



In my opinion...

DEAN SAYS:

One Won't Really Do

"Don't you think," the journalist with a major security industry magazine asked, "that it would really be much better if a single organization coordinated all the varying interests represented by the several existing trade associations?"

While I was tempted to say "yes," as I thought about her question, I realized that more careful consideration would force me to answer "no."

Different associations are necessary because the needs of the consumers of alarm services vary so widely. Private fire alarm service, for example, originated in the 1800s with the needs of facilities insured under the Highly Protected Risk (HPR) property insurance plan. Under this plan, unoccupied portions of the insured facility had to be under surveillance at all times. As fire alarm systems began to replace watchman service, the need for a very high level of fire alarm systems for property protection from decidedly service-oriented providers resulted in a deeply-wedged, yet lucrative, niche market.

The 1958 *Our Lady of the Angels*

school fire dramatically focused national attention on a host of important life safety-related fire protection features, including the need for fire alarm systems that would warn occupants so they might promptly and safely evacuate a building.

Through the 1960s and even into the early 1980s, model building codes began to recognize the value of fire alarm systems. In most cases, the applications were an extension of an already well-settled user-base of life safety-oriented consumers.

An ever-awakening fire service, challenged by budget cuts that began in the 1970s and continue to this day, sought to apply fire alarm technology to a host of commercial, multi-residential, and high rise occupancies. Here the concerns were slanted toward life safety, but were also seen as a clear adjunct to manual fire suppression.

It is not at all unlikely then to see how the various trade associations have developed to address the various categories of users.

The Automatic Fire Alarm Association, and its close ally the National Electrical Manufacturers Association, have focused on the building codes and the application of fire detection and alarm systems to life safety.

While today the interest of most members of the Central Station Alarm Association appears to lean somewhat more toward the residential and small commercial marketplace, and somewhat

more toward security than fire alarm, it seeks to effectively liaison with numerous security and fire alarm Authorities Having Jurisdiction, and to address issues specific to central station service.

The National Burglar and Fire Alarm Association has long sought to effectively support the desire of its many members—the majority of whom at least began as single-owner small businesses—to pool their resources to enjoy the educational, training, and representational benefits of a large organization. Traditionally, NBFAA has leaned toward security, though recent efforts to refocus on fire alarm has resulted in significant and laudable activity. The strength in numbers that NBFAA has brought to bear in the legislative arena over several issues, but most particularly the entrance into the alarm industry of the Regional Bell Operating Companies, has been unparalleled.

The Security Industry Association has given the manufacturers of security equipment a voice outside the framework of NEMA that can focus on specific security issues, and even initiate some standards for which recognition as American National Standards through the American National Standards Institute is being sought.

The Professional Alarm Services Organizations of North America, while still in its infancy, brings together—under the single banner of codes and standards compliance—manufacturers of fire alarm and security equipment, alarm service providers, and both public and private Authorities Having Jurisdiction. PASONA's impact, if only to stir more interest in codes and standards compliance among the other trade associations, has certainly been felt.

Are all these organizations needed? Yes. Because the job at hand is probably too big for anyone group. Should every company join every association it is eligible to join? Probably not. I suggest that each company should use its business plan as a guide. Whatever part of the marketplace you seek to penetrate should point you toward an appropriate association. Just make sure you wholeheartedly support whichever one you join. □

**The Moore-Wilson
SIGNALING
REPORT**

**November/December 1993
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