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Leadership awardee a self-proclaimed contrarian

Thomasson: Still Thinking Independently

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Thomasson

If you notice someone whizzing by in a near-blur at AAPG's [annual convention](#) in Denver, it may well be geologist and AAPG member Ray Thomasson.

The noted explorationist is going to be a mighty busy fellow at this year's confab.

For starters, he's tapped to receive the Michel T. Halbouty Outstanding Leadership Award. That alone is enough to give him a VHP – Very High Profile – in Denver.

But that's just part of the story.

He'll also speak at the Monday afternoon [Discovery Thinking Forum](#) as well as co-chair the Tuesday morning session on [Global Climate Change](#).

He'll also be wearing the hats – ribbons, actually – of past AAPG president, past Advisory Board chair and Honorary Member.

Sounds like a conventional Association man, right?

You may be surprised, then, to see that Thomasson, who is president and owner of Denver-based Thomasson Partner Associates, has tagged his Forum presentation “Challenge Dogma – Question the Answer.”

It’s a fitting title in that it has been the mantra of this self-proclaimed contrarian throughout his career.

Preparation

Thomasson joined Shell Oil Co. fresh out of college. He spent a number of years with the company honing his exploration skills and philosophy.

Following a stint as manager of planning economics and forecasting in the United States, Shell moved him to London to take charge of strategic studies, which entailed formulating recommendations for how much each organization within the company should spend based on scenario planning.

“What I learned is no one can predict the future,” he said, “and it’s really important to plan within a range of futures.

“For instance, when you hear all say the price of oil and gas has to go up in some rather non-typical fashion, be careful – because they’re almost always wrong,” Thomasson noted.

“When all are going in one direction be very careful,” he said, “and be sure to be prepared for everything going in the other direction.”

The wisdom of such thinking hits home when he cites the example of not having all your money in the stock market in late 2007.

Principle

Thomasson noted it’s a principle to challenge dogma, but the other part of that is to question the answers because when something is analyzed there frequently will be a series of answers that can be very wrong as well.

“It’s a philosophy,” he said, “and where I applied it in a particularly important way was in 1986 when the oil and gas world was in shambles because of prices.

“Everybody in the Rocky Mountains was in a catastrophic state, and all the majors and many of the independents left Denver for Houston,” Thomasson said. “That’s when I moved from Houston to Denver, and it’s worked exceedingly well.

“The majors had looked at opportunities in the Rockies incorrectly,” he asserted, “because they didn’t understand the character of the potential.

“The resource pyramid (see below) had been introduced in 1976,” Thomasson noted. “I realized how important that was, and the Rockies have a series of reservoirs that were further down on the resource pyramid.

“As technology improved and/or if prices went up, we could expose ourselves to giant accumulations – and that’s what happened,” he said. “In the last 15 years, there have been 10 or more giant fields of more than one Tcfg or 100 MMbo found in the Rockies, such as Jonah and Pinedale.

“That kind of potential was what I could dream of,” Thomasson added. “I didn’t know it was going to happen, but could certainly visualize that it could happen.

“That’s an example of the contrarian in me,” he noted, “and it has worked very well.”

This veteran explorer is a strong believer in teamwork and the team concept, which was not even a glimmer on the exploration horizon during his early days at Shell.

He penned a paper on synergistic exploration in 1980 and noted that most companies were starting to use the team approach by the late 1980s and early 1990s.

“Many still had not been able to apply the idea of all individuals working on multiple teams,” Thomasson said. “At Thomasson Partner Associates, we have taken this concept to a very high level, and the principle reason this works so well is because we apply the play concept, which requires many different disciplines.”

Thomasson’s list of attributes that are must-haves for explorationists:

- Curiosity: Curious people turn over the extra stone and acquire information that enables extra insight.
- Basic data: Channel that curiosity into digging out all the basic data; don’t rely on unchecked interpreted data.
- Problem solving: Understand the problem, and then the creative mind will only be satisfied after returning to the basic original data.
- Vision: Ability to see the big picture and visualize the importance of major opportunities and constraints.
- Think big: This is the emphasis at Thomasson Partner Associates.
- Persistence: This is all important, particularly in the face of adversity.
- Technology and art: Exploration incorporates science and technology, but exploration is an art – at the end of the day you should also trust your experienced gut, which is invaluable. If there is a conflict, check out the technology once more.
- Passion and enthusiasm: Great explorationists are passionate about what they do.
- Optimism: There is no substitute for optimism.
- Take risk and mitigate it: Spread your investment over a number of projects; big successes will cover the many failures.

- Challenge dogma: Explorationists have had dogma preached to them on an ongoing basis, and it is usually wrong, e.g., after 19 dry holes, there can't be anything big in Bay Marchand.
- Question the answers: The most important question may not be "do we know for certain the play concept can work," but instead "do we know for certain the play concept can't work."