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In January, Robertson Heating Supply President Scott Robertson will become the American Supply Association's 48th president and 49th Individual to hold the presidency. Photo by Fred Cockrill.

THE NUMBERS GUY

Incoming President Scott Robertson wants ASA members to take full advantage of available benchmarking tools.

Alliance, Ohio-based Robertson Heating Supply Co./Robertson Kitchen & Bath Gallery President **Scott Robertson** has a pet peeve. Robertson, who will become the American Supply Association's 48th president (and 49th individual to serve in that capacity) at the first of the year, feels member companies are not taking full advantage of the financial benchmarking materials made available by the suburban Chicago-based group.

"One of my goals during my year of presidency is to speak from the heart and speak as a wholesale-distributor owner and convince ASA members to utilize these benchmarking tools that are available," he said during lunch that followed a visit to Supply House Times' video studio in Deerfield, Ill., this summer. "They take minimal time to complete. The Monthly Pulse Report takes seven or eight minutes to fill out and the OPR might take a couple hours for your accounting department to fill out, but the value of these reports is twenty-fold. I want to see more participation from our members with these tools that are made available to them and are critical for their use."

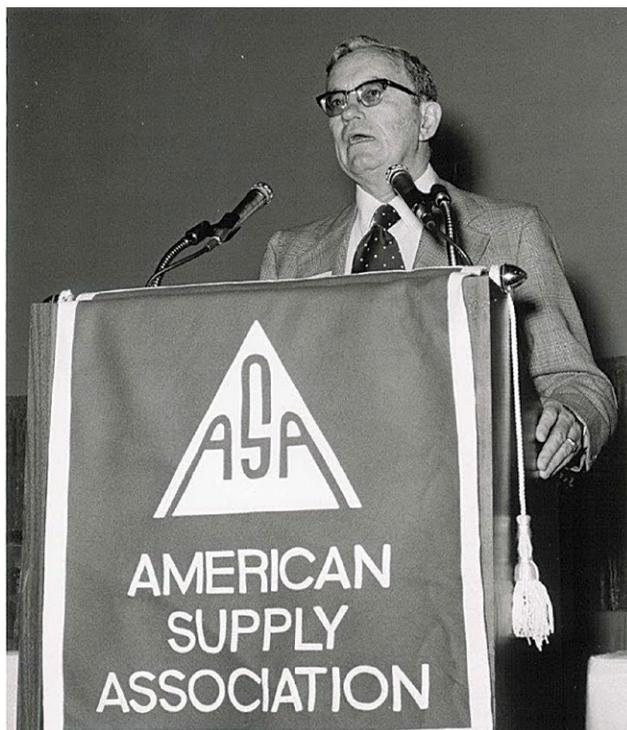
Robertson, whose company was named Supply House Times sister publication Plumbing & Mechanical's 2015 Supply House of the Year and

has won the Supply House Times honor twice and its Wholesaler of the Quarter Century honor in 1979, is particularly fond of the OPR. "They recap 60 different financial measurements," he explains. "It's not only how your company has done the last four or five years, but you see your trend line. It's you against you. You get to see how you stack up in each of those measurements against different segments, whether it's all ASA firms, firms of \$50 million or more, or even how you measure against companies in your buying group. It's the ultimate grade card in terms of how well you are doing financially in these key measurements."

Robertson, the third Robertson Heating Supply executive to be ASA president (joining grandfather, **John Robertson**, and longtime company president **Esmond Fogle**) adds the Monthly Pulse Report is valuable to him on a more local basis. "The Pulse lets me know how our company's sales growth for the year compares to my region," he says. "If we are up 6% and the region is up 4.5%, we are doing slightly better than our competitors. It's good and honest feedback because it's a confidential survey. You don't know specific companies in the report, but you will know how your company compares to others in your region."



Family affair: Robertson's father and three sisters also work in the business. Pictured, from left: Lori Keller, Ed Robertson, Scott Robertson, Linda Wonner and Sue Neil. Photo by Kelly Faloon/Plumbing and Mechanical.



