





Ford Field in Detroit, Michigan

Inside The Final Trade Show Of A Promo Legend

Paul Kiewiet took MiPPA from near ruins to a thriving regional association. While recently overseeing an event at an NFL stadium, he went out on his own terms.

By Jonny Auping

The sun was setting upon Ford Field in mid-September, with the remaining light of dusk peaking onto the turf where the Detroit Lions play football on Sundays. As it were, the sun was also setting on the career of Paul Kiewiet, MAS, the executive director of the Michigan Promotional Products Association (MiPPA) and a PPAI Hall of Fame inductee.

It was the eve of Promotions That ROAR – a MiPPA trade show and end user experience that Kiewiet pitched a decade earlier and has overseen every year since – and what was intended as a pre-show get-together at the stadium's Gridiron Club turned into a

celebration of Kiewiet, who had thought that he had kept his impending retirement under wraps outside of the MiPPA board of directors. Longstanding suppliers showered him with gifts related to his passions; skiing, hiking and fishing.

“He invented this,” Tony Shereda, president of MiPPA’s board of directors and VP of sales and marketing at QMI Group, told the attendees the next morning, just before the trade floor opened.

And make no mistake, it’s one of promo’s premier events. Shereda credits Kiewiet with the industry so commonly using the word “*event*” rather than simply “trade show.” The PPAI Expo may be the industry’s largest event, but at a regional level, Kiewiet has long prickled



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at the idea of hosting what he calls “beige wall” events that overlook the importance of experience in promo. In fact, Kiewiet has run MiPPA with such ambition, that Shereda says its board holds PPAI to Kiewiet’s standard of serving members.

“When we evaluate how PPAI is doing, we evaluate it from that baseline that Paul set here,” Shereda says.

MiPPA is now the second-largest regional association in promotional products, behind only the Specialty Advertising Association of Greater New York, but to say it was once at the bottom doesn’t even begin to describe the shape it was in when Kiewiet took over as executive director in 2012.

“To take an association that was on the brink of extinction to what it is now – the top of the

top regionals – that’s all due to Paul’s creativity and his ability to think outside the box and execute those ideas,” says Charles Duggan, MAS, vice president of North American sales at Goldstar.

PPAI Media tagged along as Kiewiet furiously responded to emails and walked the trade floor of Promotions That ROAR – distributors’ and end users’ field goal attempts going wide left and right on the field below. While he prepared for what he referred to as the “delicious ambiguity” of his future retirement, many people in the stadium were aware that Kiewiet saved MiPPA a decade earlier.

What fewer people knew was the turmoil of Kiewiet’s life before joining MiPPA. How one of promo’s more accomplished distributors came to MiPPA – and how it gave him new purpose –



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is as big a part of the story as the legacy he will be leaving behind.

‘Running On Fumes’

In an industry where the right relationships can sustain entire careers, Kiewiet formed his fair share since founding Promotion Concepts in 1983. Big clients were his bread and butter, and the Kellogg’s account – a white whale of a brand for many – was tied to him, so much so that when he sold the company nearly 25 years after founding it, Kellogg’s was willing to follow him wherever.

In 2007, Kiewiet was chairman of the PPAI Board of Directors, and the vice president of a fast-growing start-up called CorpLogoWare. He had noticed a few red flags at his new employer and was already planning his departure, but he couldn’t have prepared for how his life was about to be upended, both professionally and personally.

Around that time, Kiewiet’s then-wife of 32 years, left him unexpectedly. Within 18 months, a friend who had offered to bring him into his consulting business passed away. Then, the owner of CorpLogoWare, who Kiewiet says owed him six figures in pay, committed suicide.

“My whole world went *poof*,” Kiewiet remembers.

He had moved the Kellogg’s account to Mercury Promotions and was still able to drum up success, but he felt fractured inside.



“I had just landed a \$1.2 million project and that didn’t do anything for me,” Kiewiet says. “That’s what told me I was in the wrong place.”

He sold the majority of what he owned, moved to Chicago with his dog and what fit in his car and tried to focus on writing and public speaking, two passions that brought in income but not at a sustainable level. Eventually he moved back to Michigan, settling in Grand Rapids. That’s when the MiPPA board reached out in 2010, reeling from the unexpected death of its executive director, to inquire about Kiewiet taking over.

