

Marketing maverick

Sarah Fister Gale



Jim Voss might not have been a great student, but he has taught generations of PCI members what it takes to be a successful businessman.

After leaving Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wis., Voss returned to Chicago, Ill., to work in his family's conveyor belt business. He spent more than a decade learning the business, working in the plant, and running it as plant manager and ultimately general manager.

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In 1980, he left the family business to launch what is now JVI Inc., a provider of structural bearing pads that are used to cushion and support structural precast, prestressed concrete elements.

"It was the worst possible time to start a business," he says, noting that prime interests rates had soared to 19%. "The first couple of years were a struggle."

Nevertheless, the company quickly established a reputation in bearing pad products. "It was a very small niche market, but everyone came to us," he says.

Thirteen years later came an opportunity to expand the product line. His new products included slotted inserts, hidden connections, and shear alignment connectors.

Each new line added new business, and the company expanded from a 5500 ft² (510 m²) facility in Skokie, Ill., to a 22,000 ft² (2000 m²) operation in Lincolnwood, Ill.

JVI's longevity is due in large part to the company's products that solve unique problems for the industry, but there is more to its success than that. Voss has spent his entire 31-year career relentlessly marketing his company and supporting his customers.

"Marketing is vital, and I wave my flag any time I can," Voss says.

These efforts center on PCI, where he has been an active member for decades, sitting on boards, joining committees, supporting events, and cooking gourmet meals for thousands of PCI members over the years with the Concrete Chefs. He is also not afraid to draw extra attention to the JVI and PCI booths at industry conferences.

"There is always room for humor," Voss says.

He encourages all of his employees to participate in PCI committees and regional associations. JVI was awarded the Associate Member Award in 1989 and again in 2005. Due to his long-term commitment to PCI, Voss was named a PCI Titan in 2004.

Voss is quick to point out that his commitment to the association is far from selfless. "PCI members provide my livelihood," he says, "so it only makes sense for me to support PCI."

His active membership in PCI has offered unique opportunities to collaborate with customers to find solutions to common industry challenges. Indeed, many of JVI's most popular products took root this way.

"JVI could not have had the success we enjoy without a robust involvement in PCI."

Despite all the successful products, Voss's most satisfying achievement has been the creation and nurturing of the PCI Foundation, which provides a vehicle for educating university students in precast concrete. There are six active studios around the country and more on the way to get the word out on precast concrete.

Voss says he hopes the next generation of PCI members will include more entrepreneurs who are willing to take risks.

"It is the only way that our industry can truly grow and flourish."

His message to them is simple, "Even in an uncertain economy, if you are the best at what you choose to do, you *will* be successful." ■