

## In My Opinion...

Dean Says:

### **Licensed Trunk Slammer?**



Charlene Kidder

Over the years, throughout the pages of this newsletter, we have made it a point to take swipes at the workmanship of a particular category of fire alarm installer that we refer to as “trunk slammers.” We have done this because we very much want to encourage the highest possible level of quality workmanship by individuals committed to code-complying fire alarm system installations.

Recently, I encountered a new type of trunk slammer. This one includes a license or registration issued by a state government. I am talking about an engineering firm that presumes to design fire protection for a facility without the actual education, knowledge, training, or experience to do so.

The story begins when one of my most valued fire alarm installer friends calls and asks if I have time to review some drawings and specifications he has received on a new office building. When he arrives, he shows me drawings prepared by a particular consulting engineering firm.

The drawings show a fire alarm system for this three-story building that

includes a few smoke detectors, manual fire alarm boxes at each exit, but no notification appliances. The drawings list a possible option for the installation of an automatic sprinkler system in the building. A licensed professional engineer has duly stamped the drawings. The corporate name seems vaguely familiar.

I check my files and find that several years ago this same engineering firm had designed the mechanical systems, including the fire protection, for the renovation of a public school building. My brother-in-law, in his role as president of the school board for that small town, had asked me to review the drawings and offer my comments.

I compiled a list of 47 items that needed attention. The biggest item on the list stemmed from the design of the fire alarm system. It far exceeded the requirements of the codes and standards. It provided so many “bells and whistles” that I feared the complexity of the system would overwhelm those who would have to use that system in the daily life of this building.

After I provided my comments to my brother-in-law, I received a telephone call from the individual at this engineering firm who had designed the fire protection system. He was very, very irate. How dare I question his designs? Didn't I realize that these drawings had been reviewed by the State Board of Education?

I told him that, with all due respect and as far as I could determine, no one working at the State Board of Education had the education, training, or professional registration as a fire protection engineer. I seriously doubted that anyone there would have a sufficient background to review the efficacy of the designs. I further suggested that since his design

had greatly exceeded what would normally serve a public school occupancy, I was as concerned about wasted taxpayer's money, as I was concerned about the adequacy of the protection.

In great anger, he hung up on me. So, here I was, a few years later, looking at yet another design that missed the mark. My installer friend and I looked up the engineering firm on the internet. We discovered that the firm had five principals. Four held registration as professional engineers – two electrical, one mechanical, and one civil. And, the principal with whom I had previously dealt, and whose design I was now reviewing, held a “Certification in Plumbing Engineering (CIPE).”

Now the CIPE represents a reasonable accomplishment. The American Society of Plumbing Engineers has changed the designation CIPE to CPD (Certified in Plumbing Design). They state on their website that “The Certified in Plumbing Design” designation or CPD is not the same as Professional Engineer registration (P.E.). “Having the CPD designation does not confer upon an individual the right to sign drawings or specifications, or to use the designation, *Engineer*, in states where this is restricted by law.”

No wonder the design failed to meet the building code requirements. No wonder the design failed to meet the requirements of NFPA 72-2007, *National Fire Alarm Code*. Now, some of you may think that this is simply a case where I have a preconceived negative bias toward this individual because of the conflict I had with him over the public school design. While I did not appreciate the tongue lashing he gave me over that design, I had long ago chosen not to hold a grudge. I do, however, feel very passionate about insisting on using qualified designers to design fire protection systems. How can we expect to maintain a reasonable level of quality if the fundamental design does not incorporate those features that will set an appropriately high initial level of quality?

For all intents and purposes, I

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## Dean Says...

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believe I have discovered a new type of trunk slammer. This one sports unqualified designers. And, it includes one or more registered engineers willing to stamp or seal drawings without having the basic qualifications to design fire protection systems. Even though such action clearly violates the "Code of Ethics for Professional Engineers," it has become all too common.

So, what should we do about it? My friend the fire alarm installer decided to quote the job three ways. One way meets the design submitted by the engineering firm. However, he stated in his transmittal letter to the building owner that he would not execute that design. In other words, he would not install the fire alarm system as designed. He supplied the quote simply to give the owner the information for price comparison purposes.

The second quote included meeting the codes and standards with a cost-effective fire alarm system design. The third quote included a design that would integrate with an automatic sprinkler system, should the owner choose to install sprinklers.

It is quite likely that my friend will not get this job. But, he has maintained his professional integrity. And, he has helped educate another building owner about proper fire alarm system design. For my money, my friend is a better man for taking this position.

As to the engineering firm? I say, "A pox upon them!"

**Questions?**  
We've got answers!

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