

HERE’S LOOKING AT YOU, KID

Sherleen Mahoney

A look back at how RFMA has grown over the past 10 years

Texas was the perfect place to celebrate RFMA's 10th anniversary. After all, RFMA began in Texas, it is headquartered in Texas, and Texas' larger-than-life attitude captures the sentiment of this important milestone fittingly.

The Texas-style annual conference was hosted at the beautiful Gaylord Texan Resort, with legendary Dallas Cowboys running back Emmitt Smith as the keynote speaker. There was a lot to celebrate. RFMA has grown to include more than 1,140 members, RFMA Gives completed its largest project to date, and founding member and the first Chairman of the Board Jeff Dover joined RFMA as Facilities Resource Manager.

With more than 1,450 attendees, the conference was a rousing success; it was nothing short of what RFMA members have come to expect over the years. Walking through the massive show floor, seeing attendees greet each other, not just as colleagues but as friends, and attending the fun events held in the grand Grapevine Ballroom, it's clear that RFMA has come a long way from its early days. The innovative idea brought forth by Joe Robertson, President of Right Way Facility Services in Fort Worth, not only brought together the best facility professionals and vendors, it also transformed an entire industry.

The Promise of an Idea

Like most entrepreneurs, Robertson is a problem solver. His company provides facility and remodel solutions for residential projects and commercial restaurants. Many of his clients include restaurant facility professionals—a role he has first-hand experience with, having served as the Director of Facilities at Steak and Ale earlier in his career. Understanding the corporate and vendor side of the restaurant facility management industry gives Robertson unique insight.

In 2004, he noticed that several of his clients were experiencing similar facility maintenance problems, but without a way to network, they could not connect to learn from each other's experiences, offer solutions or discuss best practices.

"My clients Chili's and TGI Friday's are headquartered 4 miles apart from each other, but back then, the facilities managers had never met, and they were both experiencing the exact same problems. So, I suggested they meet and talk about solutions and best practices," Robertson said.

Additionally, the industry was experiencing growth within casual dining. Many of his clients were interested in new ideas and solutions to help support the growing restaurants while controlling cost and without hiring additional facility managers.

To address these industry-wide issues, Robertson invited more restaurant facility directors from leading restaurants to participate in a roundtable meeting held at Brinker's headquarters in Dallas. The attendees included Jeff Dover and Chris Devlin from Carlson Restaurants; Margaret Barada, Debbie Nelson and Pete Geloso from Darden Restaurants; Kris Kirpes from Brinker International; Ray Bond from Applebee's; and Danny Koontz from Ruby Tuesday.

"I was asked to attend a meeting with other chain restaurant facility people and Joe Robertson, a vendor from Dallas," said Danny Koontz, Senior Consultant at Mobile Fixture, formerly with Ruby Tuesday, RFMA Chairman of the Board in 2011 and currently serving on the RFMA Advisory Council. "I saw an opportunity to learn from and share information with my peers."

As the group discussed their hot-topic issues and shared their industry knowledge with each other, some best practices were revealed, such as creating a master list of the best vendors that could be accessible to everyone. This meeting also confirmed that staying connected with each other to share their knowledge and experiences on an ongoing basis would be incredibly beneficial.

The idea of creating an association that specifically addressed their needs as restaurant facility professionals began to take shape. This was Robertson's vision from the start. He saw the value of a restaurant facility management association, but he wanted the idea to develop organically among the facilities professionals themselves. At a follow-up meeting, he introduced a consultant, who gave a presentation about the value of a trade association.

"I didn't bring him in until the very end because the first thing you have to do is let everyone discover there's a problem before you can offer a solution," Robertson said.

Although there were existing associations dedicated to facility management, none was solely focused on restaurant facility management. The idea of creating one to fill the void was compelling and thrilling.

"Everyone became passionate about the idea because we could tell this would help us do our job better," Dover said. "No one said, 'Sorry, but I've got my regular job to worry about' because everyone could see the benefits of an association."

