



In my opinion...

DEAN SAYS:

Mostly I feel abandoned

"Customers like attention. If you want to keep regular accounts regular, the only way to do it is by keeping in touch with them." So begins a motivational article in the December 15, 1988 issue of *Sales Upbeat*, a publication of The Economics Press, Fairfield, NJ.

I guess it was an advertisement in a recent issue of NFPA's *Fire Journal* that started me thinking about good salesmanship. In this ad I spotted yet another new signaling product that fell into a category that has grown to immense proportions. That is the "I-heard-it-through-the-grapevine" category. In other words, rather than learning about some new product or service directly from the manufacturer, vendor or installer, I had to read about it in a magazine, hear about it from some other contact in the industry, or, worst case scenario: have it called to my attention by one of my employer's systems reviewers as he comes to me for my comments.

It seems to me that years ago manufacturers flocked to my door, literally inundating me with information on new products. Why I can remember writing

countless letters both commending manufacturers on their innovations and offering constructive criticisms drawn from my extensive field experience with systems. In fact, several manufacturers routinely submitted information on products that were still in the "bread board" stage, even before they had approached either UL or FMRC for listing. These manufacturers seemed to value that field experience and welcome my suggestions.

I'm not sure what "queered the deal," as my salesman father would have labeled it. But something has changed. I don't know what it is, so I am left to merely cry out in frustration, hoping that someone out there in the signaling systems manufacturing world will hear and respond.

Now lest I paint a picture that is not completely accurate, I must admit that I am not *totally* ignored. There is one very large manufacturer who invites me to a semiprivate showing of future products during the NFPA annual meeting each year. These folks do solicit my suggestions and have even implemented some of them. However, while I may be privileged to see the product in its pre-release stage, once it is put out into the market place, I am never sent any literature or printed information, and usually only find out that it has been released through some third, fourth or fifth party source. Let me hasten to add that I do not wish to be perceived as ungrateful. This particular manufacturer has been exceedingly

gracious to me over the years. It's just that their follow up when one of their products is released needs some attention.

And there is another smaller firm that specializes in the industrial realm that has maintained a close relationship by means of frequent telephone calls, usually to solicit assistance in solving some esoteric special hazards problem. In the past, these folks have shared a wealth of information and welcomed my input, but lately, they too, amidst the pressure of a highly competitive market place, have released some products that I didn't know about until some third party source proposed using the products.

Why have I been abandoned? Well in at least one case almost a decade ago, my relationship with a manufacturer cooled because the claims department of my employer instituted a subrogation suit against the manufacturer as part of the settlement of a claim arising out of a fire/explosion loss incident. Though I told the manufacturer several times that such action was (and is) taken without any consultation with me whatsoever, I'm not sure the manufacturer believed me. Insurance companies traditionally and rightly keep claims operations strictly separate from loss prevention operations.

Had I been an outside consultant hired by the attorneys to review the facts of the incident, I most likely would have advised against subrogation. And, in fact, the manufacturer prevailed in court, but their cost in defending the action was estimated to be in the upper hundreds of thousands of dollars. No wonder I became somewhat isolated from these folks. I am happy to say that time has been healing the wounds with them, but things are not what they once were.

But that is just one case. What about all the others? I suspect that I am not the only Authority Having Jurisdiction to feel isolated and uninformed. Perhaps the press of daily business, the pressure to sell products to paying customers, the perception that "once the product is sold, then we'll worry about the AHJ" is pervasive. Sadly, such a marketing strategy

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ignores the influence that the AHJ does have on potential customers. While an AHJ would be most unwise to openly prefer particular products or services over others, there is no question that personal preferences of an AHJ somehow always tend to become known during the course of any sustained contact with an end user.

It is also true that the manufacturer who has taken the time to cultivate a relationship with the Authority Having Jurisdiction will usually be able to obtain an approval for a particular job with

significantly less hassle than one who has not made such an investment ahead of time. I am much more willing to quickly accept the use of a product to which I have been previously and favorably exposed. Aren't you?

In the last issue I urged fellow Authorities Having Jurisdiction to recognize their need to stop "contractor bashing" and determine to take a more active role in building a positive relationship with manufacturers, vendors and installers of signaling systems. I guess my plea this month is directed to the other side — the manufacturers, vendors and installers of fire alarm and

burglary signaling systems. Please make a conscious and specific effort to keep the lines of communication open to the various Authorities Having Jurisdiction with whom you must deal. Let us know about your new products so we don't have to find out about them from other sources. And, yes, if you desire our input on future products, feel free to ask for it. I, at least, delight in an opportunity to offer suggestions on how to make a product more useful in real life applications. □

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