“I thought about how I really enjoyed being chairman of PPAI,” Kiewiet says. “I was doing all the things I love doing, and it was keeping me involved with the people I love doing it with.”



The offer, it turns out, was something of a last-ditch effort. The other considerations on the table were merging with another regional association or closing MiPPA's doors altogether. But Kiewiet accepted the challenge. There was, however, a catch: The association had no money.

"It literally had less than \$10,000 left in reserves and was running on fumes," Kiewiet says.

Worse still, his predecessor had not been correctly filing taxes, and in his first few weeks on the job, Kiewiet received a \$5,800 bill from the IRS. For the next two years, he tediously advised the board on digging MiPPA out of its hole, rotating board meetings at the homes of board members.

By 2014, it was time for a risk. Kiewiet proposed an end-user show at Ford Field. Inviting end users to trade shows was still largely frowned upon a decade ago, seen as a typically unsuccessful venture, but Kiewiet wanted to get distributors and their clients to be able to share an experience together and to credit MiPPA for that experience. It was a big swing.

"It's either hit a home run or strike out," says Shereda, who was not on the board at the time. "Striking out meant that MiPPA would go away."

Shereda was actually one of the idea's early

skeptics, uninterested in bringing clients to that first Promotions That ROAR. Now, QMI Group purchases one of the stadium's biggest hospitality suites to host 70 or so clients every year.

That first year, the event was revenue positive. You could say the rest is history, but it was Kiewiet's attention to detail every successive year that grew the event into a must-attend.

"It's good to reflect on how far we've come," Kiewiet said from a Ford Field suite looking out over more than 1,000 people – 800 distributors and end users and 120 exhibiting suppliers.

Jake Wylonis, the director of events on MiPPA's board and president of SWAG Consultants, based in Novi, Michigan, just west of Detroit, says that, at this point, Promotions That ROAR is doing a service to a city that has been trying to revitalize itself for the past 10 years.

"Bringing this event to Ford Field was not only good for MiPPA but good for the city," Wylonis says. "It's great to have all our clients out here and show them what we can do in Detroit."

Massive Change And Opportunity Coming'

It's hard to imagine that anyone who knows Kiewiet, who has since remarried, doubts that



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he still enjoys leading MiPPA and even fewer would claim he couldn’t still do the work – the man climbs mountains, plays pickleball, runs marathon and paddle boards in Lake Michigan.

He’s seen many changes in the promo world, and he’s smart enough to see many more coming.

“This is a totally relationship business, but we’ve seen investment and venture capitalist enter it, which is changing much of the personality of the industry,” Kiewiet says. “Massive change and massive opportunity are all coming together at the same time, but it’s going to be scary for those who are unwilling to look to the future.”

He has taken MiPPA too far to let his own pride hold it back from here.

“I’ll be 72 in January,” Kiewiet says. “There are some skills I don’t have that are going to be necessary for the future, and you need to be looking for those skills.”

His experience on the PPAI Board, which convinced him to become the MiPPA executive director in the first place, has also been his model for vouching for a succession plan. He has been preparing MiPPA’s board for this moment for five years. The association has chosen a new executive director, which will be announced later this year. Kiewiet will help with the transition through December.

“You don’t replace Paul,” Shereda says. “You find a new executive director. There is nobody with his industry knowledge, his networking and his ability to pick up the phone and call the CEO of PCNA or Gemline.”



For his part, Kiewiet won’t hear anything of big shoes to fill.

“I took the association from bankruptcy to one of the leading regionals, and the question to ask is ‘where do we take it from here?’” Kiewiet says.

As he takes a rest at the hospitality suite, having been putting out fires with a friendly face for the past 72 hours, he’s willing to reflect on the emotion of walking away.

“This industry’s a huge part of my life,” Kiewiet says. “It’s my social life. It’s my friends. It’s my acquaintances. But I’ll have to work at building new social connections and new friendships.”

But as the event winds down, he’s still a bit miffed at the headache caused by a malfunction in the event’s app, and he knows that the show doesn’t really end when it ends if you’re in charge; he’ll be cleaning up for the next few days.

For months, he’s been ambiguous to anyone who has asked “what’s next?” But in this moment of fatigue, he’s achieved some clarity.

“Today, I’ve been answering, ‘I’m going to do whatever I want.’ And that’s the right answer.” ●

Auping is a news editor at PPAI.