



SIIA President & CEO Mike Ferguson

SIIA ENDEAVORS

SIIA Endeavors: On the Record with SIIA
President & CEO Mike Ferguson

The *Self-Insurer* Editor Gretchen Grote sat down with SIIA President & CEO Mike Ferguson for a wide-ranging interview to talk about how the association continues to evolve and play an increasingly important role in helping its members be successful in the self-insurance marketplace.

Gretchen Grote: So ongoing COVID developments have obviously disrupted virtually every business and organization to some degree. How has SIIA been affected?

Mike Ferguson: We were affected almost immediately after a pandemic was declared with the abrupt cancellation of our Self-Insured Health Plan Executive Forum, which was scheduled to be held in Charleston. Then over the next weeks we worked to cancel and/or postpone other live events scheduled for the first half of the year.

Of course, during this time period and though early June, most members were completely focused on attending to their business and clients, so we unfortunately lost most engagement aside from the COVID webinar series which generated a lot of interest.

As things settled down a bit over the summer months, we were able to re-start some volunteer committee/task force projects through video calls, but the inability to get together in person has certainly made things more challenging. I do expect, however, that we will continue to adapt to current realities and find opportunities to better maximize member engagement.

Of course, we ultimately had to cancel our National Conference & Expo and convert it into a virtual event. This has required our professional staff team to quickly learn new skills and strategies and has kept us extremely busy working to produce a high-quality event.

So all in all, it has been a very eventful time period for Team SIIA.

GG: Since converting the National Conference into a virtual format is a pretty big deal, can you expand a little on what people can expect?

MF: I think participants will be very pleased with the significant amount of high-quality educational content. We quickly realized that one of the major advantages of this virtual format is that we are not confined by the limits of physical meeting space, so the content is easily scalable. And we have taken full advantage of this by offering about 50 educational sessions...the most content ever for a SIIA conference.

We've also incorporated a virtual exhibit hall, which will obviously be a very different experience. On the one hand, we are losing the energetic atmosphere and that's a big disappointment. But on the other hand, this does have the potential to be a very efficient way to shop nearly 100 vendors offering a variety of specialized products and services, so we'll see how it all turns out. We really appreciate all of the exhibiting companies have been willing to roll with us on this big experiment.

GG: One last related question is how did SIIA decide on a pricing strategy for this conference as it seems event organizers are over the map this year with regard to charging for virtual events?

MF: It's a fair question and one that event producers have really been grappling with this year. Ultimately, we determined that the best approach was to produce a high-quality event and that people should be expected to pay something for such quality.

In this regard, the fees have been discounted as compared to what would have been charged for a live conference given that we were not able to provide the full SIIA experience, so we think it is the right approach and may be the new reality for some time given that virtual events are unlikely to go away even when the pandemic is behind us.

GG: Switching gears just a bit, can you update our readers about Canoe, SIIA's on-line educational platform?

MF: I think Canoe actually blends nicely with the virtual conference direction because this is a great resource that allows SIIA members easy access to a huge library of self-insurance content. I like to call it the "Netflix for Self-Insurance" and now includes more than 100 pieces of unique content. For those members who have not already checked it out, I encourage them to do so at www.siiacano.org. It's really a great benefit that can be utilized by all employees of SIIA member companies.

GG: It's been about two years since the launch of the SIIA Future Leaders Initiative. How have things been going and what can we expect going forward?

MF: Let me first say that this remains one of the association's most important strategic initiatives as the generational shift continues to accelerate in our industry. We did lose some momentum this year with the COVID developments, including cancellation of our Mentor Connection Forum, but things are picking up now.

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Our SIIA Future Leaders Committee has developed content for Virtual National Conference and we have converted the Mentor Connection Forum into a virtual event to be held in November. I expect the SFL committee to hold a strategic planning meeting soon to map out a strategy for 2021, so I am excited to see what direction this initiative will take in the new year.

GG: There is a big election coming up. How is SIIA preparing for the outcome?

MF: Yeah, “big” is probably an understatement given the increased political divide in this country. Our government relations team is already developing updated lobbying strategies in anticipation of the different possible outcomes. One common component will be the need for greater member engagement.

It's important to note that the time period when Congress is most likely to act is after a presidential election, so we expect 2021 to be a very active year. And depending on the actual election results, we could be facing a real threat to the employer-based health care system that is going to require the most robust SIIA response since the run-up to the Affordable Care Act. So I guess my message to the members is to get ready for action if they are serious in ensuring that the self-insurance industry remains viable for the long-term.

