

Economic Booster Shot?

by Dean K. Wilson, P.E.

I am going to take a bit of a break from my usual technical discussion this issue in order to answer a question that is a bit more philosophical in nature. Next issue, I will return to my more normal format.

***Question:* With the current drop in the U.S. economy, what impact can we anticipate this drop will have on the business of fire protection? Is there any way we can get a booster shot?**

Answer: One advantage I obtain from having lived a relatively long time, and from having devoted virtually all of my adult life to a single industry (fire protection), is that I have gained a certain level of insight and perspective from having watched the impact of “change” on that industry. So, let me begin by saying, “We will get through this time of economic downturn.” And, I would like to boldly suggest that we will get through this best if we stick together. Let me explain what I mean.

Typically, during economic downturns, professions that provide essential safety services, including the various aspects of the fire protection business, remain stronger than the rest of the businesses in the economy. This comes about because the owners of facilities that routinely use new fire alarm, automatic sprinkler, special hazard extinguishing, or other similar protective

systems tend to use times of economic stress to make doubly certain that their facilities can continue to provide whatever goods or services it provides.

At a time when manufacturing facilities may place orders for new equipment on hold, they tend to invest more money in making certain the equipment they do have remains in top operating condition. An interesting part of this phenomenon arises when those same manufacturing facilities who laid off maintenance employees at the beginning of the downturn, now must seek outside companies to perform essential services to do what some of those laid off workers could have done if they had not been laid off. This, naturally, presents a business opportunity to outside companies.

Similarly, in the world of the Authorities Having Jurisdiction (AHJs), the various governmental bodies—who may have tried to reduce staff to counter falling tax revenues and rising expenditures—often find themselves overwhelmed by submittals for review and requests to witness tests. These requests come from facilities that have decided to upgrade their fire protection systems as a hedge against the business interruption resulting from a fire.

If a particular fire marshal, or fire inspector, has made an effort to perform in an exemplary manner, has developed a solid relationship with the fire protection vendors in his or her jurisdiction, has provided a high level of customer service to the taxpayers, this individual will often have somewhat of a “shield of protection” against layoff. It is one of those cases where investing in doing a good job, with a consistent level of excellence, pays off over the long term.

A similar state of being prevails for those companies that provide fire protection system design, installation, and service. If they have maintained a suitable level of excellence, have offered a high level of customer service, have demonstrated a responsiveness to customer needs, have anticipated problems that might occur at the facilities they service, have offered good quality

products at fair and reasonable prices, they will continue to receive orders. And, these companies may even find that their level of business will increase during a time of economic crisis.

Sound businesses providing fire protection services, and governmental agencies overseeing the code compliance of those fire protection services, typically thrive during times of economic downturn. The very fact that these subsets of the business and governmental communities provide essential protective services, in turn provides a natural “booster shot” against economic failure.

So, how do we survive? How do you survive by “sticking together?”

First of all, you must determine to continue to learn about and understand the codes and standards that impact the particular type of fire protection systems we provide. We must take advantage of every opportunity for training. Thinking you won’t spend money to get trained on the latest updates to the codes and standards? Scrap that notion! This is a time to maximize your training.

Likewise, keep your professional networks strong. Keep in touch with your colleagues. Read the magazines and journals. Maintain every possible contact to keep abreast with the latest developments in your particular field of fire protection. Determine to become the most knowledgeable contactor or AHJ in your area.

Maintain a strong work ethic. Hire the best people. Provide the most comprehensive customer service. Go the “second and third miles” when a customer asks for your help. Position yourself and your business as providing wise solutions to your customers’ problems. Emphasize excellence in all that you do.

Strategize ways to work with your colleagues to take advantage of sharing goods and services to get a lower price. Streamline your business processes. Maximize the efficiency of your

operation. Find new and innovative ways to accomplish routine tasks. Make “continuous improvement” a hallmark of your business practices.

Whether you work as an AHJ or design, install, or service fire protection systems, you can make yourself and your organization stand apart. By providing the best possible service, you will not only survive during this time of economic downturn, you will thrive. Yes, thrive!

Let *that* be your “booster shot.”

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