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Electronics Representatives Association
WINTER 2026

TURNING FRICTION INTO FUEL

THE MOST SUCCESSFUL TEAMS EMBRACE HEALTHY TENSION TO DRIVE PROGRESS, THINK DEEPER AND FIND BETTER SOLUTIONS

INSIDE:

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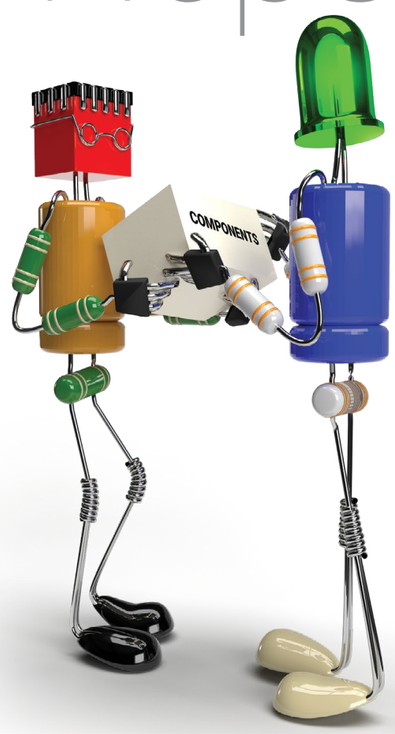

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The Representor

Electronics Representatives Association

Advancing and supporting the professional field sales function in the global electronics marketplace through programs and activities that educate, inform and advocate for manufacturers' representatives, distributors and their principals.

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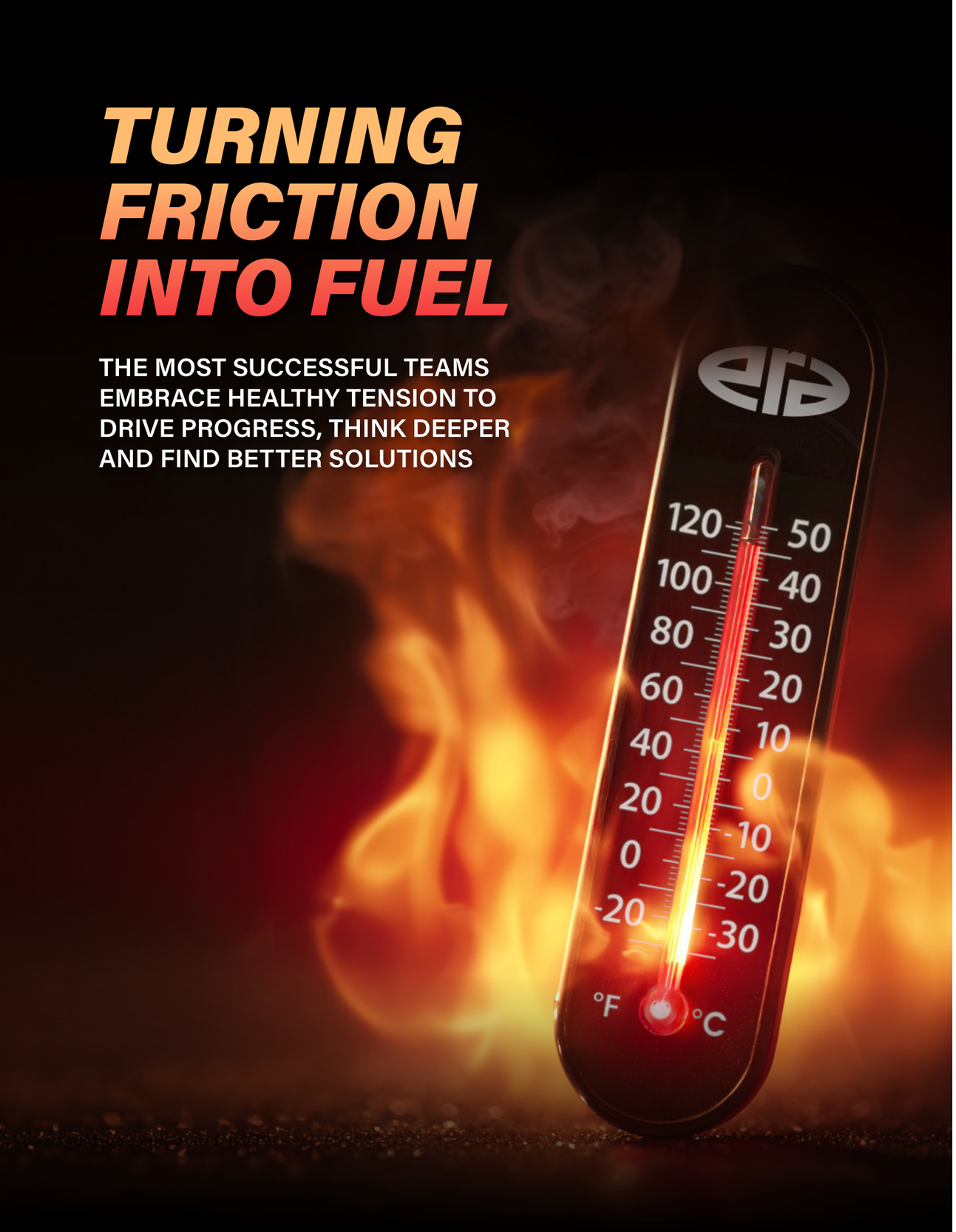
WINTER 2026

TURNING FRICTION INTO FUEL

THE MOST SUCCESSFUL TEAMS EMBRACE HEALTHY TENSION TO DRIVE PROGRESS, THINK DEEPER AND FIND BETTER SOLUTIONS



By Shane Zutz

The electronics components industry is experiencing a rapid transformation. Tariffs are rewriting supply chain playbooks faster than we can adapt them. AI is changing how engineers design and validate components. Meanwhile, customers want everything faster, more customized and at a lower price point. Oh, and they want it yesterday.

Welcome to the electronics components industry in 2026. It's messy. It's uncomfortable. And honestly? It's exactly where innovation lives.

And here's what I've learned: the companies that are going to win aren't the ones chasing comfort — they're the ones turning friction into fuel. They embrace complexity, adapt fast and build momentum from the chaos.

Before I got into business leadership, I was a teacher, a principal and a high school baseball coach. In every single one of those roles, the same truth showed up: growth happens when you lean into discomfort. When you have the hard conversation. When you challenge the status quo. When you reach for something just outside your grasp. And in today's fast-moving world, that lesson is more relevant now than ever.

What healthy tension really is

Healthy tension isn't drama. It's not about making people miserable or creating a pressure-cooker environment. It's what happens when passionate, talented people care enough about the work to push each other toward something better.

Here's what I mean:

- Your procurement team recommends a supplier shift because of tariffs, and engineering is concerned about consistency. That's tension.
- Someone speaks up and questions whether the AI tool everyone's excited about is solving the right problem. That's tension.
- A cross-functional team debates whether to ship now or invest two more weeks into making the solution more robust. That's tension.

These moments are uncomfortable. And most organizations rush to smooth them over. Find the quick compromise. Defer to whoever has the loudest voice or highest title. But here's the thing: that instinct to eliminate tension? That's exactly what kills innovation.

Tension isn't the enemy—it's the spark. When handled with intention, it drives deeper thinking, better solutions and real progress.

The tension at DigiKey was real in late 2023 as our new distribution center came online. We were running two systems in parallel to minimize customer disruption, and many were apprehensive about a full cutover because of the unknown. The stakes were high—no company wants to risk impacting customers.

There were spirited meetings, deep data reviews and honestly, a lot of tension. Running two systems wasn't sustainable, and our teams were stretched thin. Instead of rushing, we slowed down, relied on data, built contingency plans and communicated our path forward to every team member. Leaning into that discomfort created clarity in the moment—and ultimately allowed us to move a legacy project forward successfully.

Why this matters now

The pace of change in our industry is accelerating. Component lifecycles are shrinking. Customer specifications are evolving constantly. New technologies—particularly AI—are opening possibilities we're still wrapping our heads around. And geopolitical factors like tariffs are creating supply chain challenges that require creative, fast-moving solutions

> *Embracing healthy tension is like a blacksmith forging metal. The intense heat, hammering and sparks flying are not signs of destruction, but the forces shaping raw material into strong, resilient tools. It's transformation.*

In this environment, adaptability isn't optional, it's essential. You must create urgency on purpose. You must build teams that thrive in an environment where they are comfortable being uncomfortable.

Think about it: every major breakthrough in electronics—from advanced packaging that shrinks chips and integrates more functionality, to new materials that improve performance while reducing costs—came from environments where people challenged the norm. Where teams pushed back on, "That's how we've always done it." Where someone was willing to say "I think there's a better way" even when it made the room uncomfortable.

We're at the peak of the AI hype cycle. However, AI is challenging every assumption about how we deliver value to customers. From automation to decision-making to internal processes, this isn't "AI vs. the people." It's about leveraging the best of both. That mindset shapes everything: inventory management, pricing models, customer support and how we prepare our teams for what's next.

School lessons

One of the best examples I've ever been part of in my career was during my time as a high school principal. In the 2012–2013 school year, our district was considering a move to 1:1 technology. At the start of those discussions, my mindset was, "Let's wait one more year. We're already dealing

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with the big change of moving into a new building." I was excited about the technology—but not the timing.

