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Building Bridges Brings Customers Closer Than Ever by Wendy C. Burnett Mgr., Communications & Public Relations, SLMA

In 1999, the Southeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association's Board of Directors asked its Marketing Committee to evaluate its current marketing efforts. The consensus of the Committee was that though the current marketing coalitions worked well, there were some gaps that needed to be filled. Those identified by the committee were:

- Inadequate linkage and little communication between lumber manufacturers and their raw material suppliers.
- Misunderstanding by Congressional staffs about basic forest management.
- Miscommunication between the wood products industry and key customer groups.

"By identifying areas where we as an industry could come together, our Marketing Committee opened the door for us to implement the business techniques necessary to create a stronger, more unified face for the lumber industry so that we can all benefit from our common goals and other similarities," said Steve Rountree, SLMA's President.

The SLMA staff engineered a multi-pronged campaign to reinforce the gaps identified by the Marketing Committee's research. The resulting program—Building Bridges, Targeted Efforts in Marketing—provides focused efforts designed to have specific effects.

FOREST LANDOWNER OUTREACH PROGRAM

The first component of SLMA's marketing program is intended to keep timber marketers (landowners and consulting foresters) informed on the forces that impact timber prices. Through regular communications between manufacturers and forest landowners and consulting foresters, SLMA plans to serve as an information resource for them on the issues that impact the lumber market.

"Manufacturers and forest landowners have many of the same concerns. Together, we have been able to accomplish a good bit in Washington," said Rountree, "and we intend to build on those previous legislative efforts and hopefully embark on a few new ones."

Progress with the landowners has been successful since the plan was originally conceived. Last year, SLMA joined several Georgia-based associations to bring nearly 2,000 landowners, loggers and mill owners together to rally their support in the U.S./Canada lumber trade dispute. In June of this year, SLMA teamed up with the Forest Landowners Association for a joint Washington fly-in. Banding together, the two associations lobbied Congress for support on common issues such as estate taxes and Canadian lumber.

CUSTOMERS ARE ALWAYS RIGHT, BUT THEY NEED TO SEE OUR SIDE, TOO

No one would argue the importance of keeping customers happy. With its current marketing program, SLMA has organized several programs to reach out to customer groups and find common ground on difficult issues and join forces in areas of common interest.

“We realize that we aren't going to agree with our customer base on everything, but it's important that we communicate our positions and understand their perspective as well in order to keep the dialog open and build the bridges to better customer relations and continued market access,” explained Rountree.

The first customer group SLMA focused on was wood truss manufacturers. By establishing a relationship with the Wood Truss Council of America and several of its local chapters, SLMA has helped its members better understand the needs of truss manufacturers. On the flip side, WTCA was able to communicate to its membership about how lumber manufacturers operate in today's volatile market.

Earlier this year, SLMA turned its attention to a second customer group: independent retailers. In a meeting with both the National Lumber and Building Materials Dealers Association and the Southern Building Materials Association, SLMA's Executive Directors established a working relationship with the two groups aimed at understanding each other's strategies and finding common ground on industry issues.

“SLMA is the voice of the independent lumber manufacturer. As we continue to grow and build on our programs and services, I think that our members will depend more on us to ensure that their voices are heard,” says Rountree. “Our Building Bridges program has already opened new doors for the association and its members. As we continue to get feedback and polish the program, we believe it will be welcomed by everyone in the industry.”

The Southeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association represents independent lumber manufacturers throughout the Southeast. Members of the association produce an average of 4.5 billion board feet of quality hardwood and softwood lumber annually. SLMA represents 240 member companies with the continued goal of helping perpetuate family-owned lumber businesses.

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