



## Highlights from the 2019 ERA Conference

*ERA asked 2019 Conference Committee Chair John Hutson to share his insights about this year's 50th Anniversary Conference, including what were some of his personal and professional experiences at the conference in his role as conference chair; how will the knowledge and new business connections gained during the conference impact his business; and what are his key takeaways from the event? Here is what he had to say.*

### What was the highlight of this conference?

Wow – this is a very difficult question for me to answer.

I struggle with this question because my role as conference chair was such an incredible experience both personally and professionally that providing a single highlight is extremely challenging.

Personally, I get a tremendous sense of reward in being part of a team that creates something from scratch as part of a project. This experience is even more rewarding when the team is as dedicated to a project as this planning committee was to ERA's 50th Anniversary Conference. My position as conference chair allowed me to work with all the members of this team. To see the results of their efforts come together and be on full display over two and a half days instilled in me a tremendous sense of pride. This was certainly a personal highlight for myself and I encourage all of you to consider being part of future ERA Conference Planning Committees.

On a professional note, a highlight of this year's ERA Conference that resonated with me can be tied directly back to the "Embracing Tomorrow" part of the conference theme. Many of the general and breakout sessions had a very futuristic theme and I always like to hear what others think about how the future is going to affect how we do our jobs. Much was shared about what the manufacturers' rep firm of the future might look like and what will be expected of them; what the salesperson of future might look like and what skillsets will be required for their success; and what changes the future might bring to the roles and responsibilities of the manufacturers' rep, manufacturer, and distributor in order to best sell product to the customer. I found the diverse perspectives around what changes the future might bring relative to these interrelationship topics to be incredibly valuable. And the conference provided me the opportunity to reflect on what changes I should consider now to assure that my organization is well positioned to adapt to these changes tomorrow.

### Were there any parts of the conference that you found especially useful for your business?

ERA's focus on education as a core component in its' goal to set high standards for professionalism in our industry is always front and center at the conference and this year was no different. The conference program continually provides

opportunities to be better informed and enlightened of best practices and trends that are taking place in our industry. Although I always like to hear from professionals about certain topics, the fact that so much of the learning opportunities come from industry peers is very special.

This year, I was particularly impressed by the prognostications around the importance of data, automated intelligence, virtual reality, and changes to the manufacturers' representative's role in marketing to be very insightful. These perspectives left me convinced that we are going to be doing things differently in the very near future and the conference has me thinking of changes that I need to be considering now to assure that my organization is best positioned for success when these changes come. This was certainly worth the price of admission.

### How will the conference impact execution of your job/business?

I have a long list of things that I learned from the conference that I am excited to implement, but how much the conference impacts your business depends on how willing and disciplined you are to execute on a manageable number of your takeaways. This is so important, because after the conference, we all return to the tactical part of our business that is our hamster wheels and we have a hard time addressing some of the strategic lessons that were learned. I hope that this article reminds attendees to take a strategic time out, review their notes, and consider a timeline for the top things that they have learned.

I see the ERA Conference as the best professional learning experience that our industry has to offer, and therefore I try to bring as many team members as I can. Although I find that there are many advantages to having my teammates participate, our ability to attend all breakout seminars and get different perspectives on all that the conference has to offer is the most valuable. This requires an immediate download that we have after the conference closes, along with a follow up once we get off our hamster wheel. If possible, I encourage attendees to bring other members of their team and to make sure that providing for the same collective download is done. I always find the feedback to be very interesting.

### How would you rate the quality of the networking at this event?

MacInnis Group continually tries to support as many industry events as possible on a local, regional, national and international basis with networking in mind. We are very much in the people business and networking remains a very important part of what we do. However, networking is not just shaking someone's hand, or getting their business card. The true magic of networking is when an introduction is reinforced by the

sharing of knowledge. Out of all the events that we participate in, no other event provides the opportunity to network at this level by design.

Be it the all-inclusive cocktail reception, round table assignments for keynote and general sessions, the interactive breakout seminars, the fun that is had at the networking dinner, or all of the time in between, ERA strives to create an environment where everyone is encouraged to make introductions, ask questions and share their experiences and ideas; be engaging. As a result, I am convinced that no other event provides as much opportunity to network with top professionals in our industry at the level of intimacy as does the ERA Conference.