But the school district's technology coordinator at the time didn't let it go. He kept asking questions, exploring possibilities and helping me understand how we could manage the devices and creatively train staff. It took multiple conversations and meetings, but he kept pushing me to lead the initiative and rethink our approach.

The easy button would have been to wait, assuming there's always a better time. The reality? Most of the time, the best time is now.

Once I agreed to be the "tip of the spear" for this effort, my focus shifted. I knew the same tension I felt would show up with staff and parents, and I needed to help them understand why 1:1 technology was critical for our students' growth.

After I committed, my perspective changed. I started seeing the possibilities and opportunities for staff and students, which helped me lead those conversations with confidence. At the time, few schools had 1:1 programs, but we quickly became leaders in Minnesota for using technology effectively in classroom instruction and student learning.

We had many productive conversations, made space for tension and discomfort and shared what we learned with other schools.

That same principle applies in business. When people care enough to push back, advocate for what they believe is right and have the hard conversations—that's when you know you've got something real. That's when breakthrough thinking happens.

Engineering the right kind of tension

The most innovative organizations don't wait for market forces to create urgency. They manufacture it. Intentionally. They create conditions where teams must think differently, push harder and challenge assumptions before a crisis forces them to.

Here's how that shows up in practice:

— **Set stretch goals that feel uncomfortable.** Not impossible, but just beyond what feels easily achievable. When you challenge a team to reduce costs by 20 percent while improving quality, you force them to question every assumption about how the work gets done. They can't just trim around the edges—they must rethink the entire process.

— **Put different perspectives in the same room.** Pair your cost-focused procurement specialists with your performance-driven engineers. Yes, they'll disagree. That's the point. When competing priorities collide, you get solutions that neither group would have arrived at alone.

— **Create aggressive timelines.** Not to burn people out, but to unlock more creative thinking. When the clock is ticking, overthinking fades. Teams shift from cautious to creative fast.

At DigiKey, we choose to intentionally create tension and urgency around how we work. DigiKey is in a rural area in northern Minnesota and while this creates many advantages for our company, there are constraints as well. One of those constraints is access to talent. We have traditionally solved problems through working harder or adding more people. Recently we have told our leaders that people won't solve those constraints, but a continuous improvement mindset can.

We have asked leaders to get closer to the work, recognize what is working well (and can be replicated), find leverage points and improve the system. This initially wasn't met with a standing ovation but created a sense of urgency when we said hiring would not be our first solution.

We have seen a tremendous number of new ways of thinking, process reimagination and work we could just actually stop because it was not providing value to our customers and was too internally focused. This has allowed us to scale differently, and the momentum shift here is recognizable.

The key is intentionality. You're not creating chaos—you're creating productive discomfort within a framework where people feel safe to take risks. There's a big difference between manufactured tension and crisis-driven panic. One strengthens teams. The other breaks them.

Your role: Be the thermostat

Here's where leadership matters most. Your job is not to eliminate tension. It's to regulate it. Think of yourself as a thermostat. You're constantly making micro-adjustments to keep the environment warm enough for trust and psychological safety, but cool enough to maintain urgency and productive discomfort. Get that balance right, and magic happens. Get it wrong, and you either end up with burnout or complacency.

You'll know you're in the sweet spot when: Teams debate ideas openly without it getting personal. People are energized by the work, not drained by it. Disagreements lead to better decisions, not damaged relationships. Innovation becomes a team effort, not something that happens in spite of the team

And when things start tipping the wrong way—when tension becomes toxic or people start avoiding challenges altogether—that's your signal to step in. Reset the tone. Remind people why the discomfort matters. Clarify what's actually at stake.

Your role isn't to solve every problem or make every decision. It's to create the conditions where teams can navigate tension on their own. That takes courage to let uncomfortable conversations happen. And it takes wisdom to know when to intervene and when to let teams work through it themselves.

The payoff

When teams learn to embrace healthy tension, the benefits go way beyond better ideas. It changes everything.

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— **You build deeper trust.** This may sound counterintuitive, but teams that challenge each other respectfully develop stronger relationships than teams that avoid conflict. When people know they can disagree without damaging the relationship, they trust each other more, not less.

— **You accelerate innovation.** Breakthrough thinking happens when diverse perspectives collide. When your mechanical engineer's durability concerns clash with your electrical engineer's performance goals, and they work through that tension together, innovation happens.

— **You solve problems faster.** Teams that are comfortable with tension don't tiptoe around issues. They name the problem, debate the solutions and move forward quickly. That speed matters in an industry where product cycles are measured in months, not years.

— **You retain your best people.** High performers don't leave because the work is too hard, they leave when it's not hard enough. Talented engineers, supply chain strategists and technical experts crave complexity. They want their ideas tested, refined and solving problems that matter. If you're not providing that environment, someone else will.

In the electronics components industry specifically, this translates to faster time-to-market, more robust product development cycles, better problem-solving when supply chains shift and teams that can adapt when new technologies or regulations emerge.

Three principles to lead by

If you're serious about building an organization that thrives on innovation, here's what matters most:

1. Discomfort is a signal, not a problem. When tension shows up, pay attention to it. Don't rush to resolve it. Ask: What is this tension telling us? What assumption is being challenged? What opportunity might we miss if we smooth this over too quickly?

2. Balance challenge with safety. People need to feel safe enough to take risks and challenge ideas. But they also need to feel the urgency and expectation that drives excellence. Your job as a leader is to maintain that balance constantly.

3. Celebrate the sparks. Acknowledge when ideas collide and something better emerges. Recognize when someone challenges the status quo, and it leads to a breakthrough. You get more of what you celebrate. If you want a culture that embraces healthy tension, make sure people know that productive conflict isn't just tolerated, it's deeply valued.

Breakthrough thinking happens when diverse perspectives collide. When your mechanical engineer's durability concerns clash with your electrical engineer's performance goals, and they work through that tension together, innovation happens.

Here's the reality: tension is inevitable. Market forces, customer demands, new technologies and geopolitical shifts will all create it.

The question isn't whether tension will exist; it's how you will respond. Will you harness it, or let it control you? Embracing healthy tension is like a blacksmith forging metal. The intense heat, hammering and sparks flying are not signs of destruction, but the forces shaping raw material into strong, resilient tools. It's transformation.

The same is true for organizations. The friction of diverse ideas, the pressure of bold goals, the discomfort of tough conversations—when managed well—become the forces that forge innovation, resilience and growth that wouldn't happen any other way.

The sparks are already flying. Market changes, team dynamics, competing priorities — they're the raw material of innovation. The only question is: are you ready to strike the hammer? ■

About the author

Shane Zutz is the vice president of human resources and finance for DigiKey. DigiKey is both the leader and continuous innovator in the high service distribution of electronic components and automation products worldwide, providing more than 17 million components from nearly 3,000 quality name-brand manufacturers.

Veronica Stinette
Distribution Sales Manager
FH Sales

To gain better insight into how professionals in the electronics industry have turned challenges into opportunities to ensure continued growth, The Representor *interviewed Veronica Stinnette, distribution sales manager, at FH Sales.*

Stinette shared, among other things, how she entered this industry from a chance encounter while working as an Uber driver!

Please tell us a little bit about yourself, personally and professionally.

I was born in a southwest Chicago suburb and moved to St. Louis in 2015. I attended college at Southeastern University in Florida (yes, I miss the weather), but I love living in a state with all the seasons to enjoy. I love being outside more than being inside and love to hike, swim, golf, and camp. I also am a book girl and gym girl — those are my two favorite hobbies, outside of watching the Cubs during baseball season. I have three children, two girls and a boy, and consider myself a soccer mom.

I started in the industry after meeting the previous owner of Spectrum Sales (now FH Sales) while I was driving for Uber on the weekends. After our ride, he offered me his card and the rest was history. I was quite literally a personality hire, a young woman with no industry experience with just the ability to make small talk. I'm grateful for the risk they took in hiring me in 2019. I started as outside sales and moved into the distribution role in 2021.

How long have you worked in the electronics industry?

I was hired in December 2019, right before the pandemic hit. I was on board for about 6 months in a mostly lockdown state when we became FH Sales, under the Mel Foster Company. I just reached my 6-year anniversary!

What made you choose this industry as your current career path?

The people make the industry. As a people person, I thoroughly enjoy interacting with and building relationships with a diverse group of people and personalities. I am always challenged out in the field while learning from industry veterans, engineers and distributors, and I love learning.

What are some of the main challenges you have encountered as you embark on your career journey?

I think being a young person and a woman, both of which are less present in this industry, is challenging in and of itself. I feel encouraged to see that the industry is shifting to find some younger talent!

Another challenge that I think everyone feels is AI. While I'm not a huge proponent of AI, it is becoming a necessity in the industry, and learning how, when and why of its uses is something I've been struggling with — as well as how to interact with customers, distributors and other industry partners who are fully utilizing it.

What steps have you taken to overcome these challenges and ensure that you can establish and nurture a successful career?

One thing that I think everyone should be doing, and what I do, is constantly re-evaluate myself and ask, "What am I doing now and how can I add more value?" I ask myself this about my team, customers, distributors and supplier partners. I want to become as knowledgeable as possible and establish myself as a young woman in the industry.

