

The future of selling

Consumer expectations are changing—and we'd better be ready. **by Joe Salimando**

It's not easy to sit through the first session that follows lunch at a typical industry meeting. Post-meal, the human body just wants to walk away from anyone making any noise, find a safe quiet corner, and nap. But it'd be a safe bet to say that those who attended at least one of the post-lunch sessions at IDEA's 2008 E-Biz Forum, held in Washington, D.C. in September, had no trouble staying awake.

Andy Fedun, whose experience includes time with ASCO and Rumsey Electric and who is soon leaving his consulting firm to go into alternative energy, presented "The Future of Selling—Are You Ready for This?" In the presentation, he offered a vision of the future that explains the necessity of what the electrical industry is doing (or trying to do) in its collective e-biz efforts—and why it should hurry up and get it done.

According to Fedun, societal and technological developments are going to drive this industry—and all others—to get its act together on the e-biz front.

Primarily, he talked about the B2C experience. Shopping online leads consumers to certain high-level expectations of a company—and some of these consumers are, or will soon become, electrical professionals and electrical product buyers.

"Gen X and Y don't have any loyalty to people or brand," Fedun commented, explaining that they're loyal "only to information availability and search experience."

Add this up and the e-biz dream—having manufacturer product information in the counter person's computer match what's on the company's website, what's in its flyer, and what's in the manufacturer's catalog—seems to go from "nice-to-have" to "must-have." Fedun's restatement of this dream is that the industry now needs "one reliable fact, managed in one place, and syndicated to all customer touch points—systematically."

For many, it's a scary prediction. And while it's not clear when consumer ex-

pectations will drive buyers in the electrical field to expect one heck of a lot more than they are getting, it's coming.

Fedun was crystallizing the idea that the electrical industry's slow progress on attributed data will result in electrical

buyers who are unhappy with distributors. The culprits: missing data, conflicting data, and an absence of good data.

If and when these electrical buyers get information from one medium that does not match what they were led to expect from another, Fedun said, they'll be ripe candidates for an alternative source that has its data act together. ■

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THERE'S STILL WORK TO BE DONE

If there was one big message from IDEA's 2008 E-Biz Forum, it was this: While electrical distribution might still be ahead of most other industries on the "e" front, there's still a lot of work to be done.

Some noteworthy comments:

- "The [EDI form] 855 is one of the unsung heroes. It takes cost out of the process. It tells us anticipated ship dates. It tells us [using a vendor's software] about delays, so we can take action if we need to," said Marilee Anderson, e-business coordinator for Kirby Risk Electrical Supply of Lafayette, Ind.

- "Fifty percent to 70% of the sales volume in the electrical industry goes 'lights out' through e-business systems," said Steve Bieszczat of Activant Solutions, who also had this to say about attributed data: "I think it will have to be a distributor-run effort. Manufacturers are too competitive to come together and provide a set-up for all kinds of attributes that go with each product item."

- David Starr, e-catalog manager at McNaughton-McKay Electric of Detroit, noted that an IDEA committee is working on building out the schema for attributed data, using UNSPSC codes. (Note that the Aug. 13 issue of *This Week in IDEA* provided information about these codes; see it at <http://snipurl.com/3rex.b>)

- On data synchronization: "Tests that match up manufacturer and distributor data (in 2007) found improvement over a similar check in 2003," Denise Keating of Datagility noted. "Yet as much as 50% of manufacturer product offerings did not show up in distributor systems."

Additional coverage of the E-Biz Forum—focusing on a session whose speakers were Crescent Electric Supply's Ron Schlader and Hubbell's Phil Barrios—can be found at <http://www.tedmag.com/common/webnewslink.asp?currentpage=6476>.

And for more Forum on the web:

- Presentations (in PDF format) are at idea-esolutions.com/ebizforum/resources/2008. (IDEA also plans to post some videos from the event to that web page.)

- A video celebrating IDEA's 10-year history is available at idea-esolutions.com/about-us/experience-idea.

- IDEA's 2009 E-Biz Forum will be held Sept. 22-24 in Tucson, Ariz. —J.S.