GG: I guess on a related note, you have commented publicly on several occasions about how important it is for SIIA to become more a major player in terms of political contributions. Can you elaborate a bit on why this should be such a priority and give any progress that has been made to move in this direction?

MF: I have actually been saying this for the past several years and this objective has continued to move up the list of association priorities. There are two primary reasons for this emphasis, with the one reason being fairly obvious for most members, with the second reason less obvious for those who are not creatures of the DC lobbying world.

The obvious reason, of course, is that it is much easier to make and keep friends on Capitol Hill if you provide financial support for their campaigns. This does not mean that if you contribute to a specific member of Congress that they are certain to vote a specific way, but it's certainly easier to get a meeting with the member and/or their senior staff to explain your issues.

Not so obvious to those outside the beltway is that when an organization establishes itself as a political financial player, it raises your “street cred,” so to speak, with other important organizations in town that we may need to partner with on various lobbying efforts.

Our progress has been somewhat slow but steady since we established the Self-Insurance Political Action Committee (SIPAC) about eight years ago as a vehicle for SIIA members to channel political contributions to key members of Congress. Things have accelerated over the past few years thanks to this more dedicated focus, combined with increased staffing resources, and you are now starting to see SIIA really establishing itself as a money player in DC. Obviously, we are not the biggest player by any means, but it's solid progress that has already directly complimented advocacy efforts and we expect even more positive results after the upcoming election.

GG: I have seen that SIIA has been involved in some litigation efforts this year. Can you bring our readers up to speed on this?

MF: For those who may not be aware, SIIA has a long history of either leading or supporting litigation efforts to support the interests of our members when legislative/regulatory advocacy opportunities are not viable. These efforts are financed though the association's Legal Defense Fund (LDF), which in turn is funded by voluntary contributions from the members.

This year, at the specific request of various members, SIIA's LDF has funded the filing of three separate Amicus Briefs, two at the federal level and one at the state level. The legal issues have ranged from protecting health plan sponsors and participants from nefarious hospital billing practices, ensuring plan sponsors can take advantage of specialty cost containment opportunities, and confronting the Internal Revenue Service over its rule-making process that has adversely affected many captive insurance companies and advisers.

GG: So on that last note, how do you view SIIA's role in the captive insurance space, as this membership constituency continues to grow?

MF: My view is that SIIA is playing a very unique and useful role in the captive insurance space by integrating its stakeholders into the much broader self-insurance world.

This is important because mid-market employers are becoming increasingly sophisticated in how they manage risk, understanding that they can integrate multiple self-insurance strategies that may include the formation of a captive insurance company. SIIA brings this all together, giving captive insurance professionals more educational, networking and advocacy resources.

I am particularly pleased to see how much progress SIIA has made over the past year with political advocacy in Washington, DC in order to better position the captive insurance market segment with key policymakers.

Unfortunately, many of those who influence the legislative and regulatory process affecting captives, have minimal or no understanding of why an increasing number of employers rely on them to deal with risk management strategies. We are making real progress and look forward to even more positive results in 2021.

GG: Returning to the COVID topic, how do you foresee 2021 playing out with regard to live SIIA events?

MF: That sure is an obvious question and one which we are grappling with right now as planning is underway for the new year. My best guess at this point is that live events will not be viable through at the least the first quarter of the year, with the second and third quarters seeing some events coming back but structured differently to accommodate lingering public health concerns. Then hopefully by the fourth quarter we may be able to get back to some variation of normal.

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Operating under these assumptions, SIIA expects to organize its live event schedule accordingly and supplement with virtual events where it makes sense. Of course, many predictions for this year, including my own, have turned out to be wrong so we'll try to maintain maximum flexibility where possible. Members should watch for an announcement by early December confirming our 2021 schedule.

GG: There certainly sounds like a lot of exciting things going on at SIIA. What advice would you give industry executives who want to become more active in the organization?

MF: Well of course, become a member if you are not already. Showing up at association events – when we can have them again – is a big deal because SIIA is a very interactive and social organization and there is no substitute for being there. We also recruit members to serve on our various volunteer committees and participate in periodic grassroots lobbying campaigns, which are great involvement opportunities. I like to say we are happy to put our members to work, so be on the lookout for announcements.

For more information visit www.siiia.org. ■

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