> *I constantly re-evaluate myself and ask, "What am I doing now and how can I add more value?" I ask myself this about my team, customers, distributors and supplier partners.*

As far as AI, MFC Group does an amazing job in keeping all of their companies trained and as up-to-date as possible on everything AI. We have access to trainings as often as we like, and our leadership updates us on new ways to use AI in our daily interactions.

What are some training tools or networking/industry events that you have found beneficial to your professional growth?

FH Sales operates under the Mel Foster Company Group umbrella and MFC Group has offered some amazing training tools over the years. We have had Sam Richter come to speak about AI, we have had company sales training with Tim Wackel, and we are about to start reading a sales book as a company for continuing education.

Outside of that, my local ERA chapter, the Spirit of St. Louis chapter, has been an amazing networking tool since I started in the industry. I've grown so much just by listening to the veterans and asking questions. They've given me room to grow, including making me president of our chapter. Networking events with suppliers and distributors, like EDS, have been pivotal to my growth in the industry. They have taught me how to pivot due to last-minute changes, speak with diverse groups of people and make the time to build lasting relationships.

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Do you think that there is enough new talent entering the electronics industry? What could make this field more attractive to young professionals?

As I briefly addressed, I do think there has been a shift in the last couple of years in recruiting younger talent. I think in order to get more recruitment, we need to make the industry more known. Previous to my Uber encounter, I didn't know this industry existed, and I hear that same type of story from a lot of people who didn't grow up in the industry. I would love to see more manufacturers' reps at college job fairs or even college engineering trade shows. This is a lot of room for growth here.

Where do you see your profession and the industry 10 to 20 years from now?

I would love to continue to grow in the distribution role and eventually take over for my mentor, Ed Thurmes, who is the director of distribution for MFC Group.

Professionally, what keeps you up at night?

Is keeping up with reports the right answer? Kidding…mostly. No, I think that evaluating myself keeps me up at night – e.g., did I reach out to this person today? How is my relationship with that person? I need to work on this relationship with this supplier or distributor. Where is the gap here and how can I fix it? Evaluating myself, my position and being vulnerable about where I'm at professionally helps me grow the most. ■

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Toby Lasley
President
Ion Associates, LLC

With so many ERA members, it is not easy to get to know every rep, manufacturer and distributor in the business. "Someone You Should Know" is The Representor *department that gives readers the chance to learn about fellow ERA members, including how their time is spent both in and out of the office.*

Meet Toby Lasley, president of Ion Associates.

The Representor *asked Lasley a few questions about his time in the manufacturers' rep business. Here is what he had to say.*

Tell us a little bit about yourself.

With deep roots in the capital city, I am a native Austinite and a proud Texan. A devoted Longhorn supporter, my life outside of work is centered on family and the outdoors. I hold a strong appreciation for the arts and am an active concertgoer, enjoying a broad range of music and Austin's renowned live-music scene.

How long have you been in the rep business, and how did you become interested in working at a manufacturers' rep in the electronics industry?

I've spent my career in the manufacturers' rep business, and my interest in the role started long before I formally entered the industry. My father has been my role model, and growing up I had a front-row seat to what the rep business really looks like. I still remember him working from his car with one of the early analog cell phones—constantly on the move, solving problems in real time, connecting engineers, buyers and suppliers to keep business moving forward.

What stood out to me wasn't just the technology, but the role itself. Being a rep meant understanding complex products, navigating different personalities, and finding solutions that worked for everyone involved. It was part technical, part relationship-driven, and entirely dynamic.

What have you found to be most rewarding about the rep business?

The most rewarding aspect is the unique role we play as strategic partners, not just as salespeople. We get to work alongside our principals and customers from the early design stages, seeing a project progress from a conceptual need to a successful, high-volume product in the market. This long-term engagement allows us to deliver substantial, sustained value. The reward lies in knowing that our technical expertise and market connections were the critical link that brought an innovative solution to fruition, resulting in growth and success for both our principals and our customers.

What is something challenging about the rep business that you are hoping you can positively influence over time?

One of the most persistent challenges in the rep business is that our value is often measured too narrowly—typically at the point of transaction—rather than across the full lifecycle of influence that drives long-term success.

Manufacturers rely on reps to do far more than close orders. We build early technical alignment, shape roadmaps, manage risk, maintain continuity through personnel changes and keep momentum alive when programs stall or markets shift. Much of that work happens months—or years—before revenue is visible, and it's not always easy to quantify.

What I'm hoping to positively influence over time is a more holistic view of value in the rep model. That includes clearer alignment on expectations, better instrumentation around early-stage influence and design activity, and a shared understanding that consistency, proximity and trusted relationships are strategic assets not just sales functions.

The most rewarding aspect of this business is the unique role we play as strategic partners, not just salespeople.

Briefly describe your rep firm, and please include how long your company has been a member of ERA.

Ion Associates is the largest technical sales and marketing organization in Texas representing OEM electronics manufacturers. Headquartered in Austin, we operate as a fully integrated go-to-market extension for our partners across Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mexico, Central and South America.

Our organization is built around deep technical and commercial execution, combining: ***Field application engineers (FAEs)*** who engage early with customer engineering teams to drive design wins and solve complex system challenges; ***product line managers (PLMs)*** who align supplier roadmaps to customer platforms and manage strategy across product lifecycles; ***account managers*** who maintain senior-level relationships, navigate customer organizations and convert strategy into revenue; and ***inside sales representatives (ISRs)*** who provide day-to-day operational support, pipeline management and responsiveness at scale.

Together, this structure allows Ion to deliver consistent technical influence,

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disciplined execution, and long-term market development—from early architecture discussions through production ramp.

What recent innovations, best practices and/or changes has your firm made?

We have begun leveraging AI-enabled tools to improve team efficiency, particularly around meeting documentation and follow-up. Automated note-taking and summarization allow our teams to spend less time on administrative tasks and more time engaging customers and advancing opportunities.

In parallel, we are strengthening collaboration across roles by implementing standardized planning and follow-up tools. These forms help coordinate customer visits and intentionally bring together the collective expertise of our FAEs, ISRs and account managers. The result is more thoughtful meeting preparation, clearer documentation and higher-quality follow-through ensuring insights are captured, shared and acted on consistently across the organization.

What have you learned and/or what contacts have you made through ERA that have had the greatest positive impacts on you and/or your business?

My involvement with ERA has provided both perspective and practical value. ERA conferences create a unique forum where rep firm leaders can speak candidly about the realities of the business—what's working, what's changing and how to adapt as the model evolves. The most meaningful impact has come from the relationships formed with other principals and senior leaders. Those peers have become trusted sounding boards, helping validate strategic decisions around talent investment, organizational structure, supplier alignment and long-term planning. Learning how other high-performing firms measure success beyond bookings has directly influenced how we think about value creation inside our own organization.

ERA has also reinforced that strong rep firms differentiate themselves through technical depth, consistency and execution—not just coverage. The insights and relationships gained through ERA have had a lasting, positive influence on both my leadership approach and the way we continue to build and position our business.

What are some things you enjoy outside of the workplace?

I discovered hobby horsing during COVID and it quickly became more than a pastime. I've since advanced to the semifinal round of the Hill Country Hobby Horse Association and am actively pursuing qualification for the regional semifinals in June. ■

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Forward Thinking | Strategic Council

Scaling up at ERA

by Eddie Smith
ERA CEO
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I would like to thank you all in advanc for attending the annual 2026 ERA Conference, and for Conference Chair Perry Thornton and Conference Vice Chair Julie Carr and all the committee members who have worked many hours to make this an industry-leading event. We will have more than 650 attendees and a new home at the Hilton Austin in downtown Austin. This is a record crowd, and this shows that people find value in the three days in Austin. Our goal is to have speakers and breakout sessions that help and guide you in your day-to-day duties. I appreciate the support of all our sponsors which enables us to have a world-class event in a world-class venue. This was my first year putting this event together and I was impressed by the ERA staff of Kate, Karin, Clare, Ama, Natalie and Susan and the work they do to organize this great event.

A record crowd at February's ERA Conference shows that people find great value in these three days.

The main stage will have fantastic speakers talking about reaching the unreachable and about human connection in a digital world. They will speak about the fast pace of a supply chain in the new world politics (just keeping up with the tariffs last year was dizzying). We will have someone speak about how to collaborate when we live in a world where AI is being used to a greater degree. I could not be more excited to see how the main stage inspires and motivates Conference attendees.

The breakout sessions will dig deeper into topics of importance to reps, manufacturers and distributors and will be geared towards tactical and practical actions and takeaways. AI will be featured in multiple sessions, which will highlight some available tools and how to use them in practical applications.

We will have sessions on relationships and some deeper discussions on communication. We will have some conversations about CMMC and how to comply with the flow downs. We will have a market trend update that will feature new data on lead times and sales, and I will also give an ERA update.

There are many other things that ERA is working on that will be rolled out later this year. We are working to provide our members a new data resource that reports all parts shipped in Mexico, Canada and the U.S. sorted by HTS code. We are also working on some data about the value of rep firms with real-life examples and numbers to support our position.