Robertson told the group that if they were serious about pursuing the association, he would see the vision through to fruition. With everyone on board, Robertson began researching how to execute this idea. He studied the structures of the Professional Retail Store Maintenance Association (PRSM) and International Facilities Maintenance Association (IFMA) among others, and borrowed upon their best ideas and tailored them to the restaurant facility management industry to create the Restaurant Facility Management Association (RFMA). Then, he met with Ed Bordelon, who was serving as the Board Chairman of PRSM at the time, to work on a strategic partnership to launch RFMA under their umbrella, until it was financially stable to stand on its own.

"I always go to the people who do it best and say, 'help me,'" Robertson said.

A Vision Becomes RFMA

Word about RFMA started spreading throughout the restaurant industry, and excitement began to build. This was something restaurant facility professionals had been seeking for a long time. As the first and only association that targets restaurant facility professionals, people weren't just interested in joining RFMA; they wanted to be involved. They wanted to be a part of RFMA from the beginning to help shape and develop the association and its offerings.

"When I heard the restaurant folks were creating a new organization called RFMA, I wanted to be a part of it," said Angela Hughes, CRFP, Facility Manager for Red Lobster. "I was very excited and could see the potential of the new organization growing and expanding to what we are today. To have an organization entirely focused on the restaurant sector was on target for us. We needed solutions to our specific problems and RFMA has provided that for us."

With RFMA, many professionals felt a sense of belonging and a responsibility to create an association that addressed their needs, to allow them to network and offer educational opportunities, with the goal of becoming better facility professionals.

"PRSM was a great organization, providing networking, educational opportunities and benchmarking resources while I was working for The Limited and Gap," said Russell S. Subjinske, CRFP, Senior Director of Facility/Service Contracts and Energy at Wendy's Quality Supply Chain Coop. "When I started working for Wendy's, I realized that the needs of a restaurateur and retailer were quite different. I needed to find a new group dedicated to the facility service component of restaurateurs. That was RFMA."

"I received a call one day with the news that several restaurant facilities professionals were trying to form a new organization dedicated to restaurant facilities," added Rod Towns,

CRFP, Director of Facilities at La Madeleine Country French Cafes. "I immediately joined with our founders in the fleshing out of the organization and determining what we needed to do in order to accomplish our goals."

"RFMA was an organization that was so needed for the restaurant facilities professional," said Maria Johnson, CRFP, Director of Facilities Management at Pei Wei Asian Diner. "By getting involved, I could give input to help RFMA with the development of the organization. I knew getting involved early would also help me start becoming a better restaurant facilities professional. I imagined that RFMA would be a large organization where I could talk to other people that have the same experiences that I do. A place where I can find vendors, learn about the latest technology, hear what everyone else is doing to get ideas and make long-lasting relationships that would help myself and others grow in our restaurant professional career."

RFMA wasn't only appealing to restaurateurs. Vendors were equally excited because they knew it would be a valuable resource for them as well; one where they can network with existing and prospective clients.

"The restaurant environment has so much more complexity than retail, and as a result I felt we needed an organization that more readily suited our needs," said Susan Spring, Director of Sales Support at Corrigo (formerly with Starbucks, Brinker International and Carlson Restaurants Worldwide). "Although we share space with retail in many developments, the requirements for developing and maintaining a restaurant require a specific skill set that RFMA targets. In the beginning, I had hoped that RFMA would become a great resource to help me in my day-to-day responsibilities. Having relationships with others focused solely on the restaurant space meant that I would have ready access to those who I could share learnings."

"The restaurant market is very 'intimate,' and being a part of an organization that focuses on the tough demands of a restaurant was necessary," said Greg DuChane, Director of Retail-Restaurant Vertical Market at Trane. "Being grouped into traditional retail associations was not giving focus to these unique demands. RFMA filled that need."

"I can remember picking up a magazine, seeing the ad announcing this new association focused on restaurant facility professionals and thinking, 'Finally, I've found it!'" said Charisse Luckey, Director of CMMS Business Development at Roto-Rooter Services Co. "Since joining Roto-Rooter, I had been looking for just such an organization because there was so much need for collaboration, education, sourcing and networking in the restaurant facility industry—everything RFMA had to offer."

