

Find Your Focus and Keep It

BY PETER E. FRAYER

Let me introduce myself. You may know me by name; it is listed above as the author of this article. But who am I really? Well, as it turns out, after toiling for over forty years in the fire protection business I have graduated to the role of old guy. I am the old guy with a lot of colorful stories and I am an old guy who still has a job. And I believe this old guy still has something to say and something to contribute. When you carry the title of old guy I am told you also get an automatic license to ramble about the past and tell people how to succeed in the future. Hopefully these ramblings will be meaningful and perhaps even helpful.

I have been on both sides of the business. I have worked for a couple of manufacturers and several distributors. I have worked in both direct sales and have had numerous support roles. I have worked in marketing, sales, engineering, research and development, system design and have been involved in hundreds of system installations. I have sold, installed and serviced both portable extinguishers and fixed fire systems. I have had some jobs that worked me physically and others that have challenged my brain. All of this work has been rewarding and I have learned a lot. I probably most enjoyed my years as a marketing guy where we plowed the way for several new products that eventually became industry standards.

Things are not that much different today than they were back when I started in 1967. Distributors are best suited for direct customer contact and usually understand how a product must function throughout its serviceable life. Manufacturers are best suited in a mar-



keting role and at manufacturing equipment (especially in volume). Quality is best built into the product at the factory and a good installation, with periodic service, will insure that a product has a long and trouble free service life. Therefore, quality is everyone's job.

As I mentioned, the job I enjoyed most was making the phone ring. That's what we called it in the marketing department. As manufacturers we understood that the result of good marketing was when a customer called our distributor and asked for our product. And we knew that if we did a complete job we could count on our distributor being brand loyal because he knew who generated the phone calls.

As I look back the best times have

always been when everyone understood their role. Manufacturers create, produce and market fire protection solutions. Distributors sell, install and maintain completed products. Distributors understand local markets and codes. Manufacturers understand national influences and can usually get a product accepted or specified. Everyone has a clearly defined role.

I remember Bill Healy from Detroit, Michigan. Sadly he has passed away, but he will always remain in my memory as a senior statesman in our industry. I was fortunate enough to know him and we spent enough time together that I learned a lot from him. One of his favorite expressions was "delivered as advertised." What it meant was "tell a

consumer what you can do (and cannot do) then deliver to that expectation.” He understood what a distributor could deliver because he was one. He knew what strengths he had in-house, and because he had spent years with a manufacturer he also knew many manufacturer’s strengths. He knew his success would result when he married what he could buy with what he had to build. He knew that without his door knocking, a manufacturer would sell nothing, but at the same time he would be impotent if he had to build everything in-house. He was an early pioneer in the engineered systems business when there really was no engineered systems business. His in-house capabilities were legendary. He built things himself that today we able to buy right off the shelf. I credit Bill with helping me understand how to be successful. He had mastered an understanding of who he was and what his capabilities were and where he needed to go to make a complete package. With this understanding he “delivered as advertised” and never disappointed his customers.

This is why I say that everyone has a role and everyone needs to understand what that role is and how it fits into the overall scheme of things. Frictions can develop when people or companies get into each other’s functions. My advice to everyone is to understand your roles and be focused, so you capitalize on your strengths. A good business person (or company) is someone that understands who they are, what their business is, and how to capitalize on both for fun and profit.

Oh, by the way, today I am employed by a well-established distributor with a defined business focus that knows how to take good care of our geographic trade area. We specialize in pre-engineered system installation and maintenance. I am the Service Manager and the inside technical/historic reference person. I maintain my humor by thinking of my job as being a “cat herder.” I have 14 service technicians and 6 incoming phone lines so I stay busy. To manage that number of contact points it is essential that I stay focused. I am able to do so because I understand my role and the roles of everyone around me. I found my focus and I try to keep it. ▽

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