

Interview

A Voice for St. Louis

An Interview with **Kathy Osborn,**
President and Chief Executive Officer,
St. Louis Regional Business Council



Kathy Osborn

EDITORS' NOTE Kathy Osborn is active in many diverse organizations within the St. Louis community, including Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis, United Way of Greater St. Louis, St. Louis Symphony, Saint Louis University, University of Missouri-St. Louis, Forest Park Forever, the St. Louis Police Foundation, the St. Louis Airport Commission, and the St. Louis Economic Development Partnership. In addition, she has been awarded an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Lindenwood University and the St. Louis Business Journal's Most Influential Business Women designation. She received both her undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF In 2000, the St. Louis Regional Business Council (stlrbc.org; RBC) was launched with 50 mid-cap business executives. This coalition was and continues to be essential to enhancing the well-being and vitality of the region. Today, the RBC is composed of 100 CEOs representing some of the region's largest employers. These companies have a tremendous impact on the economic health of the region, employing more than 120,000 people and generating more than \$65 billion in revenue annually.

Will you talk about the history of the St. Louis Regional Business Council and how you define its mission?

The St. Louis Regional Business Council was started 16 years ago. St. Louis has many large companies with between 600 and 1,200 employees headquartered that didn't have a voice to address what was going on in the community. Today, we comprise 100 CEOs of large companies, and we act on high-impact civic, business, and philanthropic efforts for the betterment of the region.

Are there specific issues and topics you focus on?

We have five areas of focus. One is promoting business-friendly public policy, in particular, policies that improve the overall quality of life here. This includes education reform policy or infrastructure policy, for example, that involve partnering with the public sector.

Another focus is education reform, where we have invested in things like Teach for America and local charter schools, to support opportunities for all children.

Talent development is also important. We work with 15 different colleges and universities, particularly business and engineering schools. We want a school system that is diverse and professional.

Seven years ago, a number of our new members wanted better business, civic, and philanthropic connections so we developed the Young Professionals Network. Membership now includes 3,500 people of color who we bring together because we want them to remain and thrive in St. Louis.

With education, we've realized college is expensive, and we don't put enough emphasis on post-secondary jobs in the trades, IT, or manufacturing. If the president at all lives up to his statements about wanting to increase manufacturing in this country, we have a problem because we don't have trained people in the pipeline. We want to do something about that in St. Louis.

Diversity and inclusion is the fifth area, and this is about making St. Louis a globally diverse city.

It's all about quality to life. We give approximately \$13 million every year to United Way of Greater St. Louis. We're very active in Social Venture Partners, which builds capacity in nonprofits, and we have a fund called It's Our Region that invests in small nonprofits and tackles their infrastructure needs.

Within these areas, we make determinations about the key things that need to be done and how we can get those things done together. ●

A World-Class Experience

An Interview with
Kathleen Ratcliffe, President, Explore St. Louis



Kathleen Ratcliffe

EDITORS' NOTE Kathleen Ratcliffe assumed her current role in May 2006. Before this, she was Executive Vice President for New Orleans CVB; President of Jacksonville & The Beaches CVB; and Vice President, Sales & Marketing of the Baltimore Area Convention & Visitors Association.

COMPANY BRIEF The St. Louis Tourism Bureau (explorestlouis.com) was founded in 1909 by a group of local business leaders, after seeing the success of the 1904 World's Fair. In 1984, the Bureau was restructured and combined with the St. Louis County Office of Tourism to form the St. Louis Convention & Visitors Commission (SLCVC), a regional commission of the State of Missouri. Dedicated funding for the SLCVC and the Regional Arts Commission through a new tax on hotel rooms was implemented. The SLCVC's board was reorganized in 1991 to reflect the organization's new role in managing the expanded America's Center Convention Complex including the 67,000-seat Dome at America's Center, 1,400-seat Ferrara Theatre, a 28,000 square-foot ballroom, and the St. Louis Executive Conference Center. Prior to the expansion, the convention center had been operated by the City of St. Louis.

Will you talk about some of the strengths of St. Louis as a destination?

I truly believe we're the best family destination in the country, as we have world-class visitor attractions at a very affordable price. We have a number of cultural institutions and visitor attractions that annually each draw more than three million visitors, including the Gateway Arch, St. Louis Zoo, Forest Park – which is the largest urban park in the country – and the St. Louis Cardinals. We see about 20 million-plus visitors annually.

Families drive here from hundreds of miles away to see venues like the St. Louis Zoo, which is free and is routinely named as one of the best zoos in the country.

It's wonderful to offer an affordable, world-class experience to so many people, and we capitalize on that.

Would you touch on the offerings for meetings and conventions?

We have a very large convention center that our organization operates. It's in the heart of our urban core downtown surrounded by thousands of hotel rooms, and it's within walking distance of great restaurants and nightlife activities. We are very successful as a convention destination.

St. Louis is well positioned for those who are driving, but is there a broader international appeal for those coming from further away?

Our convention business consists mostly of national organizations, some of which have international attendance. We do have great air service as well as the drivability factor.

On the leisure side, a good part of our marketing is directed toward a regional-drive audience, because that fuels our economic engine on a year-round basis. We do, however, utilize international marketing for key geographic targets, mostly within Western Europe.

Our opera theater and symphony are world-renowned and attract international visitors, who may also want to check the Arch off their bucket list or drive Route 66.

How important are metrics to track the impact of your programs?

We measure everything. Working with our marketing committee, we add more metrics every year, and we never take any away, because the metrics help us understand how visitors are engaging with our message.

By measuring trends, we can better make decisions with regard to future messaging about St. Louis and its attractions. ●