



A Gracious Welcome

Supplier of the Year Dean O'Kelley continues a tradition of service by shepherding new supplier members into HAA.

Interview and photo by RACHEL ZOCH, HAA Staff

Even after seven years as an Ambassador, earning a Certified Apartment Supplier designation and serving as this year's Expo chair, Dean O'Kelley says he still feels like a relative newcomer to the industry. ABODE asked O'Kelley, our 2013 Supplier of the Year, to share his thoughts on customer service and what advice he gives new HAA members to help them succeed.

Once again, congratulations! How did it feel to hear your name called at the awards?

Surreal. I still consider the people who have won this award before my mentors. Coming from outside the industry, I've hung onto their shirttails, and they've been very gracious to show me the ropes. So I feel very honored. ... I'm very grateful, and I feel very, very honored. It still kind of washes over. At that moment, it was like, "Really?"

Remind me how you got into the multifamily staffing business. It was around 2006, right?

I believe that's correct – March 2006. I had known Ken (Bohan) for several years before, and he felt that I would be a good fit for Liberty. I think I had doubts because I had no multifamily experience, but he felt that it would be a good fit. (laughs) It took a while to get me on board with Liberty, but I don't regret anything that I've done.

You originally studied hospitality and worked in hotels and retail management, correct?

My degree is in hotel and restaurant management from the University of Houston. That was many years ago, and I worked for Doubletree and Four Seasons hotels. Loved the business. The hours can be a little tenuous, if that's the right word, but I'm very glad that I chose that as my degree.

How do your experiences in the hospitality business inform what you do now?

It's very much a people business. Of course, that's what I do now. I think that people make or break the experience of purchasing a product or a service. I feel that it truly is the cornerstone of why you want to go back to a product or a service again. I don't mean to sound crass, but a car is a car, a hotel room is a hotel room, a sweater from a particular store is a sweater – but your experience may be enhanced by the person who has served you.

You've also worked in retail management. Do you find that those experiences bring different information to what you do now?

I believe so, because I think that everyone has a choice in what they purchase. Retail, of course, is very competitive, much more so than

any other market, but I know that I have gone back to see a particular person even though I may be spending more for that product. Again, I feel that it is how you feel about the product or service that makes you purchase. I'm all for saving money, but it's your association with that product.

I remember hearing you say that it doesn't cost anything to be nice. When did you first learn that, and why is it important?

Wow, I have to think about that for a minute. It doesn't cost anything at all. Sometimes it's easier to feed into emotion. I've learned when I'm trying to help someone in a situation that the most important thing is to understand where they're coming from. When I get to a point of understanding, I feel that I can help them better.

In my business, I've often said that I sell the most imperfect product, which is people – and sometimes the human factor comes out quickly. Most of my clients are very understanding, but how quickly I can react, I think, is what sets us apart. I like to quote Ken: "You use someone for their product or service enough, someone's gonna stub their toe." I think everyone understands that, but it's how quickly you react to a situation that may not be perfect that makes the difference.

What's your strategy for providing excellent customer service, and what does that mean to you?

Customer service, to me, is being there, making yourself available, and I try to do that with all of my clients. Again, things may not be exactly to their expectations, and what I ask is that they let me know as soon as possible, because I would hate for someone to spend time with a candidate that's not meeting their expectations. The sooner I find out, the better, so that we can rectify the situation.

I consider my business almost completely reactive. ... What I find is that my clients are sometimes far more understanding than I am. (laughs) I seek perfection, and I realize perfection doesn't exist. I can give you a hundred examples. I've been told many times, "Dean, we understand, and we know it's gonna be OK."

How long have you been involved with HAA now?

Well, HAA started three days after I started with Liberty, and I guess the saying applies, "Ignorance is bliss." I was told that I would be going to an Ambassador meeting three days after I started, and I asked what an Ambassador was. I showed up, and the rest is kind of history. I'm very glad that I followed those instructions. ... I remember how gracious everyone was by extending their hands to me and letting me know that they were available to me if needed.

Why is the association important?

We are very fortunate to have the association that we do. Everything, in my perspective, is all about relationship, and that is what HAA is all about. I still am amazed by the length and the depth of some of the relationships, and for anyone who is coming on board, I encourage them to get involved as quickly as they can.