We are busy at ERA, but never too busy to help support local chapter efforts and events. If you need our help, just reach out to me or one of the ERA staff. I have attended quite a few chapter events and have been impressed with the enthusiasm and work put into each of the events. Thank you and keep up the great work! ■

These companies have joined ERA since the Fall 2025 issue of ***The Representor.***

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CeeJay Micro
Tim Walker
cjmicro.tech
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Goldfinch Representation, Ltd.
Kevin White
www.goldfinchrep.com
EMEA

Mile High Solution, Inc.
Jeff Carter
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Rocky Mountain

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Sabrina Qu
cincon.com

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Garry Herrinton
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Sales/Business Strategy: Michael Calabria.....mjcalabria7@gmail.com

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- Selling Effectively Through Manufacturers' Reps
- Manufacturers' Rep Toolkit
- Powering Up Your Brand: Strategies for Successful Marketing and Branding in the Electronics Industry
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- Staying on Course – Tips for More Effective Manufacturer/Representative Quarterly Meetings
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ERA Meetings & Programs

ERA Conference.....Feb. 22-24, 2026
EDS Summit.....May 18-22, 2026

Connected by design: Where relationships meet innovation

Perry Thornton
President, Pinnacle Marketing
2026 ERA Conference Chair

The 2026 ERA Conference returns to Austin, Texas on Feb. 22 with a theme that captures both the moment and the mission of our industry — Connected by Design: Where Relationships Meet Innovation. In a post-pandemic world reshaped by remote work, rapid technological advancement and on-demand access to information, the way we communicate, collaborate and build trust has fundamentally changed. This year's conference is intentionally designed to help attendees navigate that evolution with confidence, clarity and connection.

Industry peers, volunteers and subject-matter experts have come together to curate an education and networking experience focused on best practices for succeeding in this new landscape. From human-centered selling to emerging technologies, the 2026 Conference aims to bridge innovation with the relationships that remain at the heart of our industry.

From human-centered selling to emerging technologies, the 2026 Conference aims to bridge innovation with the relationships that remain at the heart of our industry.

A new venue, a new experience

While Austin continues to be the home of the ERA Conference, 2026 brings an exciting change in location. The conference will be held at the Hilton Austin Downtown, offering increased accessibility and an enhanced attendee experience. With expanded networking spaces, diverse dining options and a location in the heart of downtown Austin, the Hilton provides an ideal backdrop for meaningful connections.

The Conference officially kicks off with a cocktail reception at 5:00 p.m. on Sunday, February 22, hosted in the Austin Grand Ballroom Foyer. Attendees are encouraged to pick up badges at the registration desk between 12:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. and settle in before the opening festivities begin.

Conference theme

This year's theme centers on one powerful word: connections. Developing relationships, engaging effectively within organizations and navigating the external selling process have become more complex as remote work and digital tools become the norm. Artificial intelligence now offers unprecedented access to knowledge, yet human-to-human connection feels increasingly elusive.

The 2026 Conference will explore how to strengthen those connections. Speakers and breakout sessions will deliver actionable takeaways that attendees can apply personally and share with their teams, focusing on how to build stronger relationships while thoughtfully integrating new technologies into existing skillsets.

Breakout sessions designed for impact

The Breakout Sessions Committee has assembled a dynamic and highly relevant lineup of sessions for 2026. Sessions will feature insights from legal and market data experts on evolving trends, alongside practical discussions on talent acquisition, emerging technologies, sales tools and techniques, improving communications and building connections.

These sessions are designed to give tactical

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and practical advice to better prepare attendees to succeed in an ever-changing marketplace.

Main stage speakers

The Conference features a compelling lineup of keynote and general session speakers, presenting on a balanced range of topics:

• Annelise McCarthy, an international speaker and communications coach, will open as the Monday morning keynote speaker. Energetic and engaging, Annelise will explore communication as a competitive advantage in her presentation,"When Innovation Speaks: The Power of Human Connection in a Digital World." She will also present two breakout sessions that build from her keynote, offering deeper insight into building relationships through articulate dialogue. Prepare to be inspired!

• Jacob Shapiro, director of research at The Bespoke Group, brings geopolitical expertise from the finance, agriculture, energy and technology sectors. He will present, "Geopolitics, Supply Chains and the New Electronics Landscape." His perspective on global events and their impact on the U.S. economy and our industry will help attendees better understand the road ahead.

• Eddie Smith, CEO of ERA, will make his Conference speaking debut with "Everything Revolves Around Electronics." Drawing on decades of leadership in distribution and manufacturing, Eddie will address supply chain challenges, AI's influence on the industry and the fast-paced changes shaping our future.

• James Taylor, MBA, FRSA, will present "Supercollaboration: Cyborgs, Centaurs, and the Rise of Human-AI Collaboration." His session will examine how artificial intelligence combined with human intelligence influences leadership, creativity and decision-making.

• Michael Knight, corporate senior vice president of strategy at TTI, returns to close out the conference. Known for thought-provoking presentations, Michael's session,"Great Disruption Is the Mother of Great Opportunity," will explore emerging trends and the opportunities hidden within "what-if" scenarios shaping the future of our industry.

The 2026 ERA Conference will take place at a new venue, the Hilton Austin in downtown Austin!

Networking, community and a new chapter for ERA

Networking remains a cornerstone of the ERA Conference. This year's Monday night Networking Event will be held in the ballroom immediately following Monday's closing general session, allowing more time for peer connection before giving attendees the opportunity to head out to enjoy Austin's vibrant dining scene.

This year, the Conference also marks a meaningful transition for ERA leadership. Walter Tobin will be departing as CEO after a decade of championing the rep model, the industry and ERA. His presence will be missed, his impact will endure…but something tells me he will not be able to shake us off easily. ERA proudly welcomes Eddie Smith as its new CEO, and attendees will have multiple opportunities to hear from him throughout the Conference.

Serving as the 2026 Conference Chair has been a truly rewarding experience. Alongside Vice Chair Julie Carr, committee chairs and dedicated volunteers, this Conference reflects countless hours of collaboration and passion. To every volunteer who helped bring this vision to life, thank you. We look forward to welcoming you to Austin on February 22 for a Conference intentionally designed to connect people, ideas and innovation. ■

THANK YOU, CONFERENCE SPONSORS!

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For more information about the event and to register online, visit era.org/era-conference.

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MANUFACTURING UPDATE

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Building a strong RSM-rep relationship

Within the electronic components industry, few relationships are as critical to sustained success as the one between the supplier's regional sales manager (RSM) and the manufacturer's representative. This relationship serves as the primary bridge between supplier strategy and market execution. When aligned and well managed, it drives growth for both parties. When misaligned, it can limit opportunity, slow momentum and undermine long-term results.

The role of the RSM has evolved significantly in recent years but so has the role of the manufacturers' representative. Today's RSM is expected to be more than an administrative contact or performance reviewer — he/she provides direction, product knowledge and focus to ensure supplier objectives and rep execution remain aligned in a competitive marketplace. At the same time, effective representatives are expected to actively engage, prioritize and execute in ways that reflect both local market realities and supplier expectations. The strongest relationships recognize this as a shared responsibility.

> *At the center of the most effective RSM-rep relationships is trust. Trust is not assumed; it is earned through consistent behaviors and reliable execution on both sides.*

At the center of the most effective RSM-rep relationships is trust. Trust is not assumed; it is earned through consistent behaviors and reliable execution on both sides. In my 20 years of experience on the supplier side of the equation, both in regional and corporate management, the most successful partnerships share several core characteristics.

Communication is foundational. Strong relationships are built on regular, structured and purposeful communication. This includes consistent performance reviews and updates, as well as open dialogue around expectations, priorities, challenges and changing market conditions. Effective communication is not one-directional; both RSMs and representatives must contribute candidly and consistently to maintain alignment across the territory.

Accountability is a shared responsibility. Clear goals, defined metrics and mutual ownership of outcomes form the basis of effective accountability. High-performing relationships focus on both activity and results, with expectations clearly understood and commitments honored by both parties.

Attention must be applied strategically. Time and resources are limited, requiring RSMs to prioritize opportunities with the greatest potential return—key customers, targeted markets and products positioned for growth. By the same token, representatives have a responsibility to provide appropriate focus to each of their principals, regardless of size, ensuring supplier expectations are met through thoughtful prioritization and execution.

Value distinguishes strong partnerships. Manufacturers' representatives expect more from the RSM than quarterly reviews and reporting requirements; they expect insight and action. Market perspective, competitive awareness, product prioritization and strategic guidance are among the most meaningful ways RSMs add value. In return, representatives add value through local market intelligence, customer access and disciplined execution.

Empathy plays an important if not critical role in building a strong foundation. Understanding each other's business models, constraints and pressures enables more realistic planning and stronger execution. Empathy supports collaboration without lowering standards or compromising performance expectations.

Another consideration based on my own personal experience: do not overlook the value in building familiarity between rep personnel and the supplier team behind the RSM. Strategic inclusion of sales management, marketing, engineering and customer service personnel in the partnership can serve as an added component toward building trust between both companies.

Strong RSM-rep relationships are not accidental. They require intention, discipline and consistent engagement from both sides. For both parties, investing in these relationships remains one of the most effective ways to drive sustainable growth in local markets.

The RSM-rep relationship and what makes the best ones successful will be explored in greater depth at the 2026 ERA Conference during the breakout session, "The Power of Optimizing the Regional Manager-Rep Relationship." The session will focus on practical behaviors and best practices that define effective partnerships. If you plan on being in Austin, consider attending this session in what is sure to be an interesting and spirited discussion. ■

REP UPDATE

Cameron English, CPMR
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What sales reps need to succeed in today's high-velocity electronics market

"We hold these truths to be self-evident"—words that declared independence for a nation—still resonate today for an entirely different constituency: the manufacturers' representatives tasked with bridging the gap between customers and their electronic component manufacturers in an era defined by speed, complexity and escalating expectations.

