Top CEOs: Recognizing top leaders in associations

Assembling a list of top association and nonprofit CEOs could be easy—or difficult—depending on approach.

Easy since, in the association community, there is a go-to list of usual suspects, familiar names who are fixtures, either in their own right or by virtue of their group’s prominence.

Difficult if the goal is to stretch beyond those and avoid arbitrary choices.

As part of the research for this special report, CEO Update consulted the experts—CEOs themselves—to identify these leaders, asking peers who they think has made top marks.

They were asked to consider these factors:

- Legislative success
- Leadership ability
- Skill in raising a group’s profile or managing a crisis
- History of building coalitions and reaching consensus
- Membership excellence in areas such as meetings, education, certification

Hundreds of CEOs were surveyed, many of whom responded with nominations—some predictable and some surprising. Input was sought from executive recruiters, those who know the current crop of leaders well. Finally, CEO Update staff tapped into its own expertise, developed in more than 20 years of covering association executives.

The resulting nominations were an interesting mix. Association professionals whose careers are legendary and others less well known came to the fore. Nominees included industry stalwarts and turnaround specialists. Some CEOs are clearly better at promoting themselves than others. Some have been thrust into public view by circumstances or current issues.

This first CEO Update list of Top CEOs (see page 9) is a broad sample of the good work and sound leadership in the association community. It is not meant to be definitive. There are tens of thousands of associations. Even with a fraction being major players nationally, it’s easy to see how difficult it is to determine just a handful of top leaders.

We hope this list, selected from among many nominees, will spark discussion of the best association leadership practices. Your comments are most welcome, easily registered at the end of all stories at ceoupdate.com.

 Someone who you think has been overlooked?

 There’s next year.
Steve Anderson
National Association of Chain Drug Stores
This former head of American Frozen Food Institute and the National Restaurant Association now navigates the tricky channels of health care legislation as CEO of the 170-member company group. An impassioned booster for associations, he's called them "The Fifth Estate—a counter-balance to the other estates" and "vital in the life of our nation."

Gregory Balestrero
Project Management Institute
Spending more than 200 days a year traveling around the world, this CEO was nominated by his peers for growing the group exponentially since becoming CEO in 2002, tripling membership in the past five years to almost 300,000.

Kevin Burke
American Apparel and Footwear Association
He's been credited with injecting new energy into the group by increasing its Washington presence, boosting meeting attendance, energizing education programs and fostering a culture that makes members want to belong. "He turned the Titanic around," said one peer.

John Castellani
Business Roundtable
Since taking the helm in 2001, this CEO has strengthened the group's Washington reputation and led them to the forefront of public policy debate, tackling issues ranging from the overhaul of health care to green energy initiatives, corporate leadership to financial reform.

Tom Donohue
U.S. Chamber of Commerce
The de facto leader of the business community, he's transformed the

Cal Dooley
American Chemistry Council
After his 14-year career as a Democratic congressman ended in 2004, he has been on an association fast track. As CEO of the Food Products Association, he helped guide its 2007 merger with the Grocery Manufacturers Association. Just last year, he became head of the hugely influential ACC and is now a leading voice on cap-and-trade and energy-related stimulus funding.

Roger Dow
U.S. Travel Association
This veteran industry executive with 34 years at Marriott International Inc., took the reins of the group in 2005. Last year, as the economy founndered, he put the USTA on offense, launching Meetings Mean Business to promote the ailing corporate travel and meetings industries.

Greg Dummer
Association for Laboratory Automation
With just a few staffers and a limited budget, this young CEO, a former SmithBucklin executive, transformed what was once a financially troubled, annual event-focused group into a global, technology-driven association offering a range of programs to researchers and executives worldwide.

John Engler
National Association of Manufacturers
With a massive, diverse membership, this former governor and his team have tackled a dizzying array of issues on the Hill, especially since November's election. Card check legislation, oil and gas exploration, the federal budget, export controls, international trade policy, infrastructure funding, health care—all are heaped on his plate.

Glenn English
National Rural Electric Cooperative Association
This personable former congressman from Oklahoma was asked to stay with the group, which
Chamber into a lobbying powerhouse that leads on every business issue from card check to climate change. Its new $100 million campaign to “defend and advance America’s free enterprise” and a push to raise gas taxes to fund highway repair shows that, even in his 70s, he isn’t slowing down.

Kathleen Jaeger
Generic Pharmaceutical Association
Jaeger took over—and consolidated—GPhA as the association struggled to establish a unified voice after a three-way merger in 2001. Since then, she has elevated the industry profile, lobbying blows at the brand pharmaceutical industry over market exclusivity in what promises to be a mounting battle. An attorney and daughter of a community pharmacy owner, Jaeger grew her reputation representing corporations before the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and other government bodies.

Thomas R. Kuhn
Edison Electric Institute
He drew accolades from peers for efforts to address climate change. He built and maintained consensus among shareholder-owned electric companies on a plan to reduce carbon emissions, major elements which were adopted in the American Clean Energy and Security Act recently passed in the House.

Doug Lowenstein
Private Equity Council
Founding president of this new group, he has worked to protect his members from tax reclassification that could cut their earnings significantly.

Michael Maves

Dave McCurdy
Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers
It takes consensus to lead an industry as challenged as the automakers, and that’s what this CEO and former congressman from Oklahoma has delivered, most recently by garnering support from auto CEOs for a national fuel economy standard.

