The Spirit of The Association
An Interview with Steven J. Watkins

Construction Dimensions: As you take office as President of AWCI, what will be your major goals for the association for the coming year? Are there areas where you feel AWCI should be doing more for its members?

Steven J. Watkins: Over the next three to five years, AWCI has the opportunity to put together a long-range plan and actually return to the basics of our business. I feel this is a perfect time for the association to revitalize itself in terms of membership, member services, and finances. That’s essentially what I’d like to see accomplished.

CD: In terms of member services, are there areas where you feel AWCI should make a greater emphasis in the future?

Watkins: One of the things AWCI does best, and must continue to do well is provide information and service of a technical nature. This is currently being accomplished both through educational seminars such as the lightweight steel framing seminars held in June, and publications such as the Levels of Drywall Finishing recently published in conjunction with several other associations. The technical area is the one realm that really sets us apart from other industry associations. AWCI provides a great advantage to its membership with the technical committees. They are extremely active and have developed technical programs and manuals that are second to none.

CD: And these programs and manuals are specifically for the wall and ceiling industry.

Watkins: Correct.

CD: The third area you mentioned is finances. What types of changes do you see coming in the financial area for the association?

Watkins: I feel strongly that AWCI is going to have to operate more as a business, even though it’s non-profit. We have to implement those business principles that each of us use in our own operations. I’d like to see the association address not only its immediate concerns, but also establish long-term financial planning so that we can relieve ourselves of dealing with financial considerations on a near-crisis basis.

CD: The association has an excellent base of resources — committed members and suppliers

Editor’s Note: Steven J. Watkins has been elected AWCI President, taking office effective July 1. We spoke with him recently, asking him to give his views of the association, the industry, and his goals for his term in office.
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who are interested in seeing it succeed, the assets it has available, and so on.

Watkins: This is something we can really build on. The membership is united and pulling together in the same direction. When things get tough in any business, everyone needs to pull together and focus on the course the business needs to take. With AWCI, I believe everyone is now working toward a common goal. I feel you’re going to find a lot of hard work being put in during the next three to five years — even more so than in the past...

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biggest problems facing the industry in the coming years will be labor — recruitment, training manpower, making sure the people we hire are the best for the job and can do the job, and all the other human resources management concerns. Do you agree with this? Are there things the association should be doing in these areas to help members?

Watkins: There’s no doubt that in the coming years the labor shortage we’re all currently experiencing will intensify. A few years ago, the Business Roundtable did a study and clearly zeroed in on manpower as a major problem we would face. Contractors in our business are currently encountering this in many areas of the country. We first felt the pinch with experienced plasterers and lathers; now we’re seeing it with carpenters and drywall finishers. The association will have to address this issue through its committee process. We’ve already taken steps in this direction through the development of the 300 hour, two year classroom drywall training course. We can’t allow it to stop there, however. We’re going to have to carry it farther.

CD: One way the association might work on this problem is through cooperation with the unions in setting up training programs and so on. Is this something you think is important?

Watkins: There’s been an ongoing spirit of cooperation in this regard. I think the unions clearly understand the manpower problem. In many parts of the country, apprenticeship training programs are already in place. The fact of the matter is, so much of the industry has gone open shop that the unions can only address a fraction of the overall problem. Now we have to take things a step further and see how we can best assist open-shop contractors who don’t have unions to provide the training. They’re going to have to incorporate training into their own in-house programs, or they’re going to have to look at working
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with vocational schools, or they may have to work with the Associated Builders & Contractors. But unions can play a prominent role and, perhaps, use this to their benefit to recover some of the standing they’ve lost over the years in the larger markets.

CD: Another area Gene Fisher pinpointed as one we should be looking at and perhaps doing more about is safety. Are there additional things you think we should be doing?

Watkins: The association has started to address many issues in this regard through its Accident Prevention Committee. However, OSHA is playing such a large role in all of our businesses that contractors have to pay more attention to their safety programs-the way the program is designed and executed, a system of awards or incentives offered to their people for operating safely, and so on. Many contractors are finding that the states are starting to crack down and have begun reserving the right to review the overall safety program.

