

Shouldn't we (all of us) be talking?

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In my last column I questioned why more people in our industry are not openly asking questions about our collective future. I mentioned I would address this issue this time around, so here it goes. One thing we can do is face the future squarely through collaborative dialogue among all channel partners. Here are a few examples of "collaborative dialogue."

Sales meeting discussion

Recently we (United Sales Associates) had our 10th Annual "Invitational" Sales Meeting in Cincinnati. Included in the meeting were end-users (safety directors), distributors (president and vice president), manufacturers (our principals) and, of course, USA personnel – about 40 attendees in total.

The subjects included "Change" and "Trends in Reshaping Wholesale Distribution" (from the most recent DREF Report in the series "Facing the Forces of Change," a must study for all manufacturers, distributors, and representatives, obtained through ISEA, SEDA, STAFDA or NAW).

Some of the first-timers at this meeting are always a bit skeptical, but they soon come to realize we're all in this together and then they open up. We openly discussed the threats and opportunities of E-commerce, strategic alliances. And supply chain integration and globalization from each other's point of view. Everyone's eyes were opened to the necessity of including all channel partners in the discussion, and that we should all be talking more.

Other subjects at this meeting were consolidation, outsourcing, technology, and automation. The consensus feedback was positive, with the feeling that we all should delve into issues of the future aggressively and often.

Association dialogue

Another example of collaborative dialogue was at the SEMAA (Safety Equipment Manufacturers' Agents Association) breakfast meeting in Toronto during the American Industrial Hygiene Conference and Exposition. A panel of manufacturers featured Bill Smith, national sales manager for 3M, which uses only factory direct reps; Pat McLaughlin, Vice President sale/marketing for Marigold Industrial, which only uses manufacturers reps; and Mike Gompers, regional sales manager for Best Manufacturing Co., which uses both a factory direct sales force and manufacturers' reps.

All who attended this meeting believed it was a thought-provoking session that proved once again that we need to hear different points of view to thoroughly make intelligent decisions of the future.

Stakeholder synergy

Dave Johnson, *ISHN* editor and publisher, is also a big champion of engaging in dialogue between stakeholders. Rick Fulwiler, president of Technology Leadership Associates and course director of the Qualified Safety Sales Professional (QSSP) program and Bud Orr, the CEO of Orr Safety, have also expressed genuine interest and involvement.

Without stealing all of Dave's thunder, one of his suggestions includes "building a series of seminars, panel discussions, and forums on various industry topics (such as service and recruiting)".

As channel partners, we need to converge (we've discussed convergence at length before in this column), and get down to business in the critical issues at hand. Anyone who has been to ISEA,

SEDA, and NIGDA OR SEMAA meetings knows the issues. The problem is: individuals address the issues but groups (of channel partner or stakeholders) don't do enough to pull together and converse among themselves.

There are other indications of convergence or collaboration in the safety industry. The American Industrial Hygiene Association and the American Society of Safety Engineers recently announced joint symposiums and collaborative continuing education offerings. Maybe they can better coordinate their conference dates, too.

ISEA-The Safety Equipment Association and the Safety Equipment Distributors Association, as well as SEMAA, collaborate on continuing education through the QSSP program led by Dr. Fulwiler. The course attracts sales, marketing and support service personnel from three of the channel partners – manufacturers, distributors, and manufacturers' agents. All of them learn how to better serve the last link in the channel, the end user, through better safety education and training.

What can you do? Well first, as a channel partner, get out of your "box" and include the other channel partners in your thoughts, actions, and deeds. Encourage others to do the same. You'll be glad you did.

Think about it.

George J. Hayward