Scott Robertson is the third Robertson executive to ascend to the ASA presidency, joining his grandfather, John Robertson, and longtime company president Ez Fogle. Photo courtesy of Robertson Heating Supply.

Robertson also is a huge proponent of ASA's vast array of educational platforms produced through the ASA Education Foundation and ASA University.

"The training programs are where it really is a cut above," he says. "There are more than 200 courses available to employees with 29 different tracks dealing with sales, purchasing agents, showrooms and inside sales. They offer distributors training programs that are customized to the industry and to a particular job. No distributor would be able to develop something like that themselves because it would be costly and time consuming to maintain. ASA constantly works at this. It's an awesome benefit."

CONSISTENT SUCCESS

Robertson says he had two choices coming out of college. "I could go into the family business, which certainly was the sensible option, or the second option was pursue being a sports broadcaster," says Robertson, a big Cleveland professional sports fan. "I briefly thought about that and came to my senses and went into the family business upon graduation."

Robertson ended up taking over as president of the company when he was 29 years old. His grandfather (John Robertson) founded the company in 1934, and his father, Ed, has worked for the company all his life, and is the company's executive vice president. Robertson's three sisters (**Sue Neil**, **Lori Keller** and **Linda Wonner**) also work in the company. Neil is the company's human resource director.

"My dad didn't want to run the company," Robertson explains. "He had certain specialties he enjoyed and wanted to stay involved with. My grandfather was very family-oriented. When the president at the time (Fogle), announced he was retiring and gave a two-year notice, my grandpa said to me that I'd be with them the next two years learning the rest of the business and that's what I did."

Today, Robertson Heating Supply has grown to a distributor that has 31 locations, more than 280 employees and has annual revenues north of \$125 million.

"Becoming president at age 29 created a bit more pressure than if it had been a more spaced out timeframe," Robertson says. "But my grandfather and Ez (Fogle) were the absolute keys to the company, even today. They built the company and did all the risky stuff and grew it in challenging times. They taught me a lot. I just had to keep it going and moderately growing."

One way Robertson Heating Supply has continued to grow is through the embracing of technology, whether that's the continual upgrade of its customized in-house computer system or the introduction of a mobile app that allows contractors to purchase materials remotely and even scan a barcode to check for product availability.

"We have been blessed to be on the fairly forward frontier of technology," Robertson says. "We have our own internal technology department so we don't use a packaged program. We develop technology customized to us in terms of what our customers need."

Barcoding in the company's 217,000-sq.-ft. distribution center in Alliance also helps with efficiency and productivity. "We've been doing barcoding for 20 years," Robertson says. "It's been magnificent and has allowed us to operate extremely efficiently and quickly and to eliminate mistakes. It allows us to be a lot more accurate."

Robertson says about 20% of the company's contractor customers are using various forms of advanced technology in their dealings with the Ohio distributor. "We're pushing an annual pace of 7% of our sales being done through online ordering," he says. "A couple years ago that was closer to 2-3% and the industry average is 4-5% and creeping up every year. We've jumped ahead of the curve. Every meeting you listen to that's how the millennials are ordering. They don't want to pick up the phone or order the old-fashioned way. They want to do it online or on their

iPhone. Even if the average is 15% as an industry (customers using technology such as online and mobile ordering), you better have an awesome program because it will grow to 25% in the next 10 years.”

And Robertson says his company has no desire to slow down when it comes to forward-thinking practices.

“We’re a very vibrant company,” he says. “Some companies our age might start to get a bit stale and complacent and stuck in their ways. We are vibrant in the way we look at things. We challenge each other. We have projects and tweaks we always are trying to do. We challenge our people to turn that dial a hair and do it slightly better than before.”

At the end of the day, Robertson points to one other key factor in his company’s long-term success that can’t be measured by numbers.