RFMA was officially introduced at the 2005 PRSM Annual Conference, held in April at the Mandalay Bay Resort in Las Vegas. RFMA had its own booth, where board members could meet attendees and share information about the new organization. Tracy Tomson was hired as an independent contractor to assist at the RFMA booth, distribute materials and represent RFMA.

"I thought it was a weekend stint; I didn't know what it would lead to at the time," she said.

Bill Wallace, CRFP, Construction Consulting Inc. (formerly with Rock Bottom Restaurants/CraftWorks), remembers being introduced to RFMA by Tomson at that first PRSM conference.

"I was a member of PRSM for several years, since that was the closest organization that restaurant facilities folks had to work with," he said. "At the Las Vegas PRSM conference in 2005, I wandered into a small hall off to the side that had been designated for this fledgling group of folks that called themselves RFMA. Tracy welcomed me and said, 'Hey! Rock Bottom? You belong back here!' Well, it was like coming home."

Robertson presented a session about getting involved in RFMA. And a small number of exhibit spaces were sold on RFMA's behalf to vendors specifically targeting the restaurant industry. Approximately 140 attendees came to Las Vegas for that 2005 conference, the first official gathering of RFMA.

Shortly after the conference, Tomson was hired as a part-time Managing Director to take the reins of RFMA and help establish the organization as an independent entity.

"At that time, there was no office space, no checkbook—nothing," she said. "There was only a box with some files in it of people who were interested in learning more about RFMA. So, my first duties were to open a P.O. box and set up credit card processing. I worked from home and we had our staff meetings with Joe and Jeff at TGI Fridays."

"I would write her a check every other week, and some weeks I would ask her to wait a couple of days before she deposited them," Dover chimed in. "That's how we ran things in the beginning."

"We didn't really know what we were doing, which made it fun because we didn't have any rules to follow," Tomson said. "And no one could say we were doing something wrong because we weren't following in anyone's footsteps. We were paving our own way."

Rallying Vendor Support

With restaurateurs clearly excited and on board, now RFMA needed to introduce themselves to more vendors and get them interested. The restaurateurs called their vendor partners to tell them about RFMA and to invite them to a Vendor Rally, held in Frisco, Texas, in August 2005.

"I remember Mike Snyder, who was with Brinker at the time, calling and telling me about this crazy idea, and I knew I had to see what was going on," said Gordon Bruner, Owner of VMC Facilities.

At the Vendor Rally, RFMA asked for committee, sponsor and exhibitor participation. Initially, there was a mix of enthusiasm and trepidation. Some jumped at the chance to sign up and be a part of RFMA, but some asked Robertson why they would want their competition to be in the same room with their customers. Robertson had the perfect answer.

"I told them that I feel like I do a good enough job where I'm not threatened," he said. "So, if you can steal my customers, then you're doing a better job than me and you deserve them. More importantly, it puts all my prospective customers in the same building at the same time, and my existing customers can tell prospective new customers how good I am."

Declaring Independence

Thanks to the deep commitment and passion of the restaurateurs and vendors, in two short years, RFMA was ready to host their annual conference independently of PRSM and stand on its own, as planned.

"The fact that we were ready to be on our own after two years was phenomenal," Robertson said.

Once RFMA became independent, it was more important than ever for the association to prove itself. Although the membership base was strong and growing, RFMA did experience some growing pains.

"The first few years, as expected, were bumpy as we gathered our legs," Dover said. "Getting Tracy Tomson hired as the association's first employee laid the groundwork for where we are today. She coordinated and directed the activities needed to establish RFMA through the inception of the various committees, conferences and overall information gathering and distributing."

Tomson said initially getting people to serve on the Board was not easy.

"Now, people seek out being on the Board, but back then, because we were so new, getting board members and leaders was challenging," Tomson said. "But after board members and leaders became involved, they found it to be so rewarding they did not want it to end and we didn't want to lose their passion, which is why RFMA created the Advisory Council. This allows past leaders to continue playing a major role within the association."

