

“Why should we comply with the Code?”

by Dean K. Wilson, P.E.

As the managing partner in a very large fire alarm installation company, I constantly scour the internet to find articles that I think will help me serve my customers better and also increase the profits for my company’s owners. In my searching, I have come across your articles for the *IMSA Journal*. I note that you seem to strive to offer technically accurate answers to questions posed by fire alarm technicians and by Authorities Having Jurisdiction (AHJs). As I read your articles, I continually find myself wondering, “Why should I comply with the Code?” Can you offer me an incentive?

First of all, where the local jurisdiction has adopted model building codes, model fire codes, and thus, NFPA 72-2013, *National Fire Alarm and Signaling Code*, you must comply because the statute says you must.

Secondly, and perhaps far more importantly, you indicate that you want to serve your customers better. What better way to do this than to provide those customers with Code-complying fire alarm systems?

However, to try to give you a more detailed answer, I believe I will choose to begin this first article of a new year with a more philosophical answer, rather than a technical one. You see, when you provide Code-complying fire alarm systems your efforts represent a striving for excellence. And, “excellence” is a mark of a true professional.

What are those qualities that clearly make one individual or organization appear professional when compared to his or her peers? I want to suggest that among those key items which point to professionalism is an overwhelming “commitment to excellence.”

Excellence has become a very popular topic for motivational speakers and writers during the last three decades or so. Countless books, newspaper articles, magazine features, and many, many speeches have been made about the quality of a commitment to excellence. Even the military has taken up this theme some years ago with a snappy jingle that accompanies an action-packed video extolling the virtue of a soldier’s career: “Be all that you can be, in the Aaaaarrrrr-meeeeee”

And yet, everywhere we go, we bump straight up against a host of people and organizations who, day in and day out, perform at some level below a high standard of excellence. Let me offer two examples.

Example one: Back when I traveled regularly, I had an experience where it took me four phone calls, speaking each time to a different travel consultant, to try to get a large national travel agency to process my ticket as a full-coach fare. Because I am a Delta Airlines “Million Miler,” having such a ticket would allow me to upgrade my very lengthy flight to first class. I finally got the ticket in the mail and, you guessed it, one segment of the ticket was *not* coded as a “Y.” I wanted to scream, but then thought better of it.

Example two: I eat far too many meals at *McDonald’s*, purposefully choosing the smiling Ronald over the other fast food establishments. My standard order is two single cheeseburgers with extra cheese and extra onions and a large diet coke. I always use the drive-thru because of my limited mobility. Many years ago, when I lived in Connecticut, upon placing my order, the exchange with the order-taker would go something like this:

“Would you like fries with that?”

“Are they free?” I had learned to ask.

“No, of course not!” the startled order-taker replied.

“Then I guess I’ll just stick with what I ordered,” I responded.

After I paid at the first window and picked up my food at the second window, what do you suppose I found in the bag when I opened it? Well it varied, but only about one-third of the time did I get two cheeseburgers with extra cheese and extra onions. I have even watched a grill person in the Cincinnati Airport *McDonald’s* announce my order correctly, as he laid the wrapped burgers on the stainless steel burger trough. I heard my order repeated accurately by the order taker as she slid them into the bag. But, when I reached a place to sit, I discovered no extra cheese and no onions whatsoever. And, of course, I didn’t just sit down to eat, I sat down to eat with great anticipation!

Somewhere in this chain of events—from order taker to grill person to shift supervisor to store manager—someone did not have a commitment to excellence. And, I, the customer, did not receive that for which I paid extra!

Is it so very different in the field of fire alarm design, installation, maintenance, and testing—or in the field of inspecting fire alarm systems, if you’re an AHJ?

Let’s say, for example, that someone contacts you and invites you to provide a bid for a new fire alarm system. Does a mechanism in your company or organization kick in to assure that all along the chain of events—from the moment of this initial contact until you deliver the fire alarm system product or service and the AHJ accepts it—every person who becomes involved with providing the fire alarm system product or service has a commitment to excellence?

Or, if you serve as the AHJ and receive a set of plans for a new fire alarm system, does a mechanism within your office kick in to assure that all along the chain of events—from the moment

you receive the plans until you witness the acceptance test and issue your final approval—every person who becomes involved in the review and approval process has a commitment to excellence?

Now I'm certainly not just talking about lip service to some pie-in-the-sky vision of "excellence." Practically everyone I know gives lip service to the importance of a commitment to excellence. No, I'm talking about a group of "can do" people deciding it is worth their while to provide a fire alarm product or service using quality materials in a quality manner, and to do it right the first time.

Customers truly do want the best fire alarm product or service delivery possible. Even if they are operating with budget restrictions, they still expect that, whatever they buy, you will provide that fire alarm product or service properly with care and attention to detail—that is, with "excellence."

A commitment to excellence impacts significantly on the false alarm problem that has given fire alarm systems such a bad name. If you commit yourself and your organization to provide the best system you can, and you further commit yourself and your company to maintain that system in top condition throughout its useful life, then by your commitment to excellence you have taken an important step in the process of eliminating false alarms.

So, how does one internalize "excellence"? The commitment to excellence seems to come, either as a result of several very painful lessons where a failure to perform in an excellent manner resulted in a disaster, or it comes from a personal value that determines where others err, you will not.

Whichever force motivates you, I would encourage you to actively seek to cultivate a commitment to excellence. This includes making every effort to provide Code-complying fire alarm systems for your customers!

Somehow I can't help but think that such an attitude will reap many, many rewards.

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