In today's hyper-accelerated technical environment, the success of a sales rep is as dependent upon relationships, territory coverage and customer access, as it is the tools to support the customer engineering development. A manufacturer's ability to empower reps with the right tools, the right information and the right resources at the right moment, will determine the outcome of the development of the program.

The new reality: Design cycles have collapsed

Gone are the days when design cycles were measured in quarters or years. Engineers now work in weeks—or sometimes days—driven by competitive pressure, rapid prototyping technologies and the demand for frequent product updates.

- ***Immediate access to samples:*** Not optional anymore. If an engineer can't vet/review and test it, they won't spec it.
- ***Customization:*** The competitive differentiator. Today's design engineers expect components that aren't just adequate—they want parts that match their exact electrical, mechanical or environmental needs.
- ***GUI-Based modeling tools:*** Engineers expect them. Reps need graphical user interface modeling tools that allow engineers to simulate performance and downloadable models for EMI behavior, thermal profiles, mechanical fit, firmware integrity and electrical characteristics.

In the fast-paced development world, next-generation design engineers have gravitated toward the distributor entities that offer stock and quick access to data sheets and 3D models (STEP files). When the design needs a deeper understanding of the intricacies of technical development, engineering customers are going to reach out to your reps.

In this stage of the program technical development, your reps need a suite of tools that will allow them to fill in and help those engineers understand the nuance of the design parameters. The following list of resources should be the goal of suppliers to provide their sales team:

- **Graphical user interface modeling tools** that allow engineers to simulate performance and downloadable models for EMI behavior, thermal profiles, mechanical fit and electrical response.
- **Development kits** offered at no charge or at a subsidized rate
- **STEP files** — mandatory for 3D and automated design
- **Access to 3D models** for every part
- **Real-field support**
- **Comprehensive sample kits**
- **Fast access** to FAEs, PMs and engineering staff

A modern declaration of partnership includes a customer hyper responsive model, with minimal qualifiers to access the resources needed. The relationship between the rep and the manufacturer corporate management needs to be so elevated, it is based on trust and respect. When the rep speaks on behalf of the customer perspective, a rep partner needs to be treated as part of the "inner circle" of the organization. Does this sound idealistic? You bet, but this level of alignment should be the goal.

The good, the bad and the ugly

In one recent personal experience, I had a great opportunity arise at a major customer. My key engineer called and advised that they were considering the development of a custom technical component. Of course, I was motivated to find the right solution. I knew this particular part was a bit out of the envelope of this particular manufacturer that I represent, but after contacting them, they stated that they had something in development, but would need an NDA to get the technical details. After explaining that the customer was reviewing over six different potential sources, and that the NDA requirement would probably not be met with enthusiasm by this customer due to the early analysis nature of the stage of the program, the supplier relented. Question: why are we trying to make the introduction of our technology difficult?

I recall an entertaining example of how unintended organizing of the process within corporations can become roadblocks to business development. In the movie Office Space, the "right sizing" team is interviewing the "engineering liaison" and when they ask him what he does, he says he brings the engineering documents from the sales to the engineering department. They ask, "Why doesn't sales just deliver them directly?" The engineering

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liaison says, "Engineers are not good with dealing with sales or customers." "So..what do you do here?" "I told you, I deal with the engineers so the salespeople and customers don't have to!" An iconic scene that shows how layered some organizations can become.

Does your organization have an open-door policy to allow your rep team access to the technical and product management staff? If not, why? Overly hierarchical structured organizations are prioritizing policy over productivity. If one major piece of business is lost due to an overly complicated internal process, that process is too costly to maintain.

Figure 1. Your workplace culture (Source: IPA/MRERF)

In my example of a major opportunity unnecessarily burdened, one could suggest that the risk of showing a potential future product was the issue. These are examples of the unnecessary disconnects field sales struggles with.

Be an "A" supplier to your representatives

What does an "A" supplier look like from the rep's perspective? (See Figure 2) I borrowed this list from Bryan Shirley's MRERF presentation that was tailored for manufacturers to consider when working with their reps. Shirley is a well-respected consultant to both reps and manufacturers, promoting the rep function in the electronics industry. Shirley makes the case that a culture that is rep-friendly includes certain things that need to be "self-evident" to your sales partners. Take a look at this list and think about how it aligns with your organization.

Once your culture can reach a level of integrating your rep partners effectively, and the culture encourages collaboration, what should you provide as a top performing supplier to your rep team?

We succeed together

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that great manufacturers and great reps succeed together; that design cycles wait for no one; and dynamic support—fast, flexible, technical and digital—is the lifeblood of winning in today's electronics industry. Suppliers should look at development kits and samples as an investment in sales. Fast response and proactive stocking of key items that customers will need to proof viability of technology. An emphasis on productivity and collaboration, versus constant challenging and pushing. What you do should be prioritized around what the customer demands, not what the organization feels is priority.

Too idealistic you say? Maybe—but in my experience, the closer you come to a system of support, collaboration and integration of your rep team, then better results you will achieve. ■

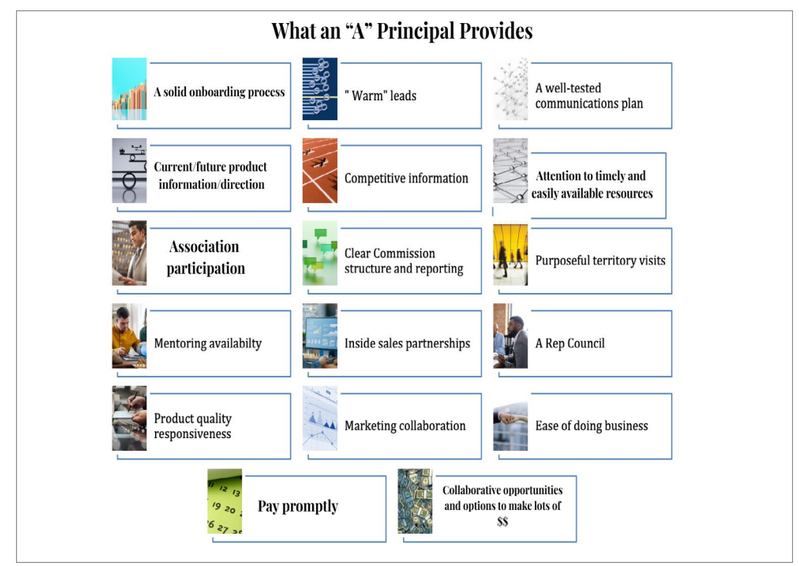

Figure 2. What an "A" principal provides

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

Lori Bruno, CPMR
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ERA: Powering the human connection in a high-tech world

The foundation: The "holy trinity" of success

In a 2026 business landscape increasingly dominated by algorithms, AI and quantum computing, ERA stands as the essential guardian of the industry's most valuable asset: the human connection. As the premier trade organization for our industry's "holy trinity"—manufacturers' representatives, manufacturers and distributors—ERA provides the bridge where high-tech innovation meets high-touch relationships. We believe that while technology provides the tools, it is the strength of our partnerships that provides the "juice" for true business success.

The strategy: Growth through connection

Joining ERA is more than a membership; it is a strategic necessity for those who refuse to be left behind. We empower our members to be "Connected by Design" through a robust ecosystem of professional resources:

• ***The ultimate networking engine.*** Whether at the national conference in Austin or through local chapter events, ERA offers the only dedicated space where the entire sales channel converges, giving you direct access to the decision-makers who move the needle.

• ***Industry-leading professional development.*** We ensure you don't just keep up with market shifts—you lead them.

Members gain access to expert legal, tax and HR consultations tailored to the rep model, as well as elite certifications like the CPSC (Certified Professional Sales Consultant) and CPMR (Certified Professional Manufacturers' Representative).

• ***Cutting-edge insight.*** From the Representor magazine to ERA LIVE sessions, we provide the intellectual capital needed to navigate a rapidly evolving marketplace.

The future: A legacy of momentum

This year marks a pivotal moment in our history as we celebrate a fond farewell and a fierce welcome. We honor the incredible legacy of our outgoing CEO, Walter Tobin—our GOAT—who breathed fire into this association and revitalized the three pillars of our membership over the last decade. As we bid him a grateful adieu, we are thrilled to welcome our new CEO, Ed Smith. Ed is already building on this massive momentum, committed to expanding our membership and delivering even deeper tangible value to every firm we serve.

The future is bright, but it must be built together. If you are not yet a member of ERA, now is the time to step out of the daily grind and into a community designed for your success. Put on your power suit, sharpen your vision and join us. Get connected, or risk falling behind. ■

EDUCATION UPDATE

Ellen Coan, CPMR
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Finding and creating the magic

Magic! How do we make our customers, principals and distributors feel as we work through the latest challenges? How did we get customs to release the product? How did we get the boat or airplane to arrive early? It is our magic (or superpower) and experience that has taught us we cannot control everything but we can offer our best efforts to find the best possible solution. Are we magicians or mentalists? It is all about how you make the other person feel in the moment that they'll remember. Was it a memorable moment? Did you read the person and react to their energy and needs of the moment? I've listened to Oz Pearlman talk on CNBC and the podcast "ReThinking" and could see many similarities to our daily grind. He says we need to plan for every possible outcome and what our response will be. As we hear rejection or experience failure, we must understand this is a snapshot in time and there will be another opportunity where our wisdom gained in this moment will carry us forward. If we trick our minds into thinking to the future where the burn is not as raw, we can alleviate the anxiety to stop procrastinating and go to the next step.

