

# 2008 E-Biz Forum

Devotees of digital information immersed themselves in this annual meeting of the tribes.

The 2008 E-Biz Forum marked IDEA's 10th anniversary, but at this year's meeting, held Sept. 14-16 on the Maryland bank of the Potomac River, attendees and organizers spent more of their time peering forward into the future rather than celebrating past accomplishments. Indeed, outside of enjoying a toast and several speeches at the IDEA Anniversary Gala banquet, attendees were immersed in an intriguing mix of seminars and presentations that provided food for thought about how IDEA and e-commerce in the electrical industry will evolve.

The new Gaylord Convention Center complex in National Harbor, Md., where the meeting was held was an apt symbol for the new infrastructure that will fuel the e-commerce world of tomorrow. The gigantic facility epitomized the new wave of design in conference and convention centers, with sun-swept atriums that housed two major conferences and trade shows in addition to the IDEA meeting. A few steps outside the facility, a new town was being built, with hotels, shops, restaurants, a marina and other small businesses.

Seminar attendees spent two days trying to create a roadmap that could help them navigate a new world of e-business in the electrical market while attending sessions that included, "Beyond EDI, the Next Generation of eBusiness;" "Business Dimensions of Data Synchronization;" and "Data Supply vs. Demand." One recurring theme continued to be the need for more manufacturers to provide high-quality and enriched product data to distributors and the need for

companies at all levels to make better use of EDI. In a panel discussion the first morning, panelists and attendees openly debated the causes and effects of continuing problems with manufacturer product data — both the difficulties for manufacturers in gathering, organizing and transmitting the data and the difficulties created for distributors when the data are wrong or incomplete.

Michael Rogers, the "Futurist in Residence" for *The New York Times*, told attendees they would have to learn to adapt to a world of e-commerce that's moving fast toward ever-more portable computers and related communication devices and a wireless infrastructure. He said that WiFi and WiMax Internet services would be so pervasive within the next 10 to 15 years that not getting an Internet signal would be the equivalent of being without electrical power today. Of particular interest to electrical distributors was his forecast that all of their delivery trucks will eventually have tiny GPS chips that would tell headquarters

any truck's exact location, how long it has been idling, how much gas it has burned and many other performance and delivery factors.

The 2008 E-Business Forum also offered a full slate of business-oriented seminars. Don Leavens, vice president and chief economist, National Electrical Manufacturers Association, Rosslyn, Va., gave an interesting analysis of current and future business conditions in the electrical market. He doesn't expect any real improvement in the economy until excess housing inventory is cleaned up and homebuilders can start building new homes again, and the federal government and Wall Street get a handle on the credit crisis in the financial market.

Leavens expects nonresidential construction to slide significantly in 2009 and slow its rate of decline in 2010. He is more optimistic about the electrical industry overall, which he expects to recover in 2010 after a double-digit decline in 2009.

In other news at the 2008 E-Business Forum, IDEA awarded its Richard Buzun Award for innovation in e-commerce to Leviton Manufacturing Co. Inc., Little Neck, N.Y., and Van Meter Industrial, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The 2009 E-Biz Forum will be held in September 2009 at the Westin La Paloma, Tuscon, Ariz. ■



During the E-Biz Forum's panel on data synchronization, Eaton's Ray Huber, Viking Electric Supply's Greg Hames, Denise Keating of DATAgility and moderator Gene Randall discussed how clean data can eliminate costly errors.

By Jim Lucy and Doug Chandler