So what’s a noncontractor doing as president of a contractor organization?

It can’t be illegal, for Robert Geyer, vice president of operations for the Concord, Calif.-based John Wagner Associates, Inc., a manufacturer/designer/distributor of drywall screws and related drywall and other proprietary products—has just become the 1999-2000 president of The Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries-International. Geyer is, in fact, the first noncontractor to be so honored.

why?

“I can’t answer that one,” is Geyer’s response. However, it doesn’t take much conversation with him to find out why.

“I live and breathe this industry,” he says. “I can’t think of anything I don’t like about it. I get excited traveling around the country and seeing how people have grown. Many who started out in the warehouse or driving a truck are now running their own business—in the second and sometimes third generation.”

Born in New York

Geyer was born in 1938, in Snyder, just outside of Buffalo, N.Y. His father was a patent attorney and he was the last of five kids. He earned a bachelor’s degree in industrial management from the University of Rochester. After working for two years at Prudential Insurance, and a six-month stint in the military, he worked in industrial human resources for a cosmetics firm, Bourgeois, from 1962 to 1967, then as a manager of employee benefits for a division of Singer from 1967 to 1972.
Meanwhile, his brother John Geyer had teamed up with John Wagner to start John Wagner Associates, which Geyer joined in 1972. He worked for about a year out of Thorofare, N.J., covering the Mideast coast, and then moving to Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., to handle the entire Southeast region. And he’s been in Ft. Lauderdale ever since.

Although Ft. Lauderdale is his home, he’s not there very often. He’s spent much of his time traveling, and, over the past 10 years, an already hectic pace has gone over the top. By way of example, he reads off his itinerary: “Just last week I made trips to Portland, Seattle and to a convention in Southern California,” he says. “Now I’m home briefly, but I’m flying back to California and then off to a week’s travel to Cincinnati, Grand Rapids and Dallas. That weekend I’ll fly to Honolulu, then come back Monday and on Wednesday go to North Carolina, and then to Washington, DC, and on and on and on.”

Geyer travels in the Orient and Europe, but mainly to the 28 or so Wagner locations throughout the country. He flies about 150,000 miles a year. “I travel three out of four weeks in a year, but during the middle part of the year, five weeks out of six.”

Geyer’s job is to oversee the Wagner outlets, to visit the sites and make sure they are performing to specifications. But, early on, he began to use these trips as opportunities to also meet contractors.

“We were trying to learn more of what their needs were more than anything else,” Geyer says. “We thought if we could understand what their problems and needs were, we could do a better job of servicing them.”

Geyer adds that he started to become very involved with AWCI in about 1980. He’s been to every AWCI convention (except for one) since he got into the industry. “As a manufacturer, we saw in the AWCI membership the core successful contractors in the trade. These are the people whose needs we wanted to understand so we could do business with them. Over the years, I’ve built up friendships with contractors all across the country.”

In fact, it’s the networking opportunities available through AWCI that Geyer says have been most valuable to him.

**Presidential Challenges**

One of the most important challenges Geyer sees in his tenure as president is membership. “The key to success of the organization is membership,” he explains. “It’s a relatively good time for the industry, and it flows along more easily when growth is good. But I’m fearful of what might happen to the membership if there’s an economic downturn. So we have to keep up the pace.”

Geyer mentions that the association has created a new staff position to focus entirely on membership, as opposed to someone doing it part time. “This means that membership will have a more directed and targeted focus.”

More concentrated help from supplier members will boost membership, Geyer believes. “Supplier members should offer membership to their contractors, explain the association’s advantages, and walk them through the membership process—as opposed to just waiting for the phone to ring,” he says. “It’s the supplier and contractor members on the street who can make it happen. A lot don’t join because they don’t understand the benefits of the association beyond their local associations. They don’t understand there’s a national one that supports the industry as a whole.

“The number of contractors who belong to the AWCI is actually very small in proportion to the number of contractors out there, though the business volume represented by AWCI members is proportionally very high. We have to find ways to reach out to smaller contractors. I’ll be trying to attend as many chapter meetings as I can, which won’t mean making more trips, but simply incorporating these meetings in the trips I’m already making.”

One area of membership that is growing in a gratifying fashion is the international membership, Geyer reports. By the same token, he adds, “We want to get people more aware of the international opportunities AWCI provides. I encourage people to make foreign trips to meet contractors in different countries and invite foreign contractors to participate here. There are different products and different applications, and I think we as
an association should at least be aware of what’s going on around the world.”

Another challenge Geyer will be facing is getting more craftsmen into the industry “The reality is that unemployment is now only 3 to 4 percent, and nobody’s come up with a good way to get more people. There are apprenticeship programs, but the way the industry has grown has put a strain on almost every area of the country. It’s not glamorous work, but we have to find some way to make it attractive to young people getting out of high school. Most of the present owners of contractor firms started out that way, but with varying work ethics and interests, it’s harder to find good additional workers now.”

Probably the associations most important immediate project, Geyer says, “is addressing the EIFS issue. We’ll be training applicators and educating inspectors as well. The EIFS manufacturers and organizations agree that this work needs to be done. It’s our responsibility as an organization to be educators.” Geyer reports that, to date, about six sessions have taken place in the United States and Canada, but many more are projected. There are thousands of applicators, and the sessions are limited to 50 to 60 people at a time, so even doing one a month will not be enough to catch up. We’re looking into using videotape presentations with monitored testing.”

No Limitations

Does Geyer feel he’ll be limited by the fact that he is a manufacturer member? I’m very aware of the fact that I’m not a contractor in a contractor-focused organization,” he replies. “I think my actions have to reflect that, and that I’m not in this for my personal gain.”

He does believe his long experience in operations can be a benefit.

“No matter what the business is, financial and operational issues are similar, and I hope I can bring some experience and solutions to contractors. I’ve always been interested in learning about other people’s business—not to be nosy, but to help me in my business, and I think now that I can offer some help in return.”

Geyer also believes that as a manufacturer having traveled all across the country and getting to know contractors from all over has given him a perspective that is both broad-based and objective.

“One thing I’ve noticed is that people tend to feel their problems are unique to their geographical area,” he says. “But I’ve found that if a problem is unique, it’s unique in a very small way General-ly it’s common to very many people.

“This first became apparent to me when I was talking to a contractor about the problems associated with communicating with craftsmen who do not speak English. But this also a problem in Florida, California, the Midwest and all over. The language problem is widespread, and should be addressed, for non-English-speaking craftsmen have become a significant part of the work force. They are hardworking, dedicated and trainable. They are good workers and have been good for the industry”

As for the changes in the industry Geyer has seen over his long career, he says perhaps the main one is “contractors have gotten far more sophisticated and professional than when I started—not all of them, but certainly those who are members of AWCI.”