

FACE TO FACE

Christian Lemire, president of PMAC

by Melanie Collison

Christian Lemire's voice on the telephone is warm and excited as he talks about his long involvement with the Purchasing Management Association of Canada (PMAC).

Three-quarters of the way through his presidency – to be completed in June 2000 at the national conference in Ottawa – Lemire is thrilled at the growing recognition of purchasing agents as professionals who make a significant contribution to their organizations.

“For a long time purchasers were perceived to be at a clerical level. Now we're perceived as we want to be. It's an ongoing achievement – more and more organizations are coming to believe that purchasing people contribute by saving money and researching quality in the products and the services that we provide to the business community and to our employers. I'm pleased to be part of it.”

Chief of the purchasing department of the City of St-Hyacinthe, Quebec, Lemire earned his Certified Professional Purchaser designation (CPP) from PMAC in 1985.

PMAC's 7,000 members are organized into districts at the local level. In each province the districts make up an institute. Each institute has an affiliation agreement with the national association. Lemire became president of one of Quebec's nine districts in 1988, and president of the provincial institute in 1993. Prior to becoming president, he worked on national committees – education, marketing and communication, and the board of examiners, which grants CPP designation – and sat on the 14-member board of directors for PMAC for four years.

“I'm fortunate that the board is very strong, so I'm only the voice of the board,” Lemire says. “We also have the support of the national office in downtown Toronto – almost 20 people work for us in this office, implementing the board vision and mission, and there is also staff at the institute level. They all work in the same direction with the same principles. My strength is in those people.”

PMAC executive vice president Ivan Fraser casts that good fortune in a different light. “Christian is a facilitator,” Fraser says. “He wants other people to express their view. He gets the discussion flowing and uses the abilities and the knowledge of the group to make decisions. He's also very good at being able to see board level and management level issues and is able to see which is

which. He's a good sounding board; you can have discussions with him. Christian is a good person; he's got integrity. He really believes in the association and the profession and he wants to see both succeed."

Lemire earned a general management degree from the University of Sherbrooke, then followed a career path in supply management that included the fields of health care and education before joining the city of St-Hyacinthe 11 years ago.

St-Hyacinthe, population 40,000, was at the heart of the horrific ice storm that hit Quebec in January 1998. The crisis showed Lemire how well regarded purchasing professionals have become. "One major fact that was very, very meaningful for me, and for my group at the city, was that the mayor and the city councillors were relying on us. We were the ones who were involved in every contract. Prior to that we had built our reputation and people had confidence in us, but during the storm it was enhanced."

At home, it was something of an adventure for Lemire's four children to heat the house and cook with a wood fire and have only candles for light through 28 days without power. But for the 2,500 people in shelters, it was crucial that Lemire and his purchasing group find generators, food, blankets and beds.

There were scary times. At one point the city was down to a one-day supply of fuel for the generators because the bridges to Montreal were too icy for tanker trucks. But the experience had its lighter moments, too, according to Lemire. "We received one full truck of lightbulbs – when we had no power – and a van full of fresh-cut pineapple from Hawaii." Gratefully, he says, "PMAC contacts were very beneficial to us. People called to help; they helped us a lot; this is the good side of volunteering for the association."

PMAC wants to be recognized as a leader in the development and advancement of world-class supply management. It conducts continuous education programs; does advocacy and promotion; partners with other associations, nationally and internationally in the field, and with governments; and promotes a code of ethics. It also does research and provides networking opportunities.

PMAC offers a Certificate in Purchasing for people new to the profession and the CPP designation at an advanced, strategically oriented professional level. Both educational programs are being updated and diversified to encompass more fields.

During Lemire's presidency, PMAC has been seeking a new governance model, and it has been strengthening its relationships with the institutes.

Ties to other associations are furthering the development of a North American designation in supply management. "The profession has never had a great opportunity like this," Lemire says. "It is so exciting to fulfill the needs of the market and the membership."

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