If a contractor isn’t already taking a good hard look at his safety program, he’s going to have to start very soon because insurance premiums and workers’ comp rates are skyrocketing. It’s a cost that is difficult to regain and it must be taken into account. It has a significant effect across the country. AWCI can definitely play a part, but it must define its role carefully, perhaps working in conjunction with other associations. We recently published a safety manual in cooperation with the American Subcontractors Association, and I think we’ll see more cooperative efforts along these lines to service the members as well as the entire industry.

CD: With the OSHA activities, every contractor will need to have

“If a contractor isn’t already taking a good hard look at his safety program, he’s going to have to start very soon…”

a safety program in place very soon.

Watkins: Absolutely. It takes time and money to set a safety program, but OSHA and the insurance companies are going to demand it be an effective working program, and not just a company policy stuck in a binder that sits on a shelf and gathers dust. We’re finding that the insurance companies won’t stand for this. They want to see the program at work and they want to be able to go on-site and talk with project supervisors and safety directors to make sure the program is effective.

CD: What do you think will happen with workers’ comp and rising health care costs? That has to be a major problem.

Watkins: It is a major problem and will continue to be for at least for the next year or two. I think you’re beginning to see a growing concern among contractors and the industry as a whole. Our association, I feel, will play a prominent role in getting legislators involved in addressing these issues. We’ll see more rate increases in the next year, but I think we’ll reach the point where everyone will decide to get serious about it. Some state and local contractor groups are already talking to their congressmen and senators about these issues. Will they
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resolve the problems overnight and bring rates down? Probably not, but they will create a much-needed awareness and initiate what will prove to be an ongoing process.

CD: The suppliers work very closely with the members in AWCI — in fact, they are accorded full membership status. This is unique for trade associations. Do you see this continuing?

Watkins: Definitely. Suppliers are a crucial part of an overall team concept.

As full members, suppliers have a major role in our association. It’s a clear indicator that we work hand in hand. We’re really talking about the betterment of the industry as a whole—we’re all working toward that goal, and that is the true spirit and purpose of the association.

CD: You’re a member of the Academy Council. How would you define the purpose of AWCI’s Academy?

Watkins: The Academy, originally started as a young executives’ group, has advanced far beyond its original concept. Initially the intention was for the Academy to last for three to five years—now it’s in its eleventh year! The group elects its own officers, many of whom have gone on to serve key leadership roles in the association. They work very diligently at putting together an excellent series of seminars that are conducted throughout the year. They are instrumental in developing the convention educational programs, and of course, there is the Acad-
emy itself, which is their November meeting. So, obviously, they play a very active role.

The Academy Council is doing the association an invaluable service in providing educational programs and the chance for each of these leaders to work with their peers in a service situation. It also enables non-owners of companies to come together, learn, and build an interaction that benefits the entire industry.

**CD:** Do you think the Academy also serves to professionalize the industry by introducing “cutting edge” information and management theory, helping all members to do their jobs better?

**Watkins:** I feel it does. There’s a definite advantage to helping those who are new to the industry to learn about it quickly. It gives them a field perspective as well as a business perspective.

**CD:** Let’s talk about you and your background. Your company,

“Aetna Drywall Contractors, is a family-owned business.

**Watkins:** That’s correct. The firm is 22 years old. I started working in the field during the summers my last two years of high school. From there I arranged my schedule so that I could attend a local college two days a week and work the other three. I then went to Auburn University in Alabama. After graduation I came back to work full time in the office.

All in all, my field experience totals about eight or nine years. The field training has helped me to understand exactly what we’re doing. When I look at blueprints or talk to people on the telephone, I can understand what they’re talking about. I don’t think I could ever replace the hands-on training. It’s given me some real advantages over people who went straight to the office and were never out at a job site.

**CD:** Your father was very active in AWCI.

**Watkins:** He was AWCI President in 1979-80, and has remained very active. Over the last 10 to 15 year period, it’s easy to see many benefits to the company that have resulted from our involvement in AWCI.