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CREW Takes Center Stage

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“Some of us have great runways already built for us. If you have one, take off! But if you don’t have one, realize it is your responsibility to grab a shovel and build one for yourself and for those who will follow after you.”

That quote from Amelia Earhart “really resonates with me,” says **Linda Hollemon**, who cited it when asked to share her thoughts on **CREW Network**. It’s a fitting statement for the woman who served as the first-ever chief executive officer of the organization. It’s also something that certainly applies to every member of the Lawrence, KS-based association, which was established in 1989 to serve as a support and networking tool for women in the highly male-dominated industry of commercial real estate.



The network got its start in the late 1980s, when various local women’s associations formally came together in a grassroots effort to establish a national organization dedicated to advancing the achievements of women in the industry. Back then, there were only a handful of CREW chapters across the country, with attendance at its annual meeting barely attracting a few hundred members.

Two and a half decades later, CREW’s annual convention has evolved into a premier event, attracting everyone from C-suite executives and think tank leaders to entry-level associates and interns. A record 1,200-plus industry professionals traveled to Miami this fall for the 2014 CREW Network Convention and Marketplace.

This year also brought new records for the organization as a whole. Membership went up by 9% from 2013 to an all-time high of 9,447 members (as of November) in 72 chapters across the US and Canada, with the recent merger of two New York chapters.

As their association celebrates its Silver Anniversary this year, CREW Network officials have found themselves at a crossroads. On one hand, women have gained better footing in the industry as firms have diversified. Demographics are shifting, and the new generation of women entering the business view themselves as equals to men in all respects, and expect to be treated as such. They may not feel the need to join a women’s organization, or at least, hold it in as high regard as their predecessors have done.

THE QUEST FOR PARITY

On the other hand, we haven’t yet achieved full parity between the genders in CRE, or in the business world as a whole. Women still don’t earn as much as men in the same position, don’t climb up the corporate ladder as quickly or hold as many senior-level positions as men. As much “Anything you can

do, we can do better” gusto as young professionals may have upon entering the workforce, there’s still much work to be done.

With these factors in mind, then, what is CREW Network to do? How can it address the issues professionals face in the new millennium while remaining true to the core values on which it was formed? Where, and how, does it find common ground between a senior executive who entered the industry 40 years ago as a part-time receptionist and a recent graduate with a master’s degree in commercial real estate? How does it remain relevant in a business environment that’s both rapidly changing and moving at a seemingly glacial pace?

In short, what role will CREW play? It’s the same question the organization asks of its members. CREW chief executive officer Gail S. Ayers puts it simply: “As women, we have learned to play many roles. Unfortunately, in working with men, they still expect us to play some of those roles. And one of the most annoying and concerning things that I see is something called the ‘little sister phenomenon,’ which is that it’s very easy for women to fall into a supporting role. It’s a deadly trap for women because it doesn’t allow you to assert yourself. It doesn’t allow you to play a competency role. People will trust you to be their assistant, but they’re not going to trust you in a leadership role.

“You must put yourself in a starring role,” she stresses. “It’s critical to know that when you’re at the office, you’re in the business role—the starring role. That’s where the leadership comes from.”

So as CREW Network teaches its members to step into the spotlight and become leaders, its latest strategic plan calls for the organization to take its own advice. Whereas until recently, CREW was very much internally focused on its members and advancing their careers, it’s now looking to engage the greater industry and establish itself as a dominant voice in the CRE world. In other words, CREW will continue to serve as a resource for its members to advance their careers, while working with the business community to increase its profile, promote its brand and effect change.

A MORE PUBLIC ROLE

It’s a logical step in the organization’s evolution, and a decision not made lightly. In all things, CREW operates as a committee—all decisions are discussed, debated, vetted and nearly unanimous before moving forward, and each step is intricately planned. For instance, CREW is currently examining when it will make sense to go global, opening chapters outside of North America. For now, however, its focus has been on more domestic issues.

“We are constantly realistic about updating our strategic plan, making sure that we’re focused on doing the most important things for our members and the industry,” explains Ayers. “One of the most useful things we did was come to terms with our branding. We decided that we’re not just here to be an organization; we’re really here to change the industry while providing support services for any woman who joins CREW. It’s very easy to do too many things and accomplish nothing, so we stay focused on the big picture.”