Another challenge was booking hotels for the annual conferences.

"RFMA didn't have any credit history, and if you don't have that when you're trying to book a conference at a hotel or convention center, they want cash upfront, which is why the first show was charged to Joe's American Express card," Tomson said. "Also, the convention business was at its peak, so some hotels did not even accept our RFPs. And we had to work around the timing of other industry conferences and franchisee meetings, so we had a limited window for booking our conference. With the guidance of the meeting planners, who had helped make PRSM events so successful, Kim Sackett and Barb Hill helped get us on the right track from the beginning and are still a part of our team today."

But all the hard work paid off. RFMA's first stand-alone conference at the Embassy Suites and Frisco Convention Center in Frisco, Texas, in 2007 was a success. It welcomed 85 exhibit booths and 199 restaurant attendees, and there was palpable excitement about the future of RFMA on the show floor.

Tomson also remembers 2009 as a challenging year for the restaurant industry. Restaurant companies were consolidating and merging; there were layoffs and cuts to business travel and expenses. Some within the association panicked and wondered if RFMA should expand to include hospital and hotel facility maintenance, but Tomson believed the association should stay true to itself.

"We'd gotten this far by fulfilling a particular need in a niche, so we agreed to stay the course and came out of it stronger than ever," she said.

By 2012, any qualms about the restaurant industry and the future of the association vanished. More than 1,200 people attended the annual conference in Las Vegas. Tomson remembers that the outdoor opening party was packed to the gills.

"I was standing with some original board members and I said to them, 'Wow. Look at what we've become.' That year, attendance exploded," she said. "Since then, we've continued to grow and hit our annual membership goals. So, it's always exciting and we don't ever stop pinching ourselves."

"I'm not surprised at the growth we have seen over the first 10 years," said Jack Kortekamp, CRFP, Corporate Sales Manager at Roto Rooter Services Co. "By staying true to our mission and core values—and at the same time being a great bunch of people who enjoy each other—RFMA just works. Our challenge is to keep it that way."

"The whole thing has been such an amazing surprise," Robertson said. "It was amazing how it came together; everyone was on board. The first annual conference was small and we were glad that anyone showed up. The growth of RFMA since then has been amazing."

Inevitable Success

During the association's first five years, Robertson was very involved in its development. But lately, he has stepped back because he is confident RFMA is in good hands.

"They don't need me anymore," he said. "They do an outstanding job. The Board of Directors is very engaged. Tracy and her staff are really good. Now, it's just fun to go to the conference, hang out and see everyone and just be part of the big family. It's like a child growing up and leaving home."

Robertson says he is most proud of having the insight to see how good Tomson was when they first met.

"I saw that we needed someone like her to lead us, and convincing her to come on board with this fledgling company was one of the most key decisions I've made towards RFMA's success," he said.

Koontz completely agrees.

"One of the highlights of the RFMA organization to me is the hiring of Tracy Tomson as our Executive Director. She is simply the best," he said.

Jack McNertney, CRFP, Sr. Director of Facilities with Darden and former Chairman of the Board, also praises Tomson's leadership, as well as the commitment of Director of Education Debi Kensell, the board members and all the RFMA members.

"Hiring Tracy Tomson was a big highlight for RFMA as a whole," he said. "We absolutely could not have enjoyed the success we have if not for her leadership, passion, commitment and marketing genius. Also, hiring Debi Kensell to grow the educational format and pulling off the CRFP testing criteria and soon the online learning tool. We are successful because of the commitment of Board Members, members and these two talented individuals. I was a former PRSM member. I attended the first conference where RFMA and PRSM split the conference hall. I didn't imagine that in 10 short years it would grow to almost 1,200 members."

Humbly, Tomson attributes RFMA's success to the fact that it serves a niche that was not previously served.

