention in San Antonio with an enthusiastic endorsement for establishing an annual Young Executives Convention, they were acknowledging, in part, the efforts of John Arsen and Carolyn Mason. Both played major roles in the planning and staging of the inaugural convention effort.

The two young executives believe they are part of a generation seeking room at the top, and if they are to achieve the reins of leadership they are willing to adapt to changes within the wall and ceiling and allied marketplaces.

Arsena, who has served as chairman of the Young Executives Council of AWCI since its inception in 1979, and Mason, who has served as YEC vice-chairman, also share another common denominator with many of their industry peers: in addition to being in the second-tier of management, both are young executives in family-owned businesses.

Their thoughts on this and other elements of the industry, government regulation, and the first Young Executives Convention follow:

DIMENSIONS: The Young Executives Convention is history now. Was it “the idea whose time has come” it was advertised to be?

ARSEN: Yes. I think it was without a doubt. All of the comments I have heard from the people who were here have been rave reviews. At first, many registrants and exhibitors felt a little leery. They didn’t know quite what to expect. Once the program got underway, everyone was excited by what was happening.

DIMENSIONS: From that analysis, I would gather you feel the addition of exhibits enhanced the educational programs.

ARSEN: I know a lot of our young executives did not attend the last national convention. The exhibits provided an atmosphere in which they were able to go through the booths and see many of the new products within the industry. In the exhibit hall we were able to exchange ideas and information. And, for many of us, it was an opportunity to meet personally with people we’ve done business with. Often, these people were known to us only as a voice on the telephone. Meeting them and knowing who they are, having them know us, helped us to build contacts that will be of value to us in future years.

DIMENSIONS: We were just short of the convention goal for the numbers of exhibitors. Do you think the success of the exhibits this year will help increase these numbers for the next Young Executives Convention?

MASON: I would think so. Many of the exhibitors came to me and expressed how great they felt the exposure was. They were happy they came, and they plan to return next year. Because so much of the convention unfolded within the exhibit hall, they received even greater exposure. It is good for them to know us and for us to know them.

DIMENSIONS: Many of the exhibitors told me they had not come to make sales, but rather, to build their exposure and a degree of fellowship with the young executives.

MASON: I think the exhibitors now realize there are additional people within member companies they can talk to. I think having the opportunity to discuss products and industry trends with the young executives livened up the convention for the exhibitors, too. I couldn’t quote an exact number, but there are more people in this second tier of management who make purchasing decisions than anyone might have expected. So, the exhibitors learned there are numbers of new people within the companies they can exchange information with, but also, who place orders for products.

DIMENSIONS: There was more than fellowship between young executives and exhibitors here. Let’s talk a little about the exchanges among your peers.

ARSEN: I could make a speech about that. Around the exhibit hall, all of us got together to discuss various products. We’d compare notes on why we use certain products. We’d identify problems and solutions for various problem areas. We explored both the high points and low points of various products. We helped each other out with these exchanges of information. A specific example would be a discussion I had with a young executive from New York. He was experiencing some problems with one of the racquet ball finishes. He brought out some points I had never even considered. By the same token, however, I was able to point out some things he might not otherwise have considered, and between us, we may have helped to solve his particular problem. The same thing was happening anywhere we got together.

MASON: The technical sessions were another example of how information was exchanged. Some of the speakers were people who had experienced the products, and some were frank when they had encountered problems. They would identify the problem and share the solutions they had developed. So, the young executives were prepared for these situations, rather than having to duplicate mistakes on the job and cost themselves money. In many cases, no
young executive would have even thought about the possibility of these problems occurring until it happened out on the job.

DIMENSIONS: When they arrive home, what do you think the young executives will tell their first-line managers about the convention?

ARSENA: First, I think they’ll discuss some of the ideas that were offered to them. Some may see changes put directly into effect. At the least, they’ll try to draw out a discussion of new ideas. They’re going to let the bosses know they did learn something from the experiences here. I think they’ll tell the boss this was more than a trip. Nobody abused the opportunity to be here. Nobody merely went through the motions.

DIMENSIONS: What have you learned about young executives?

MASON: I think we’re a group of people ready for changes. We can’t predict exactly what changes are ahead of our industry, but we’re not afraid of change. We’re willing to learn about new opportunities. And as changes come to the industry, I think we are able to adapt.

DIMENSIONS: In exchanging ideas and fellowships, did you discover a common bond among young executives?

ARSENA: Certainly. As a young executive, you always discuss things with the boss. If you have to make a decision or delegate some area of responsibility and authority, often you are confronted with the question of whether to implement the decision on your own or wait an hour to talk to the boss. You wonder, too, if the boss has the specific knowledge necessary for making the particular decision, (does he know the product or is he familiar with the job). And, once the decision is made, you’re concerned with whether he will stand behind you or are you going to be disciplined in some manner for taking a particular course of action.

DIMENSIONS: Is it harder to make those decisions on your own when our father owns the business?

MASON: It’s difficult to say definitely, because I haven’t had the other experience. But I would think it’s harder when your father is also the boss. You have the business to consider of course, but you have some other factors in there working. It’s not just the boss; it’s also dad, and the two can get rolled in together.