A big part of this involved reaching out to the industry to change the perception of the organization. “In the past three years we continued to grow and build on a platform of continual engagement with the industry,” says Collete English Dixon, 2011 past president and transactions principal with Prudential Real Estate Investors in Chicago. “I think it’s totally changed the industry’s perspective of us as an organization and as a potential change agent for the recognition of talent and the concept of diversity and inclusiveness and what women can bring to the business. We just built on that.”

One of the first steps of the shift was to join with the Real Estate Roundtable, the Washington, DC trade association that serves, essentially, as the industry’s voice at the Capitol. As then-president Kristen Blount, SVP with Colliers International in Boston, tells it, CREW was in the midst of a fundraising push at a time when funds were hard to come by, when its leadership met with Boston Properties CEO Ray Ritchie. “He said, ‘I really appreciate the fact that you’re trying to make this change in the industry from

the bottom up, but you really need to do it from the top down as well. That way you're really closing in on it," she relates. "It made sense. You had to get in front of all the CEOs in the business."

After that meeting, Blount recalls brainstorming on ways to accomplish that goal. "Gail, in her wisdom and in her unbelievable finesse, found a way for us to get on the Real Estate Roundtable that year." That was 2010.

Now that it's a member of RER, joining such organizations as CRE Finance Council and ICSC, CREW director Cheryl Hardt says CREW is part of policy and advocacy discussions within the industry and beyond. "Today CREW is about bringing together the strengths of all facets of the industry to address the challenges faced not only within the industry but also in the overall economy," states Hardt, who is a first VP with CBRE Inc. in Saddle Brook, NJ.



Also part of pushing the CREW brand to center stage are outreach efforts, particularly in terms of promoting its brand on social media. CREW's been extremely successful in helping its members advance their careers and build relationships, says New York City-based CREW director and Douglas Elliman retail chair Faith Hope Consolo, "but it's time to embrace the larger business community, as well. CREW and its members are authorities on what we do and can give unique perspectives on how CRE and the economy are intertwined, as well as other important business issues."

She should know; as the CREW Network Board Liaison to CREW's Communication and Editorial Committee, Consolo's goal "is to promote CREW members as authorities in their disciplines by encouraging them to contribute articles to our website, using social media to promote CREW's activities and industry research to members and the world at large." In short, raising CREW's profile. "Doing this will aid immensely in all our goals. Greater awareness brings larger membership, which brings more opportunities for those members in terms of career and leadership development. This newest stage is all about serious brain power."

Atlanta-based Eastwood Real Estate Services' CEO—and CREW 2015 director—Christine Gorham agrees, noting that CREW brings a lot to the greater CRE community table. "Our members are some of the top experts in the industry and we want to let the commercial world know that our organization is the place to turn when you want to learn more about not only parity benefits and how to embrace it, but also, and most importantly, we have the types of members companies want to work with."

It's important to note, now, that a more external focus will not take away from CREW's stated goals and mission. As director Jennifer Carey, CEO of New York City-based JLC Environmental Consultants Inc., puts it, "To accomplish our goals, we may require a more external focus on some issues, but CREW will do so while remaining true to our core mission of influencing the success of the CRE industry by advancing the achievements of women."

Indeed, at the epicenter of the organization is a focus on fulfilling four key initiatives: business development, leadership development, industry research and career outreach. These have remained unchanged for years, though they've become more broad and complicated as the industry has grown.

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT: NO COLD CALLS

While it's the largest gathering for the organization, CREW offers several opportunities for business development in addition to its annual meeting. Members can take advantage of three CREW Network Leadership Summits a year on a national level, as well as countless local meetings and networking events. Another tool is CREWbiz, an online and app-based business networking tool where members can access profiles of and contact information for their colleagues.

This openness is not seen often in other associations, but that's what makes CREW unique; an oft-repeated mantra among members is "there are no cold calls in CREW Network."

"There's always a member willing to help another member," says Hardt.

There's a common ground members share in advancing skill sets and ultimately driving more member-to-member business, says CREW 2015 director Barbi Reuter, chief operating officer of Cushman & Wakefield | PICOR in Tucson, AZ. "Our members have a reputation for being the most experienced and top performers in their specialty practice areas—for being dealmakers. We pick up the phone and with over 9,000 people, we get immediate support, advice, guidance, best practices or connections."