What is the magic of your company's culture? Garry Ridge, CEO of WD40, shared his ideas on the podcast, "A Bit of Optimism." He built a culture of pride into a multibillion-dollar corporation that sells a simple, common household item. The culture honors the employees who make it and sell it every day. They feel safe to speak up and share ideas and their performance is reviewed quarterly and they know where they stand. Their behavior (modeled from the top-down) plus their values, multiplied by consistency, has led to success. They have the trust of the CEO and the will to succeed together. Ridge wrote the book, "Any Dumb-Ass Can Do It" and shares leadership stories and suggestions—it's worth the read!

At the 2026 ERA Conference, we will piece together more leadership ideas that contribute to our "magic" and fit our goals and mission statements. As we approach the Conference, what is your "Why?" Why are you at the Conference (or not)? Why do you get up each day and do what you do? Why do you feel valued (or not)? If not, how can you change that?

Curiosity is necessary to keep moving forward and make each day its best possible. Let's share our stories and listen to others — together, we are better. ■

INDUSTRY UPDATE

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If I were joining ERA today, what would I do differently?

If I were joining ERA today, knowing what I know now, I would approach the organization with a different mindset. Not because I misunderstood its mission early on—but because I underestimated how much ERA could shape both my career and my perspective if I leaned in sooner.

ERA can easily be viewed as one more professional association alongside everything else competing for your time. Over the years, I've learned it can be far more than that. It can be a multiplier—of opportunity, confidence and connection—if you engage fully and consistently. Here's what I would tell my younger self.

ERA is only as valuable as the energy you put in

For many years, I was a consistent ERA attendee. I showed up, listened and learned. What I didn't do, at least not early enough. was participate in a meaningful way. I hesitated to sit on a panel, join a committee or raise my hand for leadership roles because I didn't feel I had the personal gravitas I saw in others. I assumed I needed more experience before stepping forward. I was wrong.

> *The value of ERA increases dramatically when you show up consistently, contribute openly and say yes earlier than feels natural.*

ERA needs participation from members at every stage of their careers, not just those who feel fully seasoned. And I needed the personal and professional growth that only comes from being uncomfortable. Volunteering before you feel "ready" isn't a risk—it's how readiness is built. There's a real difference between attending and participating. The value of ERA increases dramatically when you show up consistently, contribute openly and say yes earlier than feels natural.

A peer network that's a safety net

ERA also offers something that's harder to quantify but no less important: a peer network that extends well beyond your own territory or firm.

Other reps understand pressures that are difficult to explain to anyone else—business cycles, line changes, commission uncertainty and the responsibility that comes with representing both principals and customers. Informal conversations with peers often provide more clarity than any formal program ever could.

Take it from someone who has weathered the bottom of a few business cycles: other reps are not just a shoulder to cry on; they are a lifeline. The relationships you build through ERA can steady you during difficult periods and sharpen your thinking when opportunities appear. In the long run, friendships and trust matter far more than short-term transactions.

Personal growth

A deep focus on a single territory or firm can unintentionally create a professional silo. Fully embracing ERA's resources helps break that open. Being in rooms where you don't know everyone builds confidence. Hearing perspectives from other markets expands how you think. Over time, you learn how to listen more carefully—not just how to sell more effectively.

The growth here is often subtle. You don't always recognize it while it's happening. But eventually, you realize you're more comfortable contributing, more confident navigating unfamiliar situations, and better equipped to see beyond your immediate challenges.

ERA doesn't just make you a better representative. It helps make you a better professional.

Play the long game

Reputation compounds over time. How you handle disagreement, transition and change gets remembered—often long after specific details fade. Relationships, not lines or principals, are what truly endure.

I know my ERA relationships have fed directly into opportunities to compete for new lines coming into our territory. Those opportunities weren't the result of a single interaction. They came from years of consistency, engagement and mutual trust.

The long game isn't flashy, and it doesn't always deliver immediate returns. But it's the game that ultimately shapes careers.

A final thought

ERA has challenged me, supported me and connected me with people I deeply respect. Serving on the ERA Executive Committee and collaborating with its exceptional leaders over the past several years has been a distinguished highlight of my career.

If you're early in your ERA journey, or quietly standing on the sidelines, my encouragement is simple: step forward sooner. Engage more fully. Give before you think you're ready. The return on that investment has a way of showing up in unexpected places—but you'll recognize it when it does. ■

Hey dude, the law protects independent sales reps from "moral obliquity"

by Adam Glazer & Adam Maxwell
ERA General Counsel, SFBBG

Adam J. Glazer is a partner in the law firm of SFBBG and serves as general counsel to ERA. He is also a regular contributor to The Representor, *and participates in Expert Access, the program that offers telephone consultations to ERA members.*

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Sales rep-principal relationships follow certain inviolate standards, including that reps only get paid when their principals get paid, and if orders procured by reps do not ship, no payment is due. "Inviolate"? Not so fast, dude.

The facts

Footwear industry sales rep Ronnie Malatesta, owner of Ronnie Malatesta Sales, LLC ("RMS"), contracted with Lucky Top, Inc. to promote the sale of its products. Lucky Top was then acquired by Crocs, Inc., which later merged with Hey Dude, Inc.

RMS was to receive commissions between 1 and 8 percent on net sales, and as was customary, its sales took the form of customer orders, booked several months in advance of the shipping date.

The parties' Sales Representative Agreement ("SRA") provided for commissions to be paid "upon payment of an invoice by a customer on or before the 30th day of the month following the receipt of the funds." It also stated that commissions "shall not be paid in any case where a customer fails to pay within 120 days from an invoice due date."

The SRA enabled either party to terminate with or without cause on 30 days' notice. Upon termination, the SRA obligated Hey Dude to fulfill all orders placed at the time of termination.

In March 2022, Hey Dude gave RMS its 30-day notice of termination. According to RMS, as of the termination date, it had pre-booked sales orders exceeding $57 million. This translated to Hey Dude owing some $3.7 million in commissions, of which approximately $1.9 million went unpaid.

The dispute

To recover this significant sum, RMS sued Hey Dude in federal court in Oxford, Mississippi (where RMS maintained an office). RMS' claims included breach of the SRA and breach of the implied duty of good faith. Seeking to avoid a trial, Hey Dude moved for summary judgment on these claims following the discovery process, contending no reasonable jury could rule in RMS' favor based on the evidence presented.

Central to RMS' case was the cancellation by Hey Dude of a large percentage of its 2022 orders booked prior to termination. Because Hey Dude did not fulfill these orders and no customer payment was received, it took the position that no commission was due.

Hey Dude largely blamed cancellations on supply chain issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The parties' SRA was silent on order cancellations and did not expressly set out when a commission was earned. This meant the litigation was largely focused on whether shipment and customer payment were prerequisites to RMS earning its commissions.

The evidence

In her deposition, the former sales operation manager for Hey Dude admitted that following the acquisition, when the company would encounter a backlog of orders, its customer service representatives reached out to customers to offer the opportunity to cancel their orders.

RMS' customers were primarily smaller, independent stores. In June 2022, Hey Dude started selling to Academy Sports + Outdoors, a $10 million customer. RMS alleged that Hey Dude wrongfully diverted inventory to non-commissionable accounts, including Academy, rather than fulfill the orders pre-booked by RMS.

This was roundly denied at the depositions of Hey Dude executives. It would serve no purpose for Hey Dude "to rob Peter to pay Paul," asserted a former vice president of sales. However, she also conceded that she would have to check RMS' cancellation summary and Academy's orders "line-by-line" to see "if there's any correlation in there."

Additionally, the Court specifically cited to this deposition testimony from the vice president of finance for Crocs:

Q. Do you know of anything in the agreement that gives Hey Dude discretion to cancel an order?

A. There's nothing addressed on that topic in the agreement.

Q. And correspondingly, there's nothing in this agreement that says what happens to RMS' sales commissions in the event that Hey Dude decides to cancel a purchase order?

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A. That's correct.

Q. And so, if Hey Dude decides to cancel an order, it means it doesn't ship that order, correct?

A. That would be correct.

Q. And if it doesn't ship that order, the customer doesn't have an obligation to pay for it, do they?

A. Of course not.

Q. And if they don't – if they don't pay for that order, it's the company's position that RMS is not entitled to commission?

A. That's correct.

The former vice president of sales further admitted in her deposition that Academy was treated as a priority account by Hey Dude. In contrast, most of RMS' customers were smaller, independent stores not deemed "priority" by Hey Dude.

The ruling on RMS' breach of contract claim

Viewing this evidence in the light most favorable to RMS, which is the governing standard when a party moves for summary judgment, the federal judge in Oxford determined that summary judgment was not appropriate.