ARSENA: When the boss is also your father, it’s no longer a Monday through Friday situation. We may go to our parents’ house for Sunday dinner, and perhaps a business discussion will get a little heated. My mother winds up negotiating a truce in order to preserve the Sunday dinner and the family atmosphere. When this happens, you’re no longer just a family, you’re the boss and the young executive discussing an idea or concept in an atmosphere where it would normally never come up.

DIMENSIONS: We’ve talked a little about changes and challenges ahead of the industry. Let’s discuss some in more detail. How deep is the commitment to computerization among young executives?

ARSENA: Our company could never handle its payroll without the computer. Just keeping up with tax deductions, insurance deductions and the like would be impossible. We recently took our job information systems off the computer, simply because we weren’t getting the kind of information we needed. But we’re already going back to the beginning to determine how to develop a program that will give us what we need. I think the computer, even for estimating, will be important to the future of the industry.

MASON: The paper mill grows every day, largely because of the amounts of government reporting. Computers greatly reduce the burden of handling the paperwork, and as time progresses, I believe we’ll see increased use of the computer within our industry.

DIMENSIONS: You mention government reporting. One of the pending government mandates will call for energy-efficiency budgets for all new buildings. How effective is this kind of government regulation?

MASON: In one regard, these types of standards bring more work
into the industry, and it’s difficult not to view that as positive. However, it also means more government regulation of the industry, and I don’t feel anyone is going to be particularly happy about that.

ARSENA: I don’t think the new government standards will accomplish what they hope to. We’ve all been asked to adjust our thermostats, but you have a lot of factors affecting that thermostat. Heat from lighting sources, and depending on the type of the room, even body heat will impact room temperature. So, in many cases, the thermostat won’t kick the system on even at the government-mandated settings. Some people are going to want to feel comfortable, and regardless of how efficiently you design the building, they’re going to set the thermostat for their comfort. If we haven’t done what was already asked of us, how can we expect that people will comply in the future? I think the government is setting up programs that tell us what we need to do, but the only change is going to be in cost. They may be seeking energy efficiency, but the main outcome of these standards will be to drive up the cost of construction.

DIMENSIONS: We’re all interested in quality, but often you hear the real decision when the bids come in made on the basis of cost. Won’t the initial rises in construction costs bring pressure on you from your customers?

ARSENA: Yes and no. When the relationship is between you and the owner, you tend to hear more cost complaints. When you’re working with a general contractor or a construction manager, you’re dealing with people who are generally more up to date on the actual costs. They know from their own businesses what the cost-per-man is per day, and they’re much more aware of the situation you’re in.

DIMENSIONS: You’re both part of a generation that has been environmental-aware. Today, we’re seeing an increased awareness of the relationship of the job environment and specific products to the safety of the persons on the job. How do you feel about this trend?

MASON: We can be as concerned as we want to be. But, it really comes down to the individuals and how concerned they are. Only if they will use the particular methods available can we offset any safety risks.

ARSENA: We face problems simply in the way people respond to field situations. You can provide a worker with every conceivable safety device — masks, hard hats, anything you want—but you can’t force him to use them. It comes down to the personal level. If the person wants to protect himself, he will. If he is unconcerned about the situation or thinks a particular safety concern is a lot of baloney, he won’t follow your safety procedures. The result is that safety and environmental standards depend largely on how they are accepted by the individual. Continued next page
“Young people are turning from the trades . . . that’s wrong!”

**DIMENSIONS:** Environmentalism is really a form of consumerism. The trend today finds more people demanding guarantees in their products and services. Does our industry respond with quality?

**ARSENA:** I think we do. It comes down to keeping yourself in business. If you are not doing quality work and providing the services a person requires, you might as well close your doors. You are not going to have a general contractor or owner to call on. It comes down to having pride to go with your workmanship.

**DIMENSIONS:** One key to this quality, however, is how skilled your labor is. Hasn’t this convention acknowledged the need for recruiting and training more skilled labor for the industry?

**ARSENA:** I think we’re looking to the positions we have open and the types of work ahead of us. People are becoming more and more specialized. Young people are turning away from the trades. So many want to go to college, but once they have the degree, they don’t know what to do with it. In many cases, the degree doesn’t provide them the skills needed for a specific job. There’s a tendency in the society around us to downgrade a person who is skilled in working with his hands. That’s wrong. When a person has a skill and can work with his hands, it is almost artistic. It’s amazing what they can communicate and what they can produce.

**MASON:** It is very important to have young people like ourselves move into the industry and learn about new ideas and concepts. It is equally important to expose them to other young people across the country who are gaining experience in dealing with the complexities of the industry. I hope we’re moving in that direction now.

**DIMENSIONS:** If the industry moves towards a cooperative effort between management and labor to build recruitment and training programs, do you think young executives should be involved?

**ARSENA:** I think we’re saying to management that we know they are aware of the problems with manpower. Down on other levels of management, we’re equally aware. We’re saying to them that any support we can offer them, any energy we can offer them is valuable to them. We must reach the goals of increased manpower training. We’re all one association and we’re hoping to put our ideas and input with theirs to help secure the future of our industry and its manpower supply.