And the diversity of fields within the association works to most members' advantage, adds Linda K. Adler, who is on the CREW board of directors and works as a Miami-based attorney/shareholder with Carlton Fields Jordan Burt. "A real estate attorney in Florida might need a surveyor or an appraiser for a transaction in California," she explains. "By using the CREWBiz app, in a minute or two, any member can resource his or her needs in any part of the US and Canada and can also make new business connections."

LEADERSHIP IN, AND OUT

Business development also ties in with CREW's focus on developing effective leaders. Significant resources are put toward providing members with high-level leadership development training and opportunities to serve on CREW Network boards and lead committees in order to develop and hone effective leadership skills. Indeed, most CREW members serve on at least one committee on a local or Network level; several hold more than one position.

Yet this focus goes two ways; not only is CREW nurturing the leaders of tomorrow, but it's also providing a venue in which current senior-level women can share their insight, experiences and knowledge with others, while benefiting from all that CREW provides. "Everybody wants to be able to have the opportunity to network with senior women within commercial real estate," says Susan L. Hill, 2014 immediate past president and a senior managing director with HFF LP in Houston.

Confidence is the number-one factor in nurturing leadership. "It's always an issue," says Laurie Baker, 2015 CREW President-Elect and SVP of fund and asset management for Camden Property Trust in Houston. "We probably self-reflect too much, and while that focus on collaboration is what makes us so great at the table, if our confidence gets in the way, we doubt ourselves so much that we don't even allow ourselves to show that we are confident."

Leadership opportunities, she stresses, are extremely important if women want to advance and grow professionally. "CREW Network is in an excellent position to be the springboard for senior women leaders becoming future board members through our network, prominence in the industry and leadership training," she says.

With that in mind, CREW Network offers a number of opportunities for leadership development and training. Lori E. Kilberg, for one, is "very excited" about CREW's ongoing leadership initiative. She is CREW's 2014 president-elect and is a partner with the law firm of Hartman Simons & Wood LLP in Atlanta. "One of the things we think CREW does better than anyone is to train women in business in a very safe and nurturing environment, an environment in which our members can feel very comfortable."

CREW Network is currently working with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to put together a leadership curriculum and certification program that members can take advantage of during the group's upcoming meetings. "Not only will we be developing the leadership skills of our members, but we'll also give them something that will be recognized by their employers and set them apart as people that have accomplished this training," she says. "I think it's a huge initiative that helps women in all stages of their careers because nobody can ever have enough professional development and recognition."

Part of the leadership push is to get senior-level executives to share their experiences and advice with their fellow CREW members. In considering how to better facilitate that goal, CREW came up with its “Distinguished Leaders Roundtable,” involving some of the most successful women in commercial real estate. The first of these took place at last year’s annual convention.

At this past meeting, CREW honored four women as “Distinguished Leaders” in a panel moderated by noted author and keynote speaker Katty Kay, lead anchor for BBC World News America. They included Butler Burgher Group CEO Diane Butler; Sarah K. Abrams, SVP of Global Real Estate for Iron Mountain; Pat Goldstein, vice chairman and head of commercial real estate for Emigrant Bank; and Frances Aldrich Sevilla-Sacasa, CEO of Banco Ita International.

“It’s an opportunity to not only invite our senior members and senior leaders outside of our organization to come and learn about CREW, but also to give us their perspective on how they became successful, and the choices that they had to make in doing so,” says Hill.

INVALUABLE RESEARCH DRIVES ALL

It’s crucial to note that no matter what CREW does, be it building its programs or tweaking its strategy, it’s all driven by its research. This industry research has been invaluable to both CREW members and the greater CRE community.

Finding a lack of available statistical information about women in commercial real estate, in 2004 CREW officials embarked on a research initiative. A year later, the organization published the industry’s first-ever benchmark study that measured compensation, advancement and success and satisfaction levels of both men and women in commercial real estate; the data proved beneficial to corporate recruiters and firms with retention programs. CREW repeats this benchmark study every five years, with the 2015 survey to be done in conjunction with MIT.