"The initial goal was to give restaurateurs a way to benchmark, but we didn't realize that in creating RFMA, we were also creating a huge opportunity for vendors to reach out and connect with those restaurateurs, who were often too busy to answer their phone calls and reply to their emails."

Thanks to Robertson's vision for RFMA, the talents of Tomson and the backing of restaurant facility professionals with impressive knowledge and fierce dedication and passion, RFMA's success was inevitable.

Forever Changing an Industry

Robertson is also extremely proud of forever changing the perspective on restaurant facility managers. He says before RFMA, restaurant facility managers were not always valued or respected for their work.

"The restaurant facility manager was a stepchild to construction and operations in the restaurant industry," he said. "They were often seen as glorified maintenance workers. But in reality, they are property asset managers, in charge of millions of dollars of equipment, and if those assets don't operate properly, the restaurants don't make money. RFMA helped bring facility maintenance to the forefront of operations. We've proved that we are a valued asset and not a liability, even though we spend the company's money. We've changed the focus of the restaurant industry, and that was a really big thing for me." Rod Towns also welcomed this change in attitude.

"For many years before we formed RFMA, I was troubled by the perception of many companies that facilities was just a cost center; a necessary evil, if you will," he said. "For most of my career, facilities just did not get any respect. Some of that lack of respect was deserved. What was needed was an organization that would allow facilities to become 'professionalized'."

So Much More than an Association

RFMA has created a network for restaurateurs to share their expertise with one another, giving them access to the best vendors and providing them with educational tools to help them succeed. RFMA has also presented opportunities for members to lead and be more involved through committees and RFMA Gives. Through these opportunities, the association has continued to promote and augment the restaurant facility management profession.

Those who have served in leadership roles, such as on the Board of Directors, as Chairmen of the Board or on the Advisory Council, all say it's been an honor and a career highlight for them.

"My personal highlight from RFMA was the chance to serve on the Board of Directors and to be its Chairman in 2011," Koontz said.

"Serving on the Board of Directors for RFMA has been an honor, and it has helped me reach leadership levels that I may never have had an opportunity outside this association," said Patrick Hentzen, Senior Facility Engineer for Kentucky Fried Chicken, Chairman of the Board in 2012 and currently serving on the Advisory Council.

"One of my highlights has been being on the board for many years, including one year as Chairman of the Board in 2010," Wallace said.

"My RFMA highlights include being on the Board of Directors, Advisory Council and Education Chair and working with RFMA Gives," said Susan Daywitt, President and CEO of SLM Waste & Recycling Services Inc. "What an honor to be part of such a fabulous organization to see it grow, expand and give so much to the facility managers and to so many communities."

"For me, serving on the Board was huge," Spring said. "That is where I cemented relationships that have endured well beyond the years that I served. For RFMA what I have seen is a major evolution from a small group of people who wanted to make a difference in the restaurant space to a true association that is leading the charge in the restaurant facilities space."

Serving on the various committees is another great way members can be involved in the association. Those enthusiastic and dedicated members who volunteer their valuable time to serve on the committees often exemplify strong leadership and communication skills, responsibility, loyalty, champion diversity and are strategic thinkers. Many say it is a fulfilling experience that hones in on their skills and has paved the way to new leadership opportunities that have enriched both their professional and personal lives.

"Over the years, we've seen some amazing personal stories happen on the committees," Hentzen said. "Many of the Board of Directors were introduced into service for RFMA through committee involvement. Creating these networking/volunteer opportunities, through committee involvement, quite possibly has drawn some of the best industry professionals to participate in the restaurant facility industry on a much broader platform. I've personally spent five plus years on different committees in co-chair positions before being asked to accept a nomination for the Board of Directors. The years spent 'in the trenches' were very valuable for me to network with many of our members. Serving on the Board of Directors for RFMA has been an honor and helped me reach leadership levels that I may never have had an opportunity to achieve outside this association."

