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[“I wanted to grow my business locally,” he said. “I couldn’t think of a better way to do it than by joining the chamber.”]

New MRCC Chairman— Michael Cano

Fortunate Son

Michael A. Cano knows that he’s already a very fortunate person. “I’m the son of immigrants who has had the opportunity to grow up in this wonderful country. I’m now running my own business (Hightstown-based Cano Wealth Strategies LLC). I can’t think of anything better.”

Yet, very soon things will become even better for Cano. He is slated to become the next Chairman of the Mercer Regional Chamber of Commerce (MRCC). He will be succeeding current Chairman Sherise Ritter.

“I am really looking forward to becoming Chairman,” said Cano. “The chamber is a tremendous organization. It will be a great honor to be its Chairman.”

The sequence of events that led to Cano becoming a member of the MRCC Board of Directors began in 2002 during Trenton Small Business Week. He had recently joined the MRCC seeking networking opportunities for his business.

“I wanted to grow my business locally,” he said. “I couldn’t think of a better way to do it than by joining the chamber.”

During Small Business Week he mentioned to some people attached to the MRCC that he’d like to become active with the chamber’s Membership Committee. Before he could say “sign me up,” not only was he involved with the Membership Committee, but he was the committee’s Chairman.

As head of the Membership Committee Cano was the host for the MRCC’s monthly breakfast meetings. That role brought him into contact with many others, and his visibility and recognition within the organization expanded. Cano found himself not only making networking opportunities, but making friends as well.

“At the end of the day, it comes down to making strong relationships with people,” he said. “I think that’s the key to any type of networking. You build relationships not expecting anything, but you’re building trust and friendship. Then [when the need for a business opportunity arrives] they think of you first.”

Soon former MRCC President Michele N. Siekerka and he agreed that he should have a seat on the organization's Board of Directors. He occupied several different posts on the Board as he moved up the ladder.

Cano feels that the time he spent on the Board of Directors in those different offices, including that of Treasurer, has given him a well-rounded picture of the MRCC, how it operates and how it can best serve its members.

As Chairman, he hopes to place particular emphasis on the value and relevancy of membership in the MRCC—how it serves its members in a myriad of ways. He knows that businesses are already cognizant of the terrific value of belonging to the chamber, since the group's membership has stayed steady during this time of economic sluggishness.

"We have been doing an excellent job of reaching out to members on a regular basis," he said.

Cano is looking forward to getting the results of a survey of past and present chamber members that is currently in progress and should be completed shortly. "We'll be able to take a look at that and craft a strategic plan that addresses all those areas that our customers are looking for," he said.

He added that while the chamber does operate member outreach programs now, the survey results will enable them to develop ones that are even more specific.

"Instead of just having an event, maybe it will be an event with a certain speaker, or else an event with no speaker at all," Cano said.

The Board holds its annual retreat in October. Cano noted that there are numerous topics on the agenda there, such as the possibility of instituting new programs that will influence how he approaches his time as Chairman.

"My feeling is that the best business minds in Mercer County [will be present at the retreat.] They all run successful businesses. What I'd like to do is get ideas from them and apply them to the chamber. The chamber is like a small business. We need to come out with products and services that our clients need and want."

He added: "Two years from now, I would like to see and hear from our members that they have a renewed connection to the chamber that is deeper than it is today, and that they feel that they are getting their business needs fulfilled better by the MRCC than any other organization of which they are members."

Because of his Hispanic background, Cano plans to reach out more to the Hispanic business community after he becomes Chairman. "I think the Hispanic business community is unaware of the value of chamber membership," he said. "It's been wonderful to see the amount of professionals in the area that are Hispanic, and I think that there's a great opportunity to get them to network with the chamber."

Cano feels that MRCC President Robert Prunetti is right on target with his vision for the chamber of having it focus on advocacy, economic development, and relationships.



Photo: Leigh Visual Imaging

Cano places particular emphasis on the chamber's advocacy role, because he feels that small businesses often do not get a voice in decisions that affect them.

"We're made up mostly of small businesses," he said. "For the most part, small businesses don't get the attention of the people that make decisions that affect us." He explained that the chamber does indeed get the attention from government officials that small businesses lack, and that the chamber can present the pluses and minuses of decisions that may not be realized when policies or laws are contemplated.

"We're not asking for a hand-out," he said, "but we can point out anything that's going to be a hurdle or slow down what we're trying to accomplish. We're all in this

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[sluggish economy] together." Cano said that this increased advocacy applies to not just Mercer County officials, but state and federal representatives as well.

He added that decisions often can have as many as a dozen consequences. While elected officials may be aware of the first few, it's those further on down the line that need to be emphasized. "Everything that is done has a ripple effect."

"As business owners, we make decisions constantly and quickly in order to move our businesses forward, and anything that impedes us [has to be addressed]," he said. As an example, he noted that the state of New Jersey makes it difficult for restaurants to offer outside seating for restaurants, despite the fact that it is a desirable seating option for many patrons. He said that the chamber can help in finding common ground and forging agreements on such issues.

While the economy lately has been underwhelming, Cano said that he actually prefers coming in as Chairman during this time rather than when the economy is firing on all cylinders.

"When things are going well, things are just left to be," he said. "I'm the type of person who likes to innovate. I like questioning things, mixing it up and coming up with new ways of doing things." He added that while not all new ideas are feasible, he loves the way a new idea often sparks other new ideas that may well have value.

When not in his Hightstown office, Cano can be found on the golf course. He also enjoys playing soccer, and spending time with his wife Katie and their three daughters. He founded his company in 2006, fulfilling a lifelong dream. He knows that becoming MRCC Chairman will add another chapter to an already-successful life.

"We have a good leader in the chamber in Bob Prunetti, and a great support staff. The chamber is full of entrepreneurs, and entrepreneurs are always thinking of new ways of doing things. I'm very excited to have the opportunity to be the MRCC Chairman." ■