Kyle McSlarrow
National Cable & Telecommunications Association
Cable industry leaders set out to find a general to lead their trade group when they hired him in 2005. They found one in this CEO with political know-how gleaned from running political campaigns and Senate offices, including roles with Bob Dole and Trent Lott. A former deputy secretary of the Department of Energy, he guided NCTA as it led the way in consumer education surrounding the digital television conversion through an extensive campaign that included $250 million in TV ads.

Dan Mica
Credit Union National Association
A former five-term congressman, he has spent the last 13 years promoting the interests of his 8,500 members and protecting them from the banks that, he says, are out to destroy them. With financial regulatory reform on Congress’ plate, he may yet face the most critical battle of his career.

Tracy Mullin
National Retail Federation
American Medical Association
An ear, nose and throat doctor and author of nearly 100 medical papers, he became AMA head in 2002 after leaving his leadership post at the Consumer Healthcare Products Association. Bringing public policy and administrative expertise, he’s now charged with uniting a fractured membership behind hugely controversial health care reform.

Jim May
Air Transport Association of America
Since joining the group in 2003, he has led embattled members through a period of public and congressional scrutiny, staggering losses, capacity cuts and recent talk of further bankruptcies. Through it all, he’s been at the forefront of advocacy, bringing his Hill experience to bear on issues ranging from airline safety to antitrust immunity, FAA funding to airport slot auctions.

Walter B. McCormick Jr.
USTelecom
With more than 25 years of telecommunications experience and an extensive Hill background, he’s successfully led his group through the changing political landscape since 2001. Previously CEO of American Trucking Associations, McCormick is now branching his association into video and broadband industries.

Leading the group since 1993, she’s grown NRF’s annual meeting and fostered a culture of employee satisfaction that led the group to high ratings in CEO Update’s 2008 “Top Places to Work.” And though she’s retiring later this year, Mullin is no lame duck—on July 13 she announced her group had “come out swinging” at Wal-Mart over the company’s support of employer-mandated health care.

Patrick Natale
American Society of Civil Engineers
As CEO since 2002, he has been at the forefront of helping the public understand how to avoid future infrastructure disasters. This year, with stimulus money on the table, he has been more vocal, calling for the Obama administration to fix bridges and roads in desperate need of repair and issuing a report that graded U.S. infrastructure with a “D.”

Susan Neely
American Beverage Association
This CEO, known to peers as a consensus builder, just launched Americans Against Food Taxes to oppose a possible sweet drink tariff. She also partnered with the American Heart Association and the William J. Clinton Foundation to create the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, a

Matthew Shay
International Franchise Association
He has been leading his association through a tumultuous economy since becoming CEO in 2005. A vocal champion for the role that small businesses play in the economy, he has
campaign that has cut beverage calories shipped to schools. "It was a home run," said one nominator

**Dave Parker**  
American Gas Association  
He continues to excel at the tricky balancing act of protecting the industry against damaging legislation while maintaining a proactive voice in the clean energy movement. A member of the "old guard" of trade association executives, he began building Washington connections as a scheduler for President Nixon and spent nine years managing public policy for the Edison Electric Institute.

**Craig Purser**  
National Beer Wholesalers Association  
Credited with having a personable style and excellent relationships with his 2,850-distributor members, this energetic leader has engaged former adversaries, like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, to find consensus. Named CEO in 2005, he’s been fending off efforts by big-box retailers to skirt alcohol sales rules, which would force down prices and hurt his members.

**Steve Sandherr**  
Associated General Contractors of America  
Representing an industry slammed by the recession and a trade group comparably hit in non-dues revenue, he’s been steering a careful course internally while keeping his GR-trained eye on Hill actions like the stimulus and highway spending bills. His consensus-building skills get a workout with both union and open shop members.

**Gary Shapiro**  
Consumer Electronics Association  
A staunch supporter of the digital television transition that took place in June, he has been leading the way in consumer electronics since he joined the association in 1991. His group produces the annual International Consumer Electronics Show, the largest trade show in North America, and has recently begun to push an environment-friendly initiative.

been calling on the government to make small-business loans easier to obtain.

**Paul Stalknecht**  
Air Conditioning Contractors of America  
Another alumnus of the American Trucking Associations, that incubator of association execs, he is regarded by his peers as someone who really understands his members, designing programs to help them deal with their latest downturn-fueled boom—repairs. It’s paying off—the annual meeting had the highest attendance ever.

**Chris Stinebert**  
American Financial Services Association  
Shortly after he came to AFSA, he found himself at the helm of a trade group representing an industry caught in a downward spiral. Aggressive advocacy and grace under pressure have made him an effective shepherd as his members face significant regulatory reform.

**Dale Stinton**  
National Association of Realtors  
Assuming his post in 2005, this 25-year NAR veteran is credited with uniting a diverse organization and reacting well ahead of the slumping housing market with programs, education and online resources—including the multi-million dollar campaign “Right Tools, Right Now,” to help realtors confront industry challenges.

**Dawn Sweeney**  
National Restaurant Association  
Like others managing groups in hard-hit industries, she’s been wrestling with trimming (and streamlining) her staff, focused on molding a strategic advocacy team well positioned to target the issues of food safety, immigration and card check legislation.

**Dirk Van Dongen**  
National Association of Wholesaler-Distributors  
A shrewd coalition builder with deep political connections, Van Dongen packs serious punch representing the nation’s middlemen. He played a central role in mobilizing business associations and member companies alike as stimulus legislation sprinted through Congress, and is geared up for a repeat performance as the health care debate takes shape.