It can be a little daunting at first. I always like to say it's like showing up to a family reunion and you're the only non-family member. But if you just allow yourself to stick out your hand and make some introductions, more people than you know will be willing to help make introductions for you, and you'll find yourself quickly in the fold.

Dean has a way of making everyone feel welcomed and excited about being a member of HAA. I don't have enough fingers to count the number of times I have had someone come up to me to express their gratitude for how Dean has helped them get their start within HAA. Dean has a servant's heart, and we are all better people for knowing him. – Laura Lestus

You mentioned the Ambassadors as your starting point. What advice would you give someone new to the association?

For suppliers, I highly recommend Ambassadors. It's unique in that it is a supplier organization. They may have a key to a door that you're trying to open, and what I find most eye-opening is that even competitors work together. Everyone's willing to help you make the next step.

After that, I believe that BGF is very important because our industry is so heavily regulated. It gives you a chance to be in the know, No. 1. No. 2, it allows you to really see the decision-makers. There are a lot of new faces with HAA, and people who have been here for a while don't know the new faces, so it gives you the perfect opportunity to be seen and to make that introduction.

You earned your Certified Apartment Supplier designation early on. What made you pursue that, and how has it helped you?

I did that my first summer. Again, timing is everything. I still have relationships with people that I did that class with, and I would strongly recommend it to everyone. For me it was very different because I was so new to the industry, so it really was a hands-on "this is how it all works." I realized there's far more to showing apartments. (laughs)

Your co-worker and fellow Product Service Council member Laura Lestus nominated you for this award and said that she really admires your follow-up with welcoming people into HAA, and you've talked about many people who were so welcoming to you. It sounds like you are following in those footsteps.

What I can do is pay it forward. I have been given many opportunities by some very gracious people. What pains me is there are people who will sign up with their membership, pay their dues and not show up for lack of knowing what to do. I know that I can speak on behalf of all the PSC that they would be more than happy to help anyone move forward, but I feel that it's my duty to pay it forward.

I'm glad to do it, because it can truly be daunting. I mean, that first time that you go to a big event, you're like, "Ooh, what's going on here?" It doesn't take five seconds to make three introductions, and amazingly, I find that there's a connection, be it with an arborist and a landscaping service or whatever, but the bridges are formed very quickly.

Again, you're got to put your face forward, because people don't know who you are. ... It's interesting, because there are people who are always here, and then there are people – it just changes so fast. It's very odd to be seven years old in the industry and be considered an old-timer. I still consider myself a newbie, but I guess I'm not there anymore. ...

I feel very honored to work for a company that believes in HAA. It's a very unique organization, and I know that we stand on the shoulders of people who have rolled up their sleeves and given so much of their time. I feel that it's our duty to make sure that we carry it forward.

It's a PAC(Man) Party!



Open to all HAA Members, so come join the fun!

Enjoy video games, appetizers and an open bar amidst a unique and lively classic arcade environment. This fundraising event benefits the Houston Apartment Association Better Government Fund PAC and is produced for all by HAA's young professionals.

October 3, 2013 • 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.

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– Dean O'Kelley

You did a tremendous job as Expo chair this past year. Tell me a little bit about that experience. What did you learn from it?

What I learned is how wonderful our volunteers are. We have the very best, and I don't mean that lightly. I chose the theme ("Simply the Best") strictly because I do believe that HAA is the best. We have the best staff, we have the best volunteers, we have the best organization, and it was time to celebrate that. I learned how very good the HAA staff is at what they do. You definitely have it fine-tuned, and as much as I wanted to worry, I didn't really have to. (laughs) ... It would be hard to mess it up, let me put it that way.

Do you have any special plans for the PSC next year as president? What's next for you?

The first thing I think of is to continue to envelop new supplier members and make sure that they have all the tools that they need. We've started our mentoring program. I think we've gotten a good start, but I want to make sure that we really do mentor the new people coming on board. That's the main focus.

What about outside of HAA? I know you like to travel.

Right now it's focusing on my clients, because I feel like the first half of this year has been HAA, so the rest of the year is really going to be on my clients. ...

There will be some travel coming on board. ... I think of travel, and I'm very blessed to have seen what I've seen, but you get yourself out of yourself, and you realize that it is a very, very tiny blue-and-green globe that we live on. It's an amazing world that we live in, and we have some pretty amazing people on it, many of which are right here. ★

Congratulations again to all our Honors Award winners! See pages 56 and 68 for more coverage of our top people and properties.