Even though Hey Dude argued the evidence showed the orders at issue placed by RMS did not ship and that it was not paid on these orders, the reasons for this were deemed significant enough that they warranted meaningful exploration at a trial. RMS would be afforded the opportunity to prove that Hey Dude was seeking to benefit from its own actions preventing the shipments and attendant commission obligations.

The Court noted the testimony showed Hey Dude contacted at least some of RMS' customers to give them the option to cancel their orders as the result of its own inventory shortage. "Overall," the Court ruled: "there exists a jury question of whether Hey Dude diverted the overlapping inventory from RMS' customers in order to satisfy its new priority customer – Academy."

The duty of good faith claim

RMS charged Hey Dude with breaching the implied contractual duty of good faith, or stated differently, with acting in bad faith, by failing to pay commissions on the orders on the books at the time of termination.

As in most states, contracts in Mississippi contain an implied duty of good faith and fair dealing in their performance and enforcement. Mississippi courts define "good faith" to mean "the faithfulness of an agreed purpose between two parties, a purpose which is consistent with justified expectations of the other party."

Relatedly, "bad faith" is not shown by bad judgment or negligence; it requires "some conscious wrongdoing because of dishonest purpose or moral obliquity."

The Crocs' vice president of finance testified that shipments to Academy in 2022 "had absolutely no impact on the orders to RMS," but when called upon to explain, he stated "there is very little overlap in the products that shipped to Academy, if you look at a style level."

As the Court observed, by claiming the overlap was "very little," he implicitly conceded "that there was at least some overlap between the inventory shipped to Academy and the inventory that could have been allocated to some of RMS' orders."

Viewing this testimony, together with the concession from the former vice president of sales that Academy was a "priority account" for Hey Dude unlike most RMS customers, the court held that a jury could find "it implies some conscious wrongdoing because of dishonest purpose or moral obliquity."

Reading between the lines of the written decision, it was apparent the judge felt Hey Dude was acting with deceptiveness (or "obliquity"), and was not about to award it summary judgment on these claims.

Epilogue

Exactly one week after the judge issued her opinion highlighting the principal's highly questionable moves, and facing the prospect of traveling to the Oxford federal court to say "Hey, Jury," the decision-makers at Hey Dude fully settled the dispute with RMS. ■

What's new for the 2025 tax filing season?

by J. Christian Manalli
Partner, SFBBG

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For tax year 2025, significant changes result from the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act," including increased limits for state and local income tax (SALT) deductions, new deductions for tips, overtime pay and car loan interest, along with increased standard deductions and child tax credits.

Key tax changes for individual filers for 2025

New temporary deductions are available for qualifying income and expenses:

Tip income. An above-the-line deduction (which means it reduces adjusted gross income) for up to $25,000 in qualified tip income. This deduction phases out for higher earners starting at $150,000 and phases out completely at $400,000 for single filers; the phase-out starts at $300,000 for married filers and phases out completely at $550,000.

Overtime pay. An above-the-line deduction for the "half" portion of time-and-a-half overtime pay, up to $12,500 for single filers or $25,000 for joint filers. The deduction is gradually reduced (phased out) for taxpayers with income over $150,000 (single filers) or $300,000 (married couples filing jointly).

Car loan interest. A deduction of up to $10,000 in interest paid on loans for new, U.S.-assembled personal vehicles.

Seniors. An additional $6,000 bonus deduction for eligible single filers age 65 and older (or $12,000 for eligible married couples).

Standard deduction. The standard deduction amounts have increased and are now permanent: single: $15,750; married filing jointly: $31,500; head of household: $23,625.

Child tax credit. The maximum credit has increased to $2,200 per qualifying child, with up to $1,700 being refundable. A valid Social Security number is required for the child and at least one spouse if filing jointly.

State and local taxes (SALT). The cap on the itemized deduction for SALT has temporarily increased to $40,000 for married couples filing jointly with phaseouts based on income over $500,000 for joint filers and $250,000 for single filers.

Retirement contributions. The total 401(k) contribution limit increased to $23,500 in 2025, with a higher catch-up limit of $11,250 for those aged 60-63.

Clean energy credits. Many clean energy tax credits, including those for new and used electric vehicles, were accelerated for expiration after September 30, 2025. Credits for home improvements expire at the end of 2025.

Digital assets. Brokers and exchanges are now required to report crypto transactions to the IRS and taxpayers using the new Form 1099-DA.

2025 federal income tax brackets

See Table 1 for changes to federal income tax brackets.

This article highlighted a few of the key changes for tax year 2025. If you have any questions about these other changes for 2025, please feel free to contact me. ■

Table 1. 2025 Federal income tax brackets

Tax Rate	Single Filers Income Range	Married Filing Jointly Income Range	Head of Household Income Range
10%	$0 to $11,925	Married Filing Jointly Income Range	$0 to $17,000
12%	$11,926 to $48,475	$23,851 to $96,950	$17,001 to $64,850
22%	$48,476 to $103,350	$96,951 to $206,700	$64,851 to $103,350
24%	$103,351 to $197,300	$206,701 to $394,600	$103,351 to $197,300
32%	$197,301 to $250,525	$394,601 to $501,050	$197,301 to $250,500
35%	$250,526 to $626,350	$501,051 to $751,600	$250,501 to $626,350
37%	Over $626,350	Over $751,600	Over $626,350

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Chapter News reports the local activities of the 22 chapters of ERA. The chapters sponsor educational and training workshops, local trade shows, legislative and industry projects to enhance the professionalism of individual members and to advance the goals and mission of the national association.

ARIZONA

Arizona ERA hosted its first annual cornhole tournament and charity event in January! It was very successful with 62 people attending. At the event, the chapter also had 50/50 raffle where a portion of the winnings went to the winner of the raffle and the remainder going to the winners' charity of choice. A huge thank you to the sponsors of this event.

CANADA

Thank you to everyone who joined ERA Canada for its November to Remember Social in support of Make-A-Wish Canada. The energy, generosity and heart in the room were truly magical — together we helped grant life-changing wishes for kids across Canada. A massive thank you to our amazing sponsors who made it all possible: Arrow Electronics, Astec SDI, Avnet, CSC Sygnum, CST-Arwin, Electro Sonic, ERA National, GMA, JLT & Associates Inc., Molex, Pipe-Thompson Technologies, Sager Electronics, Sigma Component Design, TTI, Inc., Tech-Trek, Whitmar Rep Ltd. and X Tronics — and all our behind-the-scenes partners!

Your support means the world to wish kids and their families. ERA Canada is grateful for this community — here's to more wishes granted!

CAROLINAS

Carolinas ERA is excited to participate in the UNC Charlotte Job Fair on Feb. 5! We are very excited to engage with students to encourage and consider a career in electronics and the many resources available within the ERA network.

We will be highlighting the many benefits of ERA, including: networking with industry pros; exploring vast career opportunities; and learning how manufacturers, representatives and distributors connect. Carolinas ERA believes building relationships = building success!

CHICAGOLAND-WISCONSIN

Chicagoland-Wisconsin ERA wrapped up 2025 and launched 2026 with two outstanding events that highlighted the best of our chapter: connection, education and community. On Dec. 3, members gathered for our annual Holiday Happy Hour & Toys for Tots Drive, an event that has become a cherished tradition. With a fantastic turnout, the evening combined festive networking with meaningful giving. Attendees reconnected with industry colleagues while generously supporting Toys for Tots, helping bring joy to children and families during the holiday season. The energy and enthusiasm in the room reflected the collaborative spirit of ERA and reinforced how impactful our chapter can be when we come together for a shared cause.

We carried that momentum into the new year with our 2026 Kickoff Meeting, held on Jan. 15. The event began with an engaging and informative presentation by Mike Budde Jr. of Budde Marketing, who provided valuable insight into POS reporting. Mike

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walked members through how POS reporting works, the importance of clean and accurate data, what Budde Marketing does to support manufacturers and representatives, and best practices around design registrations and splits.

Following Mike's presentation, the chapter had the opportunity to hear from ERA's new CEO, Ed Smith. Ed shared his perspective on the current state of the electronics industry and his vision for the future of ERA. His remarks were both encouraging and motivating and allowed the chapter to get to know Ed.

The evening concluded with a happy hour and networking session, giving members time to connect, exchange ideas and build relationships in a relaxed setting. Together, these two events perfectly showcased the balance our chapter strives for: education, advocacy, networking and fun. They set a strong tone for an exciting and impactful year ahead for the chapter.

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Northern California ERA is looking forward to 2026! Unfortunately the virtual session on college recruitment in early January had to be rescheduled. Please look out for a rescheduled time and date— we will be discussing college recruitment and job fair tips with Ellen Coan, CPMR, senior vice president of education for the ERA Executive Committee.

The chapter hosted a 2026 kick-off meeting at Dave & Buster's in San Jose at the end of January. Over lunch, members engaged with the chapter's strategic vision and upcoming activities for what promises to be a landmark year.

OHIO

In December the Ohio ERA hosted its annual toy drive benefiting the The Salvation Army-Greater Cleveland and what a meaningful success it was! Thanks to the generosity of members and guests, the chapter collected over $2,200 worth of toys and coats to support local children and families in the Greater Cleveland Area for the holiday season. More than 30 participants contributed, in addition to the funds raised through our Topgolf outing. Dennis Reed spoke and presented during the event, adding an inspiring and heartfelt touch to the day. Not only did the chapter come together to give back, but everyone enjoyed a great afternoon of connection, community and friendly competition. A huge thank you to everyone who donated, attended or helped organize this year's event. Your support truly makes a difference.

