

**Smooth Sailing at the 2024 RIPA Technical Conference**

Rhode Island may be the smallest state in the nation – it occupies just over 1,200 square miles of land and has a population of about 1.2 million people - but it boasts a rich colonial history its physical beauty is extraordinary.

Much of that beauty was on display several weeks ago when 80 RIPA members gathered in the historic town of Newport to talk about the latest industry news and hear several great speakers discuss topics as diverse as the many uses of artificial intelligence in business accounting and family business succession planning.

The event got off to a great start on Sunday evening with the Supplier’s reception in the elegant Hotel Viking, which is located in the heart of the City’s historic district. As usual, much of the talk was casual - renewing old acquaintances and catching up on industry affairs - but there was also plenty of discussion about the latest efforts by EPA to regulate reconditioner’s business operations.

On Monday morning, newly elected RIPA chair Eric Bernath officially opened the conference by thanking members for supporting the organization his chairmanship. He said he would work hard to grow and strengthen the association during his tenure. He is looking forward to working with fellow officers, David Levine, Vice Chair and Mike Stephen, Treasurer, as well as the entire Board, in the coming years.

Evan Smith, President/CEO, Discover Newport, spoke about the amazing history of Rhode Island and the many things visitors can do during their stay. Founded by Roger Williams in 1638 on the basis of religious freedom, Rhode Island was one of the first states to pass a law abolishing slavery in the 1860s. In the early 1900s, Newport became a summer playground for some of the richest people in America, including the Vanderbilts, the Astors and the Morgans.

These and other families left behind a group of massive vacation homes many of which are now open to the public for tours.

“Most people are already using artificial intelligence (“AI”) in one form or another and don’t even know it,” says David Prager, VP Marketing, Stampi. For example, nearly all search engines have imbedded AI components that speed and broaden their search capabilities.

Prager gave eye opening insights about recent progress in the field of AI, including new robotic systems that are being used in manufacturing facilities around the world. These systems “learn” from their mistakes and constantly improve their performance.

Prager and David Levine talked about how the Ted Levine Company is using Stampi’s AI products for a wide range of accounting tasks, including billing and accounts receivable. Levine is very pleased with the new AI system, which gives existing staff additional time to perform other valuable functions for the business.

“For sure, AI accounting systems are not plug and go at this point in time,” said Levine. “However, our learning curve was relatively short and we are now saving a significant amount of time on routine accounting functions and spending fewer and fewer hours checking the work of our AI assistant.”

Next up were presentations by RIPA General Counsel Rick Schweitzer and President Paul Rankin on several important regulatory issues. Rankin advised members that EPA is seeking comments on a draft questionnaire that will be sent to all reconditioners in the country. The Agency is trying to gain more information about reconditioner operations, permits and empty container management practices. Schweitzer urged members to ensure that their non-RCRA empty container management procedures should be scrutinized to ensure compliance with the association’s Code of Operating Practice.

Rankin presented an overview of Special Permit 21478, which allows qualifying companies to transport RCRA-empty IBCs. Also discussed were new federal overtime rules and non-compete guidelines. Copies of these presentations can be found here.

FMCSA hazmat enforcement officer Suzanne Ellis gave members important tips on how to prepare for an enforcement visit from her Agency and understanding the meaning of their BASIC rating. She stressed the importance of keeping good files on every driver and ensuring that their drug and alcohol testing records are checked regularly.

Rick Schweitzer followed Ms. Ellis’s presentation with a detailed seminar on how to comply with an FMCSA inspection. A copy of the presentation and a written procedure are available on RIPA’s web site (here).

Monday night’s Chair’s reception was held at The Black Pearl, a stunning downtown restaurant and bar overlooking the water. The weather cooperated and the party continued long after the official closing time.

Chair Eric Bernath opened Tuesday morning’s education session with comments on the state of the association, including an overview of key decisions made during the prior day’s Board of Director’s meeting. “The association is in excellent financial condition,” said Bernath, despite significant efforts to fend off aggressive EPA regulatory efforts challenging the empty container rule and VOC emissions.

“Our staff have worked tirelessly to respond to EPA on both of these matters and I believe these efforts will pay off in the long run,” said Bernath. Bernath also announced plans to start a program designed to educate the next generation of industry leaders. “Over the next few months, we will put into place a program that brings together young leaders in our membership. Once or perhaps twice a year, they will tour a facility and have some fun while getting to know one another and learning about the business and our organization,” he said.

Paul Rankin presented a brief history of the reconditioning industry, from the earliest mentions of wooden barrels in the bible to the present. “I hope every member of this association appreciates the incredible history of this industry, and the importance of the work you and your companies are engaged in,” said Rankin.

Caleb White and Victoria Nessen of the Center for Applied Research, Inc. (“CFAR”) presented an introductory course on family business dynamics. Both speakers still work in multi-generational family businesses and understand how the intersection of hard business issues, such as finance and operations, must be balanced with interpersonal dynamics to keep a family business alive and thriving. Using short case studies, they guided the audience through several work sessions designed to help everyone understand that there are many ways to dealsuccessfully with family succession issues.

A panel of association leaders talked about their experiences growing up in the industry in family businesses and learning about the many benefits of membership in RIPA. David Levine, Ted Levine Co., Noah Flom, Apex Drum Co. and Brian Evoy, FDS, told stories about their early days in the association and how, over time, they came to appreciate not only the many personal and professional benefits of association membership but also the advantages that come with taking on leadership roles in the organization. “I have made lifelong friends and improved my business because of RIPA,” said Flom.

The day concluded with C.L. Pettit, RIPA Vice President, giving a DOT hazmat employee training program. The program fulfills the triennial DOT training requirement and is available to members for their own in-house training in both English and Spanish.

RIPA Chair Eric Bernath summed the event up nicely: “What a great conference. There was something for everyone and the setting was amazing.”