CREW’s studies remain the only comprehensive examinations of gender-based issues within the industry. In addition to the benchmark survey, CREW publishes annual white papers on topics that address the business case for diversity, which are then used to develop its programming for members. In the past three years alone, these studies have focused on such issues as “Women in Leadership: Case Studies of Executive Women in Commercial Real Estate;” “Evolution of Women in Leadership: An Analysis of Effective Leadership Skills;” and “Success and Satisfaction of Women in Commercial Real Estate: Retaining Exceptional Leaders.” Its 2014 white paper, currently in progress, will examine how members can best position themselves when working with an executive recruiter.

The annual studies play a great role in determining CREW’s planning for the following year, says Judith Nitsch, 2014 CREW president and founding principal and chairman at Nitsch Engineering Inc. and Boston. For instance, this year’s theme for the annual convention—“Rewards of Risk”—came from its case studies. “We developed our programming this year to help women throughout commercial real estate be better at forming contacts and taking risks,” she relates. “For instance, a woman will apply for a job if she knows 100% of the requirements and is confident that she can fill them. Meanwhile, a man will apply if he knows 60% of it, believing he’ll figure it out eventually. As women who want to go to that next level, we need to take risks. You’re doing just what the men are doing, so don’t let that little voice in your head talk you out of that.”

While the days of being the only woman in a room during a transaction or event are long past, says Consolo, there are still comparatively few women in the uppermost levels of leadership. “Our next great challenge is to expand opportunities for our members and to mentor future leaders,” she says. “We’re not just advancing careers. We’re looking to train the next generation of CEOs, chairwomen—the next wave of leaders.”

PROMOTING THE BUSINESS

Part of that is to attract more women into the sector. Promoting commercial real estate as a career option for young women has been a major CREW initiative. The organization set up programs to educate women and girls about the opportunities offered by commercial real estate, provides scholarships for education and sets up mentoring relationships for those new to the industry.

Much of this is done through CREW Network Foundation, the philanthropic arm of CREW founded in 1998. Donations made to this nonprofit not only help fund the organization's research initiatives, but they also go toward education efforts. The group has its own Foundation Scholarship to support future female leaders as they pursue university-level education leading to CRE careers. These scholarships are awarded annually to full-time female students that are junior or senior level undergraduates or students enrolled in graduate programs. The group also hits a younger cohort with its CREW Careers program for high school girls.

CREW gives out between five and 10 scholarships every year, says Ayers, who also serves as president of CREW Network Foundation. The help doesn't stop at the money, though; recipients also get an internship with a CREW member organization, are paired with an experienced mentor and get to attend CREW Network meetings, including the annual convention.

The amount of money available for scholarships varies depending on how much is donated. By 2013, \$470,000 had been granted to help more than 50 women complete their education and enter the workforce through professional internships.

Interestingly, the number of applicants hasn't gone up in recent years, despite the growing allure of commercial real estate. Ayers believes that this is because women don't consider CRE as a career. CREW regularly works with educational institutions such as MIT and Cornell University to help further its goal. In fact, notes Ayers, almost every CREW chapter has a relationship with their local universities, particularly if they have commercial real estate programs.

"It's really important to start teaching women about the careers in commercial real estate because even though we are 20% behind the males, the salaries in commercial real estate are much more favorable," Ayers says.

DIFFERENT DAY, SAME ISSUES

Currently, CREW has a great opportunity to embrace its younger members and students to show them the value the organization can bring to young women as they come into this business. Not only does it offer extensive networking opportunities, but CREW also provides its members with a massive support system and lasting friendships. Members are able to grow on both a personal and professional level, and that helps them in all aspects of their lives.

And as much as the incoming labor pool has evolved, new entrants to the business are facing the same issues their predecessors encountered. As noted, the percentage of women in the C-suites of the industry is in the single-digits and the gender pay gap continues.

"Sadly, while many women new to the business believe there are no parity issues, our research tells us that this is simply not the case," relates Kilberg. "A Case Western Reserve study shows that many more men coming out of MBA programs negotiate their salaries—about 57% of men compared to about 7% of women. We see this disparity in later salary levels as well as promotions, and it's because women don't push themselves forward.

"That's why CREW will be extremely relevant as we move ahead," she continues. "We are a multi-discipline, multi-generational organization that can give our members access to all facets of real estate and all levels of experience. It's important to give women the tools and the sponsors to level the playing field."