"Personally, the highlight of the past 10 years was getting involved," Johnson said. "The things that I got involved with continue to help me grow personally and professionally. Joining a committee, helping to get the CRFP program started, getting involved with Females in Facilities and being voted onto the Board of Directors were also highlights. I would not have gotten those experiences, skills and relationships at my current company, and this was a way to do something that was new and scary and took me out of my comfort zone to grow. Now I have even more confidence when I am asked to do something I don't typically do. It increased my wealth of knowledge and opened my eyes to different areas I needed to improve on."

"I jumped right in and signed up for a committee right off the bat," Bruner said. "I saw the potential and really wanted to be a part of this. I have so many great memories, not to mention how it has helped my company grow and all the great new friends and relationships I've gained. Since my humble beginnings, I have been Vendor of the Year, I have been on the Board and I am still on the Advisory Council. I love getting to be part of RFMA Gives and serving on the RFMA Gives Steering Committee. I get to do all kinds of fun things by just being involved, and I will stay involved as long as they will let me."

Creating a Family

For a majority of the members, RFMA isn't just a professional organization, it's a family. It brings together the best facility professionals and allows them to encourage and support each other in their day-to-day tasks. It's a resource they can turn to when they need answers and solutions to challenging problems, as well as a group to celebrate achievements and milestones. RFMA's network connects these facilities professionals, many of whom have enjoyed friendships that span more than 20 years. And once a year, the annual conference brings these friends together for a highly anticipated reunion.

"The chance to meet such wonderful people, both restaurant facilities people and vendor partners, is so special," Koontz said. "These are business associates but more importantly lifelong friends. I am honored to be a part of it and can't wait to see what the next 10 years brings."

"The members of RFMA are some of the best professionals in the industry, and we'll also be lifelong friends," Hentzen said. "I've learned much over the past 10 years and am looking forward to staying active in RFMA."

Over the years, these industry professionals have seen each other hone their skills, advance their careers and accomplish extraordinary things, such as pouring their blood, sweat and tears into the various RFMA Gives projects.

"From the beginning, I've believed in our mission and our people, and I've watch people stretch and do more than they ever believed was possible," Luckey said. "I've seen phenomenal success and growth, not only in the numbers, but also in the heart of an organization that wants to give back and in the passion of its members who truly want to be involved. Many hear me say that I love RFMA, and I do! I have felt a true sense of accomplishment and value here. Many of my closest friends are members, and a number of my business relationships started at RFMA events. I'm grateful and proud to be a member and a leader of this fantastic association."

"I absolutely love meeting my peers in the industry and the vendors whom I've done business with for 20 years. To me it's sort of a family reunion," McNertney said.

And according to Hughes, RFMA gives professionals like her a lifeline to her peers that she can reach out to professionally and personally.

"Sometimes the life of a facility manager can be a bit of a lonely gig," Hughes said. "Many facility managers like myself work from their home and have demanding jobs and often work long hours with extensive travel. Developing the connections with other facility managers through RFMA has helped a lot, and has also given me contacts outside my company who I can reach out to when I need help, feedback, wisdom or even encouragement. Sometimes I just call another RFMA facility manager to just check in, ask how they are doing or ask about their kids and family, and that's when I can encourage them too if they are having a bad day or facing a big challenge. Since we don't see each other often, the phone calls keep us connected. The face-to-face time we spend may be just once a year at the Conference or a second time at a regional event. I've made some lifelong friends through RFMA, and I truly appreciate that."

Looking Toward the Future

RFMA is just getting started. Always guided by the needs of the members, the association continues to dream bigger and to deliver more. RFMA has accomplished a staggering amount with the commitment of a small but passionate staff that includes Tomson and her talented team: Kensell, Education Director, a seasoned association executive who came to RFMA after parting ways with PRSM; Heather Webb, Marketing and Communications Coordinator, who brings a youthful energy and strong knowledge of social media and marketing; and Jeff Dover as the first industry professional and newest member of the team. A search is in progress for a new Membership Coordinator to join the staff later this spring.

With everything that RFMA has accomplished in 10 years—RFMA Gives, the CRFP exam and Facilitator magazine, to name a few—it's no wonder everyone is excited about what the next 10 years will bring.

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator.

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