The Best you can be

David Graebel Receives Lifetime Achievement Award for Distinguished Service

by Sabrina Waiss, Director of Federation Relations

The Moving & Storage Institute’s 2008 Lifetime Achievement Award for Distinguished Service was presented to David Graebel, chairman of the board of The Graebel Companies, during the closing dinner at AMSA’s Annual Education Conference & Expo in Orlando on April 4.

Recognized as the industry’s most prestigious symbol of leadership, innovation, integrity and service, the award is bestowed annually on an individual with at least 20 years experience who has made significant contributions to the moving and storage industry, both in operational advancement and enhanced public image.

As he made the introduction, MSI Board Chair Chip Dircks said, “It is a great honor for me to present Dave with this award. As a friend of my father, I grew up in the moving business watching and learning from Dave as he grew his business from an agent of Allied Van Lines to a major independent van line. I was impressed that he was able to maintain high quality and service excellence while growing his business. I can’t think of a more deserving recipient of this award.”

David Graebel ventured into the moving world more than 50 years ago without fanfare and with limited industry experience and contacts.

He attended college for one year while working more than 40 hours a week in a sporting goods store and running a ski school in Wausau, Wis.

In his spare time, he enjoyed helping a local mover.

When he saw an ad for a statewide moving authority for sale for $4,000 (less than the cost of a college education), he jumped at the opportunity to launch his own business. He bought his first truck in 1950, the same year he was drafted into the Army, and his wife Lois ran the business for the next two years while he served in the Korean War.

The company that Graebel founded in 1950 with one truck today is recognized as the world’s largest privately held relocation company.

When asked what has remained consistent since those early days, Graebel responds without hesitation, “Since my very first order, never once in my life did I work for the money. I always wanted to be worthy of the trust if someone gave me an order. That’s absolutely essential to any business.”

With a career spanning nearly 60 years, Graebel has witnessed many changes in the industry.

Chief among them is how the business has expanded from local and interstate household moves to full-service national and international corporate relocation.

“We’re no longer just a truck on moving day,” says Graebel. “Business has evolved...”
into full-service relocation. Where families used to move locally, they are now moving globally.

Graebel’s business success is due in no small part to his ability to assess and respond to the changing needs of his customers. According to his son, Graebel Companies CEO Bill Graebel, one of Dave’s greatest strengths is his “ability to be responsive to and facilitative of the needs of corporate clients, which have evolved incredibly. What is expected today—moving people on employer-sponsored moves—is far different than individuals moving themselves. Being attuned to the individual needs in a corporate environment and translating that downstream to the transferee is critical.”

In his tenure, Graebel has also observed great changes in the American culture that have impacted business operations. Consumers, for example, want increasingly more for their money and they have high expectations when it comes to service.

“Today’s highest achievement is tomorrow’s minimum acceptable,” he says. “We have to be the best value. And the only way to be the best value is to be the hardest workers with the highest standards and to deliver services or products every time on the basis of commitments made, commitments kept.”

According to Bill Graebel, his father knows what he’s talking about when it comes to hard work, high standards and honoring his commitments. “When people think of Dave, integrity is the word that jumps out. He sees no barriers in pursuing what’s possible. He is an untiring worker and has always sought to be challenged to meet the needs and exceed the expectations of every customer and every prospect out there.”

This industry innovator also has much to say about the state of the nation’s economy and the challenges it poses for the moving industry.

“In an economic downturn, tough times present an opportunity to prove your value, broaden the base, diversify,” he says. “We are facing huge changes in the relocation industry because the economy is changing so radically.”

Movers focusing solely on residential moves are particularly hard hit because of the incredible downturn in the housing market but Graebel believes that movers should face the challenge head on.

“The focus has to be on adding more business service lines. There are lots of things that move that don’t involve a home—renters, offices, medical equipment, corporations, freight, records storage, etc.”

Moving companies will need to look at doing new types of business in ways that they never considered before.

With this approach, Graebel believes the industry will survive and many companies will come out stronger in the end.”
can’t sell orange juice—but we can broaden the base of what we offer to get through this.”

To those interested in launching a business, Graebel cautions that they shouldn’t do it if they think it will mean they’ll be able to work less and make more money.

“You can’t hire a few workers and expect to do the backstroke. There’s nothing part-time about owning a business; it becomes your own life. As the founder of a company, you

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must realize that you are your most valuable asset—and you must put that asset to work tirelessly.”

He adds, “Competition is violent, you either get the order or you don’t. And forget about how many competitors you have out there. You don’t get any business from competitors. The only competitor you have to overcome is your own inclination to quit, compromise or to tolerate.”

When asked about the senior Graebel’s strengths as a businessman, Bill Graebel echoed his father’s sentiment.

“Competitiveness—[although] it wasn’t about competing against others. It was about being the best you can be. If you execute, given the opportunities available, you can succeed and grow.”

While the company Graebel has built may serve as a testament to his skill as a businessman, The Graebel Companies’ corporate culture strongly reflects his core values and work ethic. Graebel spoke about his father’s gratitude for having the privilege and opportunity to live and work in America and the philosophy of servant leadership that is evident throughout the company.

“It’s the notion of what do you need, how can I help you? And it’s about having everyone realize that their job is to be a reliable and trusted resource to every one of our clients.”

Bill says that Dave, having been a driver, has consistently celebrated the role of drivers and their value to the customer at the first and final mile.

“He has created a company that is very keen on ensuring drivers are treated with respect and making them feel that they are essential to the success of our organization—which they are.”

Asked to look back on his long career to date and whether there is a particular experience or accomplishment about which he is most proud, once again Dave Graebel doesn’t hesitate.

“Absolutely. We started that first truck with never doing it for money but for trust. On a global basis we have earned a reputation of trust and progressiveness. We have become right for today and ready for tomorrow in the minds of the entire world. Now that’s not too bad for a truck driver who got a couple good loads.”

Sabrina Weiss is director of federation relations at AMSA and director of the Moving & Storage Institute. Having spent more than 10 years in grassroots and international nonprofit management, Weiss has extensive fundraising, development and marketing experience, as well as corporate branding and strategic-partnerships expertise.

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