

**2022 Fall Conference Speaker Bios
Sugar Lake Lodge**



Brad Gruhot

President, Marshall Area Chamber of Commerce

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Brad started his Chamber career as the Membership Director for the newly formed SouthWest Metro Chamber in 2009. From there, he worked for the Bloomington Chamber in Membership from 2011-2014 before deciding to move his family back to his home town of Marshall to be closer to his mom who was having health issues. Brad was the Membership Director from July, 2014 until and then was named the Chamber director of the Marshall Area Chamber in January of 2016. Prior to Chamber work, Brad worked for the Southdale YMCA in Edina for 11 years.

Brad is very active in the community where he sits on various boards & committees at Southwest Minnesota State University and Holy Redeemer Church and School. He also sits on the regional chamber MACE as well as chairing MCCE.

Brad has been married to Karen for 21 years and has two children, Jonathan-17 and Alayna-14. In his spare time, he enjoys traveling, visiting friends and even through all of the heartbreak, he is an avid MN sports fan.



Shari Pash

Strategic Solutions for Growth

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Shari Pash is founder of Strategic Solutions for Growth, a training company headquartered in Grand Rapids, MI. Her work focus is on sustainable member growth and Board of Director goals and strategy sessions, which requires much more than just maintaining the status quo - it calls for innovation, creativity, and a strategic approach. That's why chambers of commerce, non-profit organizations, and associations throughout the U.S. and Canada are turning to Shari.

Shari's hands-on approach to membership and volunteer development is rapidly changing the way organizations view recruitment, engagement, and retention. Her customized, multi-step programs implement tools & reporting mechanisms to strengthen member engagement and new members from the ground up. In addition, Shari conducts board of director planning and goal setting sessions and works alongside her clients to take their efforts to the next level. Shari takes the expertise of her clients and combines it with her 30+ years of success in growth and development strategies to generate continuous, measurable outcomes.

Shari is a dynamic conference presenter for many national associations, including Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE), National Home Builders Association (NAHB), Institute for Organization Management (IOM), Chamber of Commerce Executives of Canada (CCEC), and Canadian Home Builders Association (CHBA). As a highly sought-after industry professional, she is regularly invited to share her knowledge at state and provincial conferences across the U.S. and Canada.

Extensive success in revenue generation, new market identification, and business development, while managing and working with the Association market at Michigan State University's Kellogg Center earned Shari numerous industry awards of excellence through her career. Following MSU, she next served as the Vice President of Sales for the Greater Lansing Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Shari began Strategic Solutions for Growth in 2010, continuing her role as an industry professional, coach, and trainer.



Robin Anthony

Executive Director/President, Greater Stillwater Chamber of Commerce
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Robin serves as the President of the Greater Stillwater Chamber of Commerce and has since April of 2016. Prior to that, she worked 12 years in local and state government, 8 years in global consulting, and 6 years as a small business owner, building a business from the ground up. In her prior life, she instructed marching band for 15 years across the State of Minnesota, hoping to make a difference in young adults.

Robin's focus is on collaboration, leadership, team building, serving the public, and has a passion for social justice. She is proud to serve the St. Croix Valley and considers herself a life-long-learner to continue to improve, expand, and streamline processes and policy. Her expertise includes organizational management, project management, legislative affairs and elections, and business and community engagement.

She attended St. Cloud State University, Communications Major 1986 and her continuing education included multiple programs, certificates and courses from: Century College, University of St. Thomas, St. Charles Illinois, U of M, Auburn University, Capella University and just recently a 2019 graduate of the Institute for Organizational Management, US Chamber of Commerce.

Robin has lived in the Stillwater Area for over 32 years and has two adult children who both attended the Stillwater Schools. Tyler a former Marine, and currently, Military Police for the Stillwater National Guard and an Officer for the City of Crystal Police Department. Her oldest daughter Nicole is a teacher for the Hudson, Wisconsin School District. She is passionate and proud of her family, community, region and country.



Ken Warner

President, Willmar Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce
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Ken serves as President of the Willmar Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce. He is responsible for the internal operations of the organization and managing staff. Ken serves as the primary contact for business and community concerns and issues. He is viewed by the membership and community as a strong, effective voice for business. Ken manages the local Grow Minnesota! program and serves as a Chamber liaison to affiliate organizations such as the Willmar Lakes Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, Vision 2040 (currently serving as Chair), Highway 23 Coalition and others.