SOUTHWEST

Southwest ERA held a very successful fundraising and happy hour event in Dallas in November! The generosity and donations from those who attended were able to provide 941 meals for those in need through the North Texas Food Bank. The chapter had a wonderful time connecting with industry colleagues and helping our community.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Southern California ERA is thrilled to announce the registration for the 2026 Office 365 All Access Pass Training, available to all ERA members nationwide at a special discounted rate!

In today's fast-paced, tech-driven business world, Office 365 offers much more than just email and file storage. When used effectively, it transforms into a powerful productivity platform that enhances collaboration, secure information management and efficient time use. This training aims to help ERA members unlock the full potential of the Office 365 ecosystem.

Participants will get a comprehensive, virtual hands-on learning experience with tools like Outlook, Teams, OneDrive, SharePoint and more. The training focuses on real-world business use cases for independent sales reps and their teams, delivering immediate, actionable takeaways. The program emphasizes efficiency, consistency and smarter workflows, helping attendees create more organized digital workspaces. The discounted member pricing makes it a valuable opportunity to enhance technology skills without significant investment.

Benefits include access to the 2024 and 2025 video archives, and an unlimited number of employees can attend. Interested members can contact the chapter at era@erascal.org. The 2026-2027 annual training kicks off on Tues., February 10 at 9:00 a.m. PST. ■

2026 EDS SUMMIT RETURNS TO RESORTS WORLD LAS VEGAS ON MAY 18

The 2026 EDS Summit will take place May 18-22 at Resorts World Las Vegas! The event's theme is "The Week That Makes Your Year." New this year: Companies approved to attend EDS will receive a registration email from EDS Management, which will include a direct link to register. There is no passcode required this year. Once registered, your hotel booking link will be available both on your registration confirmation page and in your confirmation email, making it easy to complete your plans in one place.

Register to attend, view sponsorship information, explore meeting space options at edssummit.com.

ANNOUNCING THE NEW CAREER CENTER HUB ON ERA.ORG

ERA is excited to debut a new section on its website — the Career Center Hub, aimed at providing a single access point to ERA resources on recruitment, mentorship, internships and other support for member firms and early-career professionals. Visit era.org/career-center-hub to check it out!

As for mentorship, an ERA committee is in the beginning stages of creating a mentorship/mentee program in 2026. The first step is to collect seasoned professionals that are willing to volunteer their time to be a mentor. Interested in serving as an ERA mentor? Fill out this form: era.org/era-mentorship-program.

CONGRATULATIONS, COLT 2025 GRADUATES!

Congratulations to the 2025 class of COLT graduates! Sixteen electronics industry professionals took time out of their busy week in November to come together, collaborate, learn and brainstorm ways to elevate their local ERA chapters at ERA's annual Chapter Officers Leadership Training. Hosted by Cameron English, CPMR, Ed Smith, Walter Tobin, and Ama Derringer, this three-day virtual training program provided attendees with interactive, creative lessons on member recruitment, hosting events and organizing educational sessions, all to help chapter leaders elevate chapter activities and networking opportunities.

Well done to these participants: Drew Vojslavek; Carolann Vlastaris; MaryJo Tullo; James Pipe; Codi Sinkovitz; Kevin LaPiana; John Masucci; Jorge Rodriguez Vidrio; Sam Karr; Joe Norton; Steve Mendez, CPMR; George Montano; Tracy Williams; Gary Lee Smith, CPMR; Caleb Scott, CPSC and Veronica Stinnette.

STEP 2025 PROGRAM AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE

Elevate your sales skills with the STEP 2025 video training series! If you or your employees couldn't attend the live STEP 2025 program, don't let that valuable knowledge pass you by.

We've archived and bundled all nine sessions, which focus on topics like speaking with authority; career-planning; the AI advantage...and more! This series is designed to equip you with the practical, actionable tactics needed to close more deals and lead with confidence.

ALL STEP programs from years 2021-2025 are available for purchase at: era.org/step.

These training videos will allow you to step up your sales and professional skills, and come away with useful takeaways, best practices and key tools to succeed in today's ever-changing market. Viewers will be able to implement what they have learned right away and excel at their jobs. ■

Florida Sunshine Chapter

Advancing member success and professionalism through education, networking, and dedicated service to our customers and community

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Join our mailing list to collaborate with Florida's top manufacturers, distributors, and reps on events and initiatives.
Email us at shane@cbcelectronics.net to be added!

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MEMBER SERVICES

*For a complete list of ERA's **Recognized Resources,** visit the Member Services page on ERA.org or scan the QR code below. **Avis and Hertz Car Rentals** member discounts are ONLY accessible via the ERA website).*

- **BUDDE MARKETING SYSTEMS** is a leading provider of point-of-sale (POS) reporting. Call 708-301-2111 or email sales@buddemarketing.com.
- **EDGEWATER RESEARCH** offers research published on technology, digital advertising, e-commerce and consumer. Visit edgewaterresearch.com.
- **G&G CREATIVE SERVICES** creates impactful brands, websites, email & marketing campaigns, managed hosting, website policies, ADA compliance & ongoing technical support. Visit ggcreative.nyc/era.
- **JJM SEARCH** is the global executive search firm founded by Carla Mahrt, a 20-year electronics industry veteran. Visit jjmsearch.com.
- **LECTRIX** is a results-driven marketing company that serves electronics manufacturers, suppliers and representatives. Visit lectrixgroup.com.
- **REPFABRIC / EMPOWERING SYSTEMS'** efficiency tools for manufacturers and representatives. Sync data with partners, see trends with analytics and manage your sales pipeline in one system. Contact Carroll at carroll.boysen@repfabric.com, or 888-297-2750 x709. Visit repfabric.com.
- **SCHOENBERG FINKEL BEEDERMAN BELL & GLAZER LLC** offers legal Expert Access services to all ERA members. Visit sfbbg.com or call Adam Glazer at 312-648-2300.
- **UPS** is an ERA member service provider for shipping of all kinds. For discounts of up to 34 percent, call 800-MEMBERS (636-2377). ■

Scan QR code for more ERA Member Services information:

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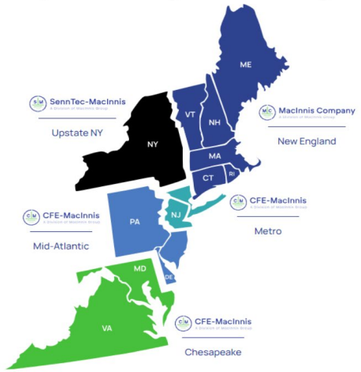

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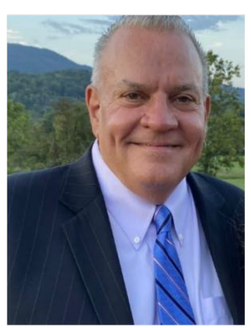

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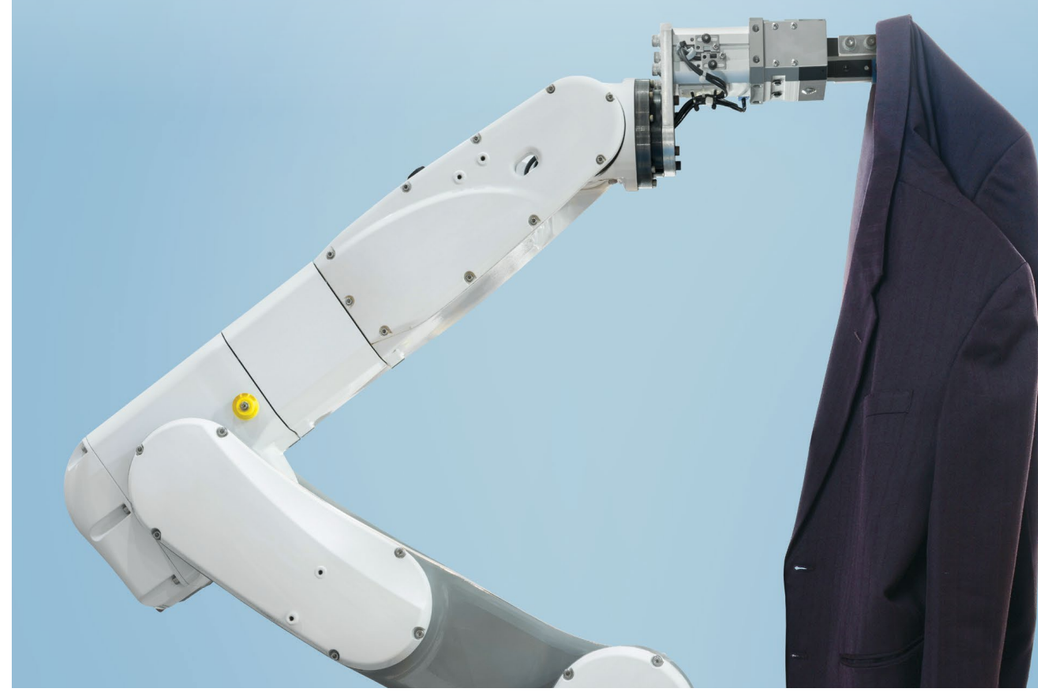

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