

Major Challenges Facing the Industry

By Steven Baird

One major challenge facing the industry is the development and inclusion of new technology in installations with appropriate reliance on testing for effectiveness. Everyone on all sides of the issue understands the need for safety, and, in support of safety as a goal, the effectiveness of fire prevention and fire suppression solutions. Where different groups diverge is in the implementation.

The largest percentage of buildings are constructed using a "for-profit" model, and it's safe to agree that all parties want that to continue. Central planning and government funding of all construction projects would not serve the interests of occupants and potential occupants. If we want buildings (and we do) we need to make sure that the end-to-end experience of investing in, designing, developing, and owning a building can be profitable on some level.

Building owners, in their role as investors, quite rightly focus on making their buildings successful. Market forces ensure that profits will be available for smart investors, but will be kept in check.

Within that model, building owners and developers are interested in solutions that will meet safety requirements at the lowest cost, which depends on innovation. At the same time, many industry participants are resistant to change and repeatedly rely on 50-year-old technology, choosing reliability over potential cost savings or improved effectiveness.

How can we break this deadlock?

On some level we have to prepare the next generation to be open to technologies as they arrive, but at the same time conscious of the need for product testing that is both forward-thinking and rigorous. However, we cannot be responsible stewards of new building development and existing buildings by simply passing the requirement for development and innovation on the next generation. We, the current generation, must also work together and hold each other accountable for developing and evolving forward-thinking attitudes towards product innovation and code advancement.

Another challenge the industry must tackle is the requirement to update our codes on a more aggressive schedule. As it stands now, the main input for updating industry codes comes from investigation of past events.

If we want to do the best we can for building occupants to

ensure their safety, we cannot continue to react to past events and update industry codes only as demanded by the latest, most tragic disaster. Fixing this will require even greater efforts on behalf of associations and other industry groups to meet with manufacturers, building owners, and contractors to both provide and receive presentations on new solutions, specifically focused on what could be done to address growing threats or provide greater safety.

One final concern is the extended timeline involved in bringing a new idea to the market. The path from the drawing board to the manufacturing floor and the shipping dock is long and difficult for companies in any industry, but it's even more so for manufacturers and suppliers of fire safety and fire suppression technology. Although there are obvious reasons and many historical instances that stand as examples of why we should not rush solutions to

the market, where product innovations can genuinely improve safety by either making fire suppression more effective or by making effective fire suppression more affordable, we need to find a way to shorten the time horizon for acceptance of new technologies and solutions.

A small step towards that is making sure that industry associations exchange as much information as possible from leading innovative manufacturers on product development. As an industry, we need to find a way to make the expertise of testing and product investigation transferable or communicable, so that other groups and organizations can perform the testing functions with oversight from industry bodies. Properly structured, this can be beneficial to manufacturers and building owners, as it could lower the cost of new product design on introduction, and speed the process of bringing a new idea to market.

About the Author:

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