John Cosgrove

G.L. Berg Entertainment
john@voicehive.com

John Cosgrove immigrated to the Twin Cities directly from his native Northern Ireland in 1999. Soon he joined forces with fellow countryman, Kieran Folliard and worked for seven years in all aspects of the Irish Pub/restaurant operation. He began hosting trivia based events initially as an entertainment for the public and then further developed as a team based facilitation program for both corporate and private events. In 2006, he departed from the hospitality industry to grow his presentation business further. John's experience as a presenter, emcee and facilitator is as diverse as it is wide. He has hosted over 300 corporate events for many Fortune 500 companies including Google, Microsoft, Boston Scientific and many times with Thrivent; using his trivia program where the task of keeping all attendees engaged and interactive has always been met. John brings a high level of energy and dynamism to any event that combines sharp articulation, a keen sense of humor delivered with that renowned Irish charisma and lilt.



Commissioner Sarah Strommen
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

Formerly the DNR's assistant commissioner, Commissioner Strommen now oversees a DNR staff of about 2,700 located in St. Paul and around the state, with the mission of working with Minnesota citizens to conserve and manage the state's natural resources, providing outdoor recreation opportunities, and providing for commercial uses of natural resources in a way that creates a sustainable quality of life. Prior to coming to DNR in 2015, Strommen served as assistant director at the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) before becoming acting deputy director. She previously served as policy director for Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness and as associate director of the Minnesota Land Trust.

Strommen holds a bachelor's degree from Grinnell College, where she majored in biology and Latin American studies. After graduating from college, she used a Fulbright research scholarship to do field work in Costa Rica, and subsequently earned her master's degree in environmental management from Duke University.

She served several terms on the Ramsey City Council and was elected mayor in 2012, a position she stepped down from in May 2018. She is an avid outdoors person, spending family weekends fishing, hunting, snowmobiling, camping, and hiking.



Rick Horton
Executive Vice President, Minnesota Forest Industries
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Rick Horton is the Executive Vice President for Minnesota Forest Industries, the trade organization representing the major timber consuming mills in Minnesota. He works with legislators and policy makers to address issues that contribute to the competitiveness of the forest products industry in the state. Chief among them are timber supply, industrial electricity rates, workforce and environmental permitting. Rick is a Certified Wildlife Biologist with a Masters' Degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He has focused on forest wildlife management throughout most of his 25-year career. Rick lives in Grand Rapids and maintains an office in Duluth.



Sawyer Scherer
Forest Ecologist, UPM, Blandin Paper

Sawyer Scherer is the Forest Ecologist for UPM Blandin Paper Company located in Grand Rapids Minnesota. He works together with the Blandin Forestry team to ensure the sustainable management of company owned forestlands and the responsible procurement of wood fiber for the Blandin Paper Mill. Sawyer's responsibilities include long-term strategic forest planning, forest inventory, forest regeneration, monitoring, forest carbon, and overseeing the implementation of the company's forest management certification. He has a Bachelors of Science and Masters of Science in Forest Resources from the University of Minnesota. In addition, he has served in a variety of leadership roles for the Minnesota Society of American Foresters. Sawyer lives in the western metro, and splits his work hours between a home office and the Blandin forestry office in Grand Rapids.



Brad Meier

President/CEO, Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce & Tourism
BMeier@owatonna.org

Brad Meier is the President/CEO of the Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce & Tourism (OACCT). He has worked as a chamber executive for 21 years, and 14 years in Owatonna, MN. The Chamber represents 530 businesses and more than 13,000 employees in the Owatonna area. The organization advocates for strong economic development, workforce growth, a vibrant downtown, tourist attraction, and business-friendly legislation. The Chamber was recently reaccredited with the US Chamber's highest 5-star ranking.

Brad left the Owatonna Chamber in 2013 to become president of the TwinWest Chamber of Commerce, a 10-city regional chamber in the west metro of the Twin Cities, for 3 ½ years before returning to his former position as President/CEO of the Owatonna Chamber in 2016. Before that, he worked as the Executive Director of the River Falls, WI Chamber of Commerce and a television news reporter and anchor in Mason City, Iowa, and Green Bay, Wisconsin. He graduated from the U.S. Chamber's Institute for Organizational Management program for chamber professionals and has been a presenter for the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce Executives (MCCE) professional development programs several times.

