Wanko to Leave WF&SSA, 2011 Ushers in New Leader

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After almost 12 years as executive vice president of the Wholesale Florist & Florist Supplier Association, Jim Wanko will retire from the Annapolis, Md.-based association Dec. 31.

Wanko’s three decades in the floral industry include leadership roles at SAF, at publically held and private floral companies and at Promoflor, a nationwide flower marketing campaign.

His retirement announcement last week also introduced Trish Lilly of Thomson Management Associates as the association’s new management executive. Members will be able to meet Lilly, along with other new staff members, at the WF&FSA Conference in early November, as she’ll be working alongside Wanko during a two-month overlap.

When Wanko joined WF&FSA in 1999, the association’s long-time annual Wares of the World trade fair had recently been discontinued, giving the new leader a revenue challenge from the get-go, he said. Together with volunteer leaders, Wanko said he has always been encouraged by their "willingness to try new things" and remain progressive, even when some ideas didn’t pan out.

One idea that came to fruition is its annual flagship meeting, a development Wanko counts as a success during his tenure. This year’s Conference has close to 500 registrants — a draw that Wanko and staff “feel really good about,” he said, noting that the sizable increase from the 300 registrants the event usually gets.

SAF CEO Peter Moran witnessed Wanko’s resolve as he took major steps to overhaul and realign expenses, making difficult, but necessary decisions. He sold the headquarters building, relocated to a less costly location, cut staff and eliminated a magazine. “When the dust settled, Jim had a stable and solid foundation on which to move WF&FSA forward,” Moran said. “He is a humble guy so many folks may not realize all he accomplished in his tenure, but I really admired the way Jim took the challenges before him and delivered a case study on how to turn around an association.”

Another role Wanko takes pride in as a grandfather, and he’s ready to spend more time perfecting that in retirement, taking cues from wife, Laurie. “I look forward to having time for my personal interests that have always taken a back seat to work,” he said.

While he’ll have plenty to fill his workdays in these last months, at least one member of the Wanko family is not waiting to start celebrating. “My Labrador Retriever Max is keeping a countdown calendar,” he said. “Max thinks we are going to be doing a lot more together and he is right.”

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