
Having been an AWCI member since 1983, Baker, 43, brings to his new AWCI position extensive association experience. He’s currently on the board of directors of his Associated Builders and Contractors chapter. He has 16 years of experience as a member of the American Subcontractors Association, having served on their board for five years, and as president of his local ASA chapter in 1985. In addition, Baker was a founding member and board member of the Dallas/Ft. Worth Drywall and Acoustical Association.

Baker has served many local community and church organizations, and has been active in coaching children’s sports. He has been married to his wife Carol for 19 years. They have three children: Allison, 16; Bryan, 14; and Clark, 11.

**Mission: Association**

“My goals are to continue strengthening our membership services and technical information, and to build on the innovative ideas Tom McCartney has put into place,” Baker says. “What we must do is continue operating as a business with new and fresh ideas that adapt to the changing needs of our members.”

Baker particularly wants to build on the AWCI mission: Association. Baker also wants to build on AWCI Executive Vice President Steve Etkin’s restructuring of the AWCI Committee Week into the Industry Leaders’ Conference. This annual AWCI meeting, which at one time was structured around AWCI committee meetings, will now offer projections of business trends and target member needs. Featured guest speakers are new additions to this annual fall meeting.

AWCI’s primary meeting, the annual convention, will feature the second joint exposition between AWCI and the Ceilings & Interior Systems Construction Association when the two groups meet in New Orleans in March 1997.

“Part of the new excitement in the industry is the joint AWCI/CISCA joint exposition, the second one in the past three years,” Baker says. “This is a really positive trend for the industry. Both contractors and manufacturers have less time, so when you bring them together under the same roof once, rather
Steve Baker Boldly Goes Where Most Refuse to Go: Hospitals and the Web

By Michael J. Major
than twice, you’re getting double the impact.”

In terms of the general economy, Baker says, “The construction market is fairly upbeat nationwide and there are no real challenges in this arena. So our focus now is on the technical side of the business. We want to make sure we provide the resources and information for members to become more profitable and efficient. AWCI has tried to do this not only through providing technical services, but also through the design and production of employee safety handbooks, which have been very well-received in the industry.”

One big crisis the industry is facing is that of the manpower shortage. “The average age in construction is 48 years—not just in drywall but in all the trades,” Baker says. “Associations such as AWCI have to provide avenues of training for the younger generation.”

**Baker’s Bottom Line**

If one of Baker’s goals is to look out for AWCI’s bottom line and service to its members, Baker is well-equipped to take on the job. After graduating from Texas Tech University with a degree in business administration in 1975, Baker went to work for his father, Bob. The elder Baker has been in business since 1948 with Triangle Plastering; he is still active, though semi-retired, at age 68. Stephen went to work for an offshoot of Triangle Plastering called Baker Drywall Co., Inc. He built up the small drywall offshoot, eventually becoming one of Baker Drywall’s owners in 1977 and then majority stockholder in 1983.

When it was started in 1974, Baker Drywall saw an annual $100,000 in sales; it grew to more than $16 million...
of the Year Award for its region in 1994, and the Associated Builders and Contractors award of excellence in 1995. The latter award was for the AMC Grand, the largest theater complex in the nation. Other important projects include the ballpark in Arlington, the home of the Texas Rangers; Texas Instruments’ DMOS Project V semi-conductor plant; and the 300,000-square-foot Westwood Medical Hospital.

Baker credits much of his success to his employees, some 80 of the 350 employees having been there for more than 10 years. But much of the credit also has to go to Baker for the way he’s managed those employees. “We’re fortunate to now be in a dynamic market, but think back to the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the Texas construction industry was not merely in a recession, but in a depression,” Baker says. “During that time, we basically cut our volume back, and everybody sacrificed in terms of wage and benefit cuts. We didn’t lay anybody off, so once the market improved we had the people in place to take advantage of it.”

Baker adds that during the downtimes, instead of sacrificing the bottom line just to do volume in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area, he showed a willingness to travel out of state. “Typically we would send a foreman and other key personnel who would be willing to make the sacrifice and move for a particular job, and they would hire the labor locally,” Baker says. “I can’t stress enough the loyalty of the employees. Yet even during the lean years, we were contributing to the profit sharing of all company employees.”

**Going Where Most Contractors Won’t**

Another note of distinction is the fact
David Shellman (right), a Baker Drywall employee for 10 years, receives the Unsung Hero Award from Steve Baker at the company’s 1995 Awards Ceremony.

Steve Baker (right) awards door prizes to employees at the Baker Drywall Benefits Fair.

that, as Baker explains, “We pursue work that others avoid. For the first 10 years I followed my father’s lead in avoiding hospital work because of the difficulty. But for the past 12 years, hospital work has been 50 percent of our volume, and most of the projects we’ve done in other states have been hospitals.” Baker acknowledges that hospital work is dirty and difficult, with miles and miles of duct work and a greater need to pay attention to fire and other safety codes. “It takes an expertise most people don’t want to develop,” Baker says. “But now that we have it, we’re able to get those jobs.”

Another point of interest, says Baker, is that “we are totally computerized. We rely a lot on technology for our efficiency, and are doing twice the volume we did four years ago with the same basic

staff typically in terms of estimating project management and payroll, which are totally integrated with the latest software. Our current claim to fame is that we have a Home Page on the World Wide Web—one of the few contractors who do. It’s been pretty exciting to get feedback from general contractors who have discovered us on the Internet.”

About the Author
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