Meier was also the chair of the MCCE Board of Directors and served on the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors. At a community level, he graduated from Leadership Owatonna and has served as president of the Owatonna Early Edition Rotary Club.

Brad's wife of 23 years is Heidi; they have five children, Braeden (22), Preston (19), Laken (16), Clara (12), and Brooke (11).



Mary Hodson

President, Hutchinson Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism
mary@explorehutchinson.com

Moved throughout Midwest for several years; Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa with family
Graduated Southeastern Iowa with AA, emphasis in Art, Phi Theta Kappa, and Presidential Honors:1999

Moved to Hutchinson in 2001

Became involved with church activities including VBS Week Planning

Worked for Hutchinson Health Organization & Foundation for 8 years

McLeod County Relay for Life- Participant, Emcee, Event Leadership Team: 2005-2017

Became Hutchinson Chamber President in October 2012

IJ Burich Family Foundation Board Member: 2012-current

Hutchinson Downtown Association Board Member: 2012-current

Water Carnival Pageant and Event Emcee: 2013-2019

TigerPath Core Steering Committee: 2015- Present

Earned IOM Certification, Institute of Organizational Management: 2017

Honorary FFA Chapter Degree: 2017

Minnesota Chamber of Commerce Executives Board of Directors: 2017-Present

Wrote "Good Night Hutchinson" to raise funds for the newly formed Hutchinson Chamber Foundation: 2019

Co-Founded Ignite Your Future, Student Career Exploration: 2019

Co-chaired the 150th 151st Anniversary Celebration for Faith Lutheran Church

Southwest Minnesota Chamber of Commerce Executives Chair: 2020 and 2022

Work Highlight: My greatest moments are watching young leaders become more self-assured, build networks, and give back to the community with their skills and talents. These are a direct reflection of the work of the Hutchinson Leadership Institute and Leadership 2.0.



Barry Wilfahrt

President and CEO, The Chamber Grand Forks East Grand Forks
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Barry is President and CEO of The Chamber Grand Forks, ND/East Grand Forks, MN. The Chamber focusses on relevance, advocacy for business and providing tangible value to its 1,100 Chamber members. In his 39 year Chamber career he has served as CEO of 4 different chambers.

Barry has a BS degree in Government from Saint John’s University in Collegeville, MN and his MA degree in Urban Studies from Minnesota State University where he was the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Fellowship recipient. Barry has served as President of the SD, ND and MN Chamber Executive Associations. Barry is also a graduate of the Chamber Institute for Organizational Management Program (IOM), US Chamber Academy Program and is a Certified Chamber Executive (CCE). He also serves as a US Air Force ACC Civic Leader.

Barry has served on more than 140 national, state and local boards over his career including the US Chamber’s “Committee of 100” which he continues to serve on. Barry also personally owns a billboard company and has a lobbying/consulting firm. He and his wife Kristi enjoy traveling, kayaking and spending time with the children and grandchildren.



Brooke Sticha

Executive Director, New Prague Chamber of Commerce
bsticha@newprague.com

Brooke Sticha is the Executive Director of the New Prague Chamber of Commerce. She has led the Chamber for 4 years, working as the assistant for the Chamber in New Prague for 4 years prior. With 7 years in the Chamber industry, she has learned a variety of valuable skills including relationship building, mentorship, social media and marketing, and leadership; among various others. In 2020, she completed the MCCE Leadership Program for new directors, a valuable program lead by experienced leaders in the industry, which allowed her to learn and grow as a leader in her community.

In 2011, she graduated from the University of MN – Twin Cities with a Bachelor’s degree in Journalism-strategic communication and advertising with a minor in new media. She enjoys volunteering on a few local community boards and spending time outdoors with family and friends.



Nort Johnson

President and CEO, Faribault Area Chamber of Commerce & Tourism
nort@faribaultmn.org

Nort Johnson is a native of Faribault, Minnesota and currently serves as President and CEO of the Faribault Chamber of Commerce & Tourism

Johnson attended two Minnesota colleges and began a 20 year career in publishing management and marketing in southern Minnesota, spending eleven years at the Schwan Food Company where the culture of *Continuous Improvement through Strategic Planning* became part of his DNA. During 10 of those years he also held a city council seat and sat on numerous volunteer boards and committees. In the early 2000s Nort took those “extra-curricular” experiences to a professional level and left Schwan’s to work in economic development in both Minnesota and then western South Dakota.

