

Best Chamber of Commerce

Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce

By *Virginie Boone*

Jonathan Coe was perfectly happy running a chamber of commerce in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho...until he heard there was an opening in Santa Rosa.

"For 25 years, I've been running chambers," Coe says. "[Santa Rosa] has always been one of the outstanding chambers in the country." (See "Follow the Leaders," May 2010.)

NorthBay biz readers agree, naming it the best in the region this year. Coe came on board as president and CEO in September 2009, impressed by the Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce's reputation for putting together programs on the leading edge, most notably the program known as WHEEL, which stands for Worksite Held Employee English Learning, which brings teachers to worksites to train English-as-a-second-language-speaking employees.

"It's pioneering and very important," Coe says. "Through it, employees continue to grow and prosper and, for the companies, their productivity gets better and their turnover goes down."

Coe feels the chamber has historically been in front of a lot of these kinds of innovative programs. "It's an honor to be recognized," he notes. "It's a reflection, I think, of the variety of programs we're undertaking for our members and our

efforts to start regrowing our economy."

The 900 members of the Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce are a diverse bunch, representing a broad cross-section of the city's economy, from large medical facilities to wineries, farms and sole proprietorships.

"I've been impressed by the diversification of the economy here," says Coe. "We have significant manufacturing and R&D, we're a retailing hub, there are the wineries, and we have strong banking and medical communities."

That can make the chamber's job more challenging at times, but also very satisfying. "We have events that appeal to all our members, our after-hours business mixers, for example," explains Coe, "but also we try to tailor programs to specific business sizes."

That includes providing advocacy efforts that are especially important to larger companies and workshops in employment law, of particular assistance to companies without their own human resources departments. Ultimately, the chamber brings all manner of organizations together to see how they might help one another.

"It's always interesting when

people discover their commonalities," Coe says.

To that end, the Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce also brings together younger folks with its Young Professionals Network, which features a regular speaker series as well as breakfasts and mornings simply called "buzz," a more casual chance to grab coffee with a small group and establish connections.

It also works hard to help those members looking to go green, hosting workshops on conservation, green building and more. The chamber also operates the Santa Rosa Visitors Bureau and the California Welcome Center, where last year, staff greeted 50,000 people.

"We have great staff, who are so good at interacting and listening to our members," says Coe. "And great volunteer leadership. Our board of directors is very engaged and involved, it's long provided direction for the chamber."

The focus for the future is, like so many of its member businesses, on social networking with the chamber employing a full-time communications person to delve into Facebook, Twitter and other technologies it can add to its website to help members.



Attendees at the 2009 Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce annual banquet.



The Santa Rosa Chamber's 13th annual golf tournament.

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