Personally, I can think of multiple individuals that I had the opportunity to meet at ERA conferences that are not just colleagues, but friends. I don't know if I ever would have had such an

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222 S. Riverside Plaza, Suite 2100 • Chicago, IL 60606 • 312.648.2300

FEATURE ARTICLE

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opportunity elsewhere.

### What is it about the breakout session that make them so popular?

The breakout sessions continue to be one aspect of our conference that probably stands out the most. You know that it was a great conference when 100 percent of those who responded to our post conference survey said that they would highly recommend the ERA Conference to a colleague and that the most common complaint was that the breakout sessions were so good that the respondents wish that they could attend them all.

This was not always the case. We only have so much time, and to add breakout sessions requires that we take time from somewhere else. In fact, the first ERA Conference that I helped plan in 2013 had six general sessions, but since that time, in response to the post conference feedback, the Conference Committee reduced that number to five and then to four. It is interesting that as much feedback as we get about disappointment in not being able to attend enough breakouts, we continue to get feedback asking for more.

I firmly believe that the breakout sessions continue to be a key part of the conference's success because of the degree of interaction that is considered in their planning and encouraged in their delivery. A high level of participation from the attendees is a key element for a successful breakout, and the willingness of some of the industry's top minds to lead breakouts has been a major contributor to the breakout sessions success. At the end of the day, however, the breakout sessions are all about content, content, content — and the credit for this belongs entirely to the creativity, diversity, experience, and professionalism of the Breakouts Planning Sub-Committee. Working with them was truly an amazing experience.

### Who would benefit from attending the conference?

In the past, the ERA Conference was attended predominately by rep owners, along with some manufacturing members, but that has certainly changed to some degree. The addition of distributor members has contributed to a more diverse attendee list. However, I feel that the real driving factor as to who benefits from attending the conference is the content.

On the surface, the content of the conference has become very relative to anyone who has a vested interest in how to successfully participate in the field sales function of electronic parts and services. As a result of this content, anyone who needs to or wants to better understand and contribute to all aspects of a field sales team has much to benefit from attending an ERA Conference. I always try to bring my team members who are active in sales and distribution management, contribute to the long-term strategy of the organization, or have not been to an ERA Conference and wish to do so.

### What is involved in the conference planning process? .

The planning process for the ERA Conference begins before the prior conference ends because the following conference chairperson is already planning to align their team. After the post conference survey results are digested and a list of volunteers is created, the chairperson strategically picks four reps and four manufacturers/distributors to co-chair the four sub-committee positions — Keynote, General Sessions, Breakout Sessions, and Sponsorship. This group, along with a few others, makes up the core Conference Committee.

After the core committee is established, the chairperson assists the sub-committee co-chairs in picking their sub-committee members, at which point a series of core committee and sub-committee conference calls are scheduled.

It is during these sub-committee calls that the content for each sub-committee is created, while the progress of these calls is reported by the co-chairs back to the core committee for further discussion and review.

This structure allows for the delegation of responsibilities and the entire process has been incredibly streamlined. When you add the professional support of ERA Events Coordinator Erin Collins and the rest of the ERA staff, the commitment in time is minimal and your participation can be very rewarding.

I have answered questions at length regarding how invaluable ERA's conference has been to my organization and our industry, but I have neglected to recognize the generous support of the conference sponsors.

This year's 50th Anniversary Conference brought in a record number of sponsors. This allowed us to spend money on world class speakers and support the entire event from start to finish. Without all of you we would not have a conference and the entire ERA membership is grateful for your support. ■



**John Hutson, CPMR**

*President  
MacInnis Group*

*John Hutson, CPMR, is president of MacInnis Group and 2019 ERA Conference committee chair. He joined MacInnis in 1992. Prior to that, he held a sales engineer position at the Tyco Printed Circuit Group.*

*Hutson has held numerous New England Chapter level positions, is presently chapter president and has been involved on the past two ERA conference committees. He has a B.A. from Syracuse University, and an M.A. from Wesleyan University.*

*During his free time, John enjoys skiing in the winter, golfing in the summer and travels year-round.*

*Hutson can be reached at john@macinnis-company.com, or at 781-762-8090.*