While in Sturgis he was recruited by Black Hills and Badlands Tourism and served as President/CEO. Under his leadership a new membership strategy helped the sales team reverse declining membership and hold 5 years of continuous growth. New marketing strategies and campaigns earned four ADDY Awards including a *Tommy* for Best Integrated campaign in 2014. Johnson also led successful lobbying efforts at both the state and federal levels on behalf of the tourism industry earning recognition from the US Department of Agriculture in 2011 for efforts to relieve the Mountain Pine Beetle epidemic. Routinely Johnson and his team built strategic partnerships including Rapid City and Sioux Falls EDAs to blend efforts in business recruitment with tourism related quality of life messaging. Some favorite marketing partners included Polaris, Minnesota Twins, Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, Washington Nationals, Deadwood Chamber/CVB, American Park Network and South Dakota Department of Tourism.

After 25 years Nort found his way back to Faribault and says he’s “blessed” to use his experiences to help grow and promote his hometown. The Chamber is experiencing record revenues and has expanded it’s work to include Education and Economic Development. With a nod to Johnson’s passion for regional cooperation, a strategic marketing partnership with Northfield and Owatonna has won two marketing excellence awards from Explore Minnesota for the Minne-Roadtrip™ brand.

He and Shelly’s blended family includes 7 grown children and 10 grandchildren. They are living in their latest renovation project – a 132 year home in Faribault with a small tribe of fat cats.



Carrie Johnston

President, Detroit Lakes Regional Chamber of Commerce
carrie@visitdetroitlakes.com

Carrie Johnston has been with the Detroit Lakes Regional Chamber for 12 years. The DL Chamber has 450 members and 4 full-time staff; it serves as the Tourist Information center and partners with the Tourism Bureau. Detroit Lakes is a community centered around manufacturing, tourism and agriculture. With over 412 lakes in a 25 mile radius of town “lake life” is at the heart of all local businesses.



Sara Hoffner

Executive Director, Melrose Area Chamber of Commerce
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Sara Hoffner is a busy mom of 4 and has been the Executive Director at the Melrose Area Chamber of Commerce for six years and just started with the Albany Area Chamber of Commerce this August. Both Chambers are a one-person operation with no additional staff. Her Chamber champions their city festival, pageant program, holiday kickoff event along with several fundraisers throughout the year.



Michelle Larson

Executive Director/President, Red Wing Area Chamber of Commerce
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Michelle Larson has been the President & CEO of the Red Wing Area Chamber of Commerce since February 2021. Prior to that, she served as the Executive Director for the Lake City Chamber of Commerce for 4 years. She is a Blandin Community Leadership Program graduate and holds excellence awards from Mayo Clinic in quality improvement projects and communications. Most recently, she was named 2022 Outstanding Alumnus for Minnesota State College Southeast where she attended school for an associate's degree. Michelle earned her bachelor's degree and MBA from Saint Mary's University of Minnesota.

She resides in Lake City with her husband Nate and their three boys, Cedric, Felix, and Rowan. They spend most of their time together golfing, playing/watching football, cooking, and enjoying the lake. Aside from work and family life, Michelle is serving her second 4-year term as a School Board Director for ISD #813 in Lake City and serves on many other volunteer committees in her hometown and Red Wing.



Laura Bordelon

Senior Vice President, Advocacy, Minnesota Chamber of Commerce
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Laura Bordelon is senior vice president for advocacy at the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, a position she has held since November 2011. In her role, she leads the organization's public policy, grassroots and political engagement strategies.

She directed the Minnesota Chamber's education, telecommunications and energy policy from 2000-2004. She was a policy director for Governor Tim Pawlenty from 2004 to 2005 and then was named director of legislative and cabinet affairs in 2006. She most recently was director of corporate state government affairs for Medtronic Inc.

She graduated with a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Minnesota. Her community involvement includes being a board member of the Minnesota Government Relations Council and the Minnesota Zoo.



Chris Tiedeman

Partner, Weber Johnson
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Chris Tiedeman is a licensed Minnesota attorney who brings a national network of political friendships and record of successful Public Affairs campaigns on issues ranging from Healthcare to Forestry to the Music Industry to Retail. Chris has become a highly regarded Public Affairs consultant with particular expertise in Grassroots programs and the use of Social Media to engage key constituencies. He has become known for bringing unique, often disparate coalitions together to help move public policy.



