

# Your company can ‘borrow’ this ERA chapter’s planning process

Here we are, into another new year — hard to believe! I’ve confessed in a previous edition my bias away from New Year’s resolutions, and I’ll spare you my rationale except to say I lean toward a continuous improvement mentality that isn’t tied to flurries of focus at one time in the year that often (at least in my case) lose traction over time. That said, the flipping of the calendar from one year to the next does seem like an appropriate time to reflect on the past year, its hits and misses, and more so to look forward to the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. It seems logical that the cover story in this issue is a forward look at 2015.

Recently I had the opportunity to join the leadership group of Chicagoland-Wisconsin ERA as they engaged in an exercise to plan their activities for the foreseeable future. The process they deployed was an interesting one. Rather than leap into program content, meeting plans and the like, they took a step back to ask themselves some broader questions, including:

- 1) What are the changes the industry is experiencing and will experience in the future?
- 2) Given those changes, what are the characteristics of a winner representative firm in that evolving industry scenario?

Based on the outputs from these two foundational queries, the group is in the process of building meeting plans and content for the year ahead that will add value to their membership and encourage new members to participate. It was an interesting exercise that took just a few hours, and the group did a thorough job of anticipating the future and supposing the effects on the representative function. Let me give you a feeling for some of the major highlights.

(For a very thorough assessment of the evolutions underway in our marketplace, I urge you to take the time to review the updated “Thriving on Change” work completed in late 2013. It can be accessed on the ERA website Publications page.)

As to industry changes, the group felt the rapid pace of change would continue on several fronts. Data collection/reporting will not subside. Our industry will continue to evolve in its complexities — with further globalization, the role of distribution advancing (as approved vendor lists shrink), contract manufacturing

expanding and consolidations on all fronts (manufacturers, distributors and representatives) likely. The good news is that a broad proliferation of electronic components is likely in non-traditional markets as sensors take root as a part of the Internet of Things.

Certainly some fundamental demographic shifts are underway among our customers, employees and all partners. Our once-infant electronics industry is well into mid-life, and a new generation now populates it with vastly different approaches than those we baby-boomers grew up with.

If that is our evolving world scenario, the next question becomes, what does this mean to me if I am to survive and thrive? Several worthwhile thoughts came from the chapter group, again with the focus on the rep function.

As a largely asset-less business, rep firms must attract and retain excellent associates who allow their firms to differentiate themselves. This implies a

never-ending commitment to personnel training.

Given the continued trends toward doing more with and for less, a real onus on efficiency of operations exists. A solid business structure must be in place, including fiscally sound practices, strategic planning, succession planning and compensation plans that motivate and align with the strategic direction. Leading rep firms will have the relationships in place that allow them to participate efficiently in the global market. Again, this list goes on as well.

The next step in the planning process for this chapter group is to convert these foundational inputs into action plans for the year ahead. My intent here is not to share with you the plans under development with this ERA chapter. Rather, I want to expose you to the process and encourage you to engage in a similar initiative for your organization, whether that is a rep firm, a manufacturer, a distributor or other. It is easy to mire in the details of your business, the daily fire-fight, the challenges and opportunities. A periodic step back — a “forest for the trees” look — seems appropriate, and the start of the year is a logical time to engage in such an initiative.

ERA will be happy to help as we offer some guidance and facilitation for our rep members. Happy New Year ... make it a great one!



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