

An introduction to COSBOA

An address to the NIRA National Conference 27th April 2005 – Tony Steven, CEO COSBOA

President of NIRA Kerry Woolacott, incoming President John Symons.
Minister for Small Business the Hon. Andre Haermeyer MLA, other
Parliamentarians, Small Business Owners and Managers, Ladies and
Gentlemen.

There is a very special and unique spirit that lies within small business operators; that spirit is here tonight, the word that springs to mind to describe that spirit is “individual”.

This characteristic common to all small business is, both, good and bad; good because without it the tenacity and drive would not be there to build their business in the first place; and bad because there is an innate hesitance to ask for or even seek help and assistance.

The answer lies in industry associations that believe in small business. We should never underestimate the honorary work of the volunteers in this sector, and their ability to enlist and engage the small businesses.

As CEO of COSBOA (The Council of Small Business Organisations of Australia) I stand in a unique position to witness the work, the empathy and the relationship building that is carried out by volunteers and those touched with this sense of altruism.

It is these people who work so hard that stand as the foundation of the COSBOA reputation. When I started in this position just over 12 months

ago I didn't realise that I was awakening a sleeping giant, COSBOA is well respected in Government and business circles because of this reputation and more importantly because of the respect this country has for small business owners and managers, that work beyond what is expected in other areas and risk everything in order to take on self responsibility.

That is why it is a privilege to present to you this evening the work of COSBOA.

It is also why organisations like yours coming together as NIRA is so vital, your representatives have such a responsibility, the effects of the work they do is felt by millions and we should never forget the “on the ground” nature of our work.

Recent Productivity Commission studies and work by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) have highlighted the importance of small business in the economy.

There are around 1.2 million small businesses representing some 96 per cent of private sector firms in this country. Small businesses are responsible for generating 3.3 million jobs, or 47% of private sector, non-agricultural employment.

As I said during the election campaign last year if you add small business owners with their families and their staff they represent more than half of the voting population in the country.....

So what do we do?

The fifth National Small Business summit is being held in Sydney on the 16th and 17th May at Darling Harbour. The Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition will be in attendance along with the Minister and Shadow Minister and luminaries such as Graeme Samuel of the ACCC. We also feel that you should be there....

Before then we have the Federal Budget, Mr. Costello's tenth. COSBOA has lodged a submission calling on red tape reduction both when dealing with Government and also the referred red tape that occurs when dealing business to business.

COSBOA holds a series of dinners in Canberra, featuring high-level guest speakers on a quarterly basis. We host Government Ministers, Parliamentarians and top-level bureaucrats. We network with each other a build bridges between them and small business.

Small business doesn't always agree on issues, but when we do, policy is developed for representatives like myself to use. Lobbying Government and building relationships using these guidelines ensures the message is getting through.

Recently we met with the Minister for Work Place Relations, Kevin Andrews, and we have left him in no doubt that COSBOA feels we have a role to play in any changes to the Industrial Relations system in Australia, small business will be affected either way.

Other issues we have concerns with include the proposed sale of Telstra, a single company in the telecommunications industry with massive market power, simply must not be left to its own devises.

There are four main messages I will be delivering to the National Small Business Summit next month, they are, increased Business Education in small business, Red tape reduction and tools to get through it, a flexible, easy to access and simplified IR system, and a fair competitive market place in which to operate.

These policies assertively implemented over the next few years, along with the global opportunities presenting themselves, means that Australia can significantly benefit from growth in the Small Business sector.

I think we have an opportunity and an obligation to build the infrastructure for small business in management skills, Government processes, Industrial Relations and general services

This our responsibility to ensure we build on the very special and unique spirit that I mentioned that lies within small business operators, that get up and go attitude, that individual spirit.

Its time to get off the back of small business and let it go, prosper and win.

Tony Steven