Janelle Jones

Executive Director, Lake County Chamber of Commerce
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Mike Zipko

Co-founder and Principal, Velocity Public Affairs
mike@velocitypublicaffairs.com

Mike is the third co-founder and principal of Velocity Public Affairs. He has more than 20 years of experience helping clients manage issues, address challenges, and maximize opportunities that involve creating and executing effective communications. He has served as communications director for St. Paul mayor Norm Coleman, deputy communications director for governor-elect Jesse Ventura's transition office, deputy communications director for the Minnesota Republican Party during the 1998 campaign season, and deputy press secretary for Minnesota governor Arne H. Carlson. He has also provided media relations counsel to political campaigns and elected officials.

Earlier, Mike worked for seven years in several roles for Minneapolis/St. Paul broadcast outlets WCCO-TV and KSTP-TV, in roles ranging from field producer to assignment editor. He also spent considerable time covering political issues and events during legislative sessions and election seasons. Mike has strong connections with Twin Cities media that he leverages to help clients target the appropriate media contacts and outlets.

Before the merger that established Velocity Public Affairs, Mike owned and operated Zipko Strategy, a strategic consulting firm based in St. Paul that provided public affairs, media relations, crisis communications, grassroots advocacy, online content management, and marketing support for businesses, nonprofits, government entities, and advocacy organizations.



Representative Spencer Igo, 5B

Minnesota House of Representatives

State Representative Spencer Igo is currently serving in his first term as a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives. Since entering the legislature in 2021, he has quickly emerged as a leading voice on issues related to mining and the environment. As a Representative, he is committed to working to build a prosperous Northern Minnesota that

retains youth, builds the local economy, and invests in the future of communities in the Northland. Igo lives just outside Grand Rapids.



Doug Loon

President and CEO, Minnesota Chamber of Commerce
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Douglas B. Loon is president of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, a position he has held since September 8, 2015. The Minnesota Chamber represents more than 2,300 Minnesota companies, 130 local chambers and 65 business trade associations at the Minnesota Legislature on a variety of issues that impact Minnesota's economy.

Prior to assuming leadership of the Minnesota Chamber, he spent 20 years at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 17 of those in Minnesota. As the vice president for regional affairs and advocacy, he managed the seven regional offices that provide political and grassroots outreach across the nation. He also managed the U.S. Chamber's Midwest Region that includes Minnesota. He was intimately involved in supporting state and local chambers and businesses to move public policy in a direction that helps them be successful.

Loon received his bachelor's degree in government and international affairs from Augustana College in Sioux Falls, S.D. He is a graduate of the Congressional Research Service's Institute for Legislative Staff as well as the Federal Election Commission's program on campaign finance laws for incorporated trade associations and membership organizations. He also graduated from Leadership Minnesota, an exclusive program of the Minnesota Chamber addressing the economic and public policy issues of Minnesota businesses. He is past chair of the Eden Prairie Foundation Board of Directors.



Ethan Hellier

Manager Congressional and Public Affairs, U.S. Chamber of Commerce
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Ethan Hellier is Senior Manager of the Midwest Region in the Government Affairs Division at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Hellier helps develop and implement the Chamber's grassroots, legislative, and political activities in the region.

Before joining the Chamber, Hellier worked for the Minnesota House of Representatives as a Committee Legislative Assistant for the Education Policy Committee and the Taxes Committee, as well as a Communications Specialist. He has also worked and volunteered on multiple campaigns in Minnesota.

Hellier graduated from St. John's University (Collegeville, Minnesota) with a Bachelor of Arts degree in political science. He lives in Prior Lake, Minnesota with his wife: Kelly, daughter: Reagan, and dog: Wrigley.



Steve Fredlund

The Safari Dude
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Steve Fredlund (The Safari Dude) has thirty years of diverse leadership success, from Minnesota to Rwanda, nonprofits to corporations, and start-ups to Fortune 500s. His work in human resources analytics uncovered the surprising drivers of productivity, engagement and retention, the most critical people-based factors impacting organizational success. His insights

and methodology are fundamentally transforming how leaders build powerful teams. Steve earned an MBA and fellowship in the Society of Actuaries; he is a two-time TEDx speaker passionate about disc golf, poker and trying to stay a loyal Minnesota sports fan.