“Our success over a long 82-year period is because of the reputation we have,” he says. “A lot of times during the course of a year or a couple-year period, a company can get sideways and make a decision that might immediately benefit them or be a financial spark, but it might take you out of your ethical honesty and what’s right zone. Your reputation is what customers remember. They don’t necessarily know your sales volume and we know we aren’t the biggest company in the industry. What’s important is when people talk about your company they talk about it in a good light. We’ve done that for 82 years. Our employees feel it and our customers feel it.”

In terms of 2017, Robertson would like to see ASA continue to ride the years-long wave of momentum it has established. “ASA has to be one of the few associations where membership, attendance and activities are growing,” he says. “I want to keep that going. I want to take that momentum already established by previous presidents and by ASA Executive Vice President **Mike Adelizzi** and his staff and keep it going forward. ASA is the cat’s meow with providing companies customized training programs. For us, ASA has been awesome. It’s our association that represents our business.”

And his advice for ASA member companies over the next year?

“I want more distributors to utilize more parts of ASA,” he says. “I encourage fellow distributors and vendor partners to participate a little more in ASA than before. When they do that, they will be happy and will see the benefits and those benefits of ASA will be compounded throughout the industry.” 

LEADING THE INDUSTRY

A look at the roster of ASA presidents.

1970: Glen Turbeville (Morrison Supply) and **Robert Taylor** (Taylor Engineering Corp); **1971: Frank Dupar** (Palmer Supply); **1972: Ernest Buchi** (Tenn. Pipe & Supply Corp.); **1973: Lincoln Pierce** (Central Supply); **1974: Samuel Rosen** (Hereford-Union Supply); **1975: John Robertson** (Robertson Heating Supply); **1976: Lavoy Moore** (Moore Supply); **1977: William Schultz** (Lawson Supply); **1978 A.J. Somerville** (Thos. Somerville); **1979: Robert Addison** (U.S. Supply); **1980: George Keenen Jr.** (Keenen-Cashman); **1981: F.S. Templeton** (Plumb Supply); **1982: Kenneth Perry** (VAMAC); **1983: M.W. Meyer** (Wm. F. Meyer); **1984: John McDonald III** (Brock-McVey); **1985: Fred Keenan** (Keenan Supply, Division of Hajoca Corp.); **1986: David Corcoran** (Supply New England); **1987: Esmond Fogle** (Robertson Heating Supply); **1988: William Quinn** (General Pipe & Supply); **1989: Earl Zarbock** (Plumbers Supply); **1990: Frank Finkel** (Davis & Warshow); **1991: Randy Tice** (APR Supply); **1992: Paul Heieck** (Heick Supply); **1993: Robert Seiffert IV** (Supply 1 Corp.); **1994: John Vogt** (National Wholesale Supply); **1995: John Bertsch** (Bertsch Co.); **1996: Herb Strong** (Economy Plumbing Supply); **1997: Morris Cregger** (Cregger Co.); **1998: Ed Felten** (First Supply); **1999: Karl Neupert** (Consolidated Supply); **2000: Harold Williams** (Security Supply); **2001: Don Maloney** (Coburn Supply); **2002: Jack Hester** (F.W. Webb); **2003: Steve Anderson** (Central States Industrial Supply); **2004: Mark Theis** (H.W. Theis); **2005: Dottie Ramsey** (Modern Supply); **2006: George Conyngham Jr.** (Eastern Penn Supply); **2007: Joel Becker** (Torrington Supply); **2008: Jeff New** (Mid-City Supply); **2009: Joe Poehling** (First Supply); **2010: Frank Nisonger** (Slakey Brothers); **2011: Bill Kenny Jr.** (Kenny Pipe and Supply); **2012: Scott Weaver** (APR Supply); **2013: Jeff Pope** (F.W. Webb); **2014: John Strong** (Economy Plumbing Supply); **2015: Rick Fantham** (Hajoca Corp.); **2016: Tim Milford** (Milford Supply); **2017: Scott Robertson** (Robertson Heating Supply)



Robertson encourages ASA members to take full advantage of the association’s numerous key benchmarking services, including the OPR and the Monthly Pulse Report. Photo by Fred Cockrill.