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Great Expectations and Other Disappointments

One of my favorite expressions is: You never get a second chance to make a first impression. It's simple, its true and more important it is meaningful. For, first impressions often create bridges or barriers between individuals and organizations that last for years.

The phenomenon is an asset or a liability depending upon your perspective or position. The slant that first impression has can create lasting cooperation between the parties or it can establish conflict. Good impressions tend to make future interactions smoother, bad impressions tend to create misunderstandings and hostility. The former takes very little effort to sustain; the latter takes a great deal of time to overcome.

In either case the relationship between individuals or agencies usually has to have a starting point. It may create the future direction for that relationship. We would be foolish if we did not aspire to start off relationships in a productive and positive manner.

In the real world of government and industry, we often fail to recognize the importance of first impressions. From the governmental perspective, the authority having jurisdiction often feels that it does not have to put a good foot forward because they are in a position to approve or disapprove what is brought to them. Industry is sometimes blind to first impressions based on the fact that they have a right to service...after all, they are the taxpayers, the ones that pay the bills either in terms of permit fees or other charges.

Does conflict ever occur during the AHJ-Industry interface period? Has one side or the other ever created a problem in building good relationships? Well, in my career I have seen both happen many times. Moreover, I suspect that good and bad relationships will be created many more times as the number of opportunities for government and industry to interact because of the expansion of the field of automatic fire protection. There will be many opportunities at the plan checking level or the field inspection level for good and bad relationships to develop.

First impressions can be improved upon if the ground rules are spelled out in advance.

Taking a page from the history book we can learn a lot about impressions from diplomats. The essence of establishing good impressions between countries and cultures was often based on a thorough assessment of the expectations of both parties before the actual face-to-face meetings were held. By studying rituals, protocols and rites of those that are different from ourselves we can often avoid making mistakes that offend. Even the most diverse of races and religions have



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learned to work together in a positive fashion. The key to good impressions is knowing the taboos and sacred cows of the other side.

In the field of built-in fire protection there are a lot of ways that the AHJ and the sprinkler industry can improve relationships by studying each other's forbidden areas: things that cause them grief or waste time and resources. Notably the expectations of both sides in this arena are of identical value. Expectations from one side of the formula are matched with expectations from the other. Neither side has the right to expect compromise from the other side unless that compromise is based of respect for the others sides needs.

For purposes of this column I have categorized expectations of the interface between AHJ and Industry as being one of the 3 "P's". These are professionalism, protocols, and productivity.

Let's deal with professionalism first. This is a word that has received a lot of attention over the last decade. In some people's minds the term relates to levels of education, i.e. doctors or lawyers CPA's. Other definitions that are used to describe a professional deal with someone that is licensed or certified to operate or practice in a specific field, i.e. airline pilot, cosmetologist or laboratory technician. There are some who merely consider whether a person is paid to perform a task versus their being a volunteer as a sign of professionalism.

In the context of the relationship between AHJ and Industry professionalism has to do with competency. The AHJ has an expectation that when they work with someone on a set of plans or an installation that the person will have all of the basic skills to complete the job with a minimum of input from the agency. They feel that they should not have to train a person in the basics or in the quality control issues of the job. Industry representatives have an expectation of a plan checker or an inspector that they are well informed of the requirements and the technology of the automatic fire sprinkler industry and that the AHJ will not have to be trained by the person who prepares the plans or installs the systems. Sounds simple doesn't it.

However, you would be amazed at the horror stories that abound regarding lack of professionalism from both sides. Examples of such things as installers putting in sidewall heads with the deflectors upside down are matched with stories of fire authorities that hadn't even heard of NFPA 13D, or an arbitrary inspector that asks for a specific requirement that isn't in the code and they won't explain the requirement. To be fair we should admit that the stories are almost equally divided between the two disciplines. Unfortunately, because the two professions are separated socially the stories are often embellished in the telling and create more bad impressions. There are legendary stories from both camps. And, the stories are almost always counterproductive.



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What I am suggesting here is that both agency and industry do everything they can to assure that the interface between parties be accomplished by the most highly trained and competent persons to represent each side. The training and education levels of these two people are absolutely essential to creating mutual respect for the other side's point of view. The more matched the competencies are for the individuals involved the better the relationships goes. Conversely, the more mismatched they are the more likely a misunderstanding will occur. Both parties are well advised to keep the balance by constant inter-action and information exchange.

Our second P stands for protocols. In the simplest terms possible this is nothing more than having ground rules for interaction. These can be anything from having a standard way of submitting plans for review to the manner in which the installer asks for a field inspection. The worst thing that can happen is that these protocols be highly personalized and based on friendships or long-term acquaintances. Protocols are best structured around a set of practices that are recognized by both parties as being fair and reasonable...and reproducible for everyone. Many AHJ's reduce their protocols to writing in the form of departmental policies. Many from the sprinkler industry have worked out excellent protocols with the AHJ's to reduce the ambiguity of their working relationship.

A classic example of the latter was recently introduced in some fire departments in California. In order to improve upon scheduling activities some fire departments have installed fax machines and the contractors have used their fax machines to submit a standardized form to request field inspections. This eliminates the proverbial telephone tag and provides hard copy for record keeping. The AHJ uses the fax to also notify the contractors of updates on information or policies and practices. In this case both the agency and the industry have gained from a mutually agreed upon practice.

Productivity is similar to professionalism, but deserves its own considerations. What I am referring to in productivity is the timely completion of tasks so that either party can bring closure to its responsibilities. From a standpoint of the AHJ productivity is measured by the amount of time it takes to clear a project through the entire process. In short, the shorter the amount time that a project takes, because it has fewer errors or reinspections the more productive the agency is in accomplishing its workload. From the industry point of view productivity is measured by whether or not the project is completed within the budgeted or bid price. The more delays are introduced into the project by the AHJ the smaller the profit margin becomes.

Productivity is an issue in both government and industry. Time is money and any problems in the relationship between the two parties that wastes time, wastes money. If there is anything that will



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cause conflict between two friends it is money. So, imagine how much conflict it can introduce into relationships that have problems already. Therefore, the primary emphasis that emerges from the first two considerations (professionalism and protocols) is to find ways of improving productivity.

This can best be accomplished as joint effort. Communicating the productivity issues of a governmental organization is no easy task because there is no profit margin. But, if one looks at the clearance time of a specific project as representing the confidence level between the two parties then less is more. The best of all worlds is when a project is cleared as quickly as possible, in compliance with all of the necessary requirements and the contractor makes a reasonable profit.

As we mentioned in the beginning of this article one never gets a second chance to make a first impression. Most AHJ's already exist and many companies are in the automatic sprinkler business. Isn't the problem already resolved? I wish it were, but it isn't. Daily I hear about ruptures between agencies and the industry that are counterproductive to the entire sprinkler movement. Detractors from the current expansion movement in the sprinkler field often point to these differences of opinion as evidence that the concept is doomed to failure. Or, that it should be restrained until these problems can be resolved.

Others have been very successful in establishing working relationships that are getting better every day. The key for building and sustaining successful relationships is the recognition that this is a symbiotic relationship. Professionalism exists on all sides of the fire protection arena but competency must be proven by the development of working practices that improves the productivity of both parties.

All is not lost either if first impressions don't pan out. How many of us really made a good impression upon our future spouses...or our future in laws the first time out? By considering the elements we have discussed in this column even bad impressions can be improved upon with time.