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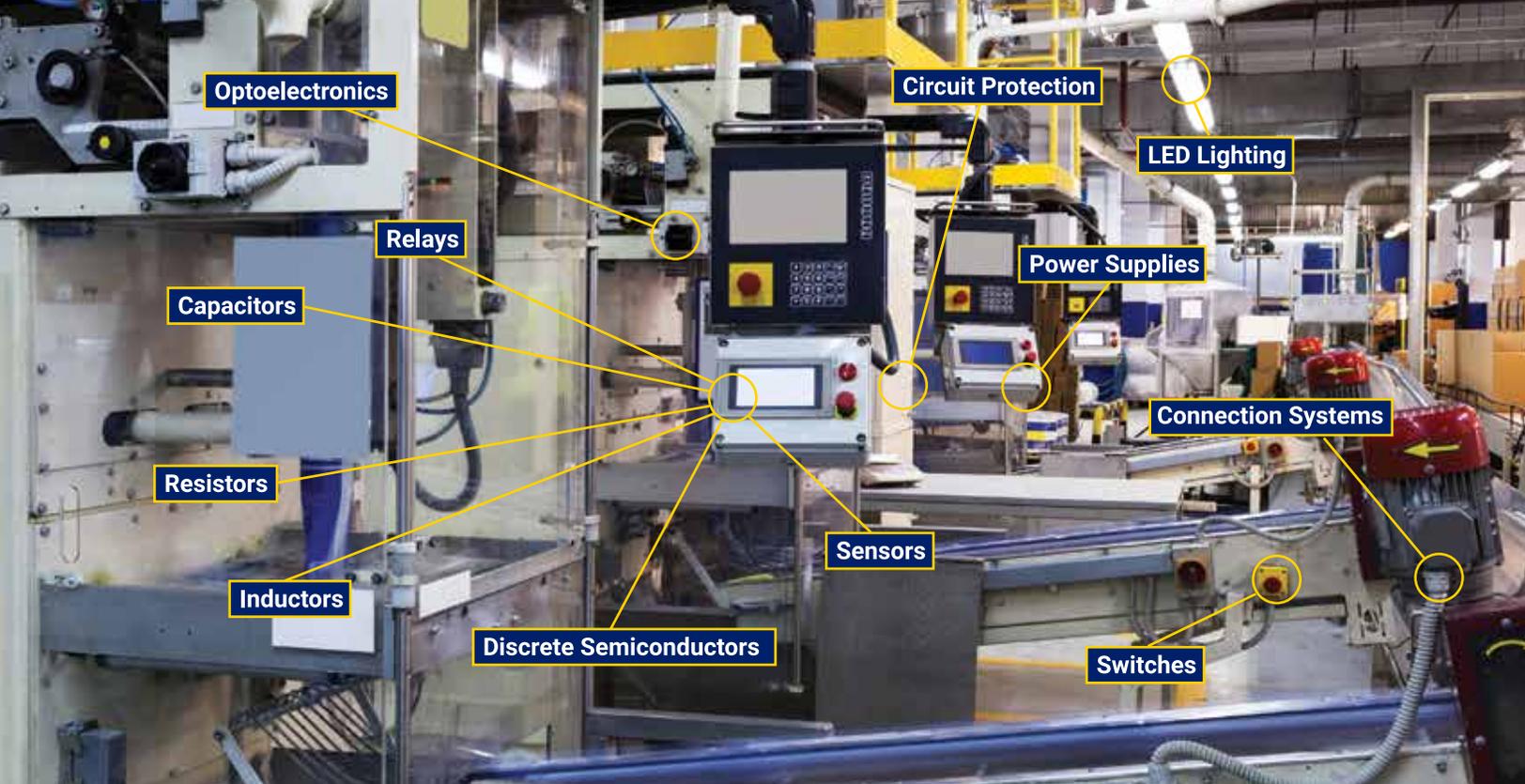
 Electronics Representatives Association

SUMMER 2020

## **Facing Disruption at an Unprecedented Level**

**The Changing Role of the  
Traditional Field Sales Position  
Creates Opportunity**

**Inside:**  
**Executive Commentary, p. 11**  
**ERA White Paper, p. 16**  
**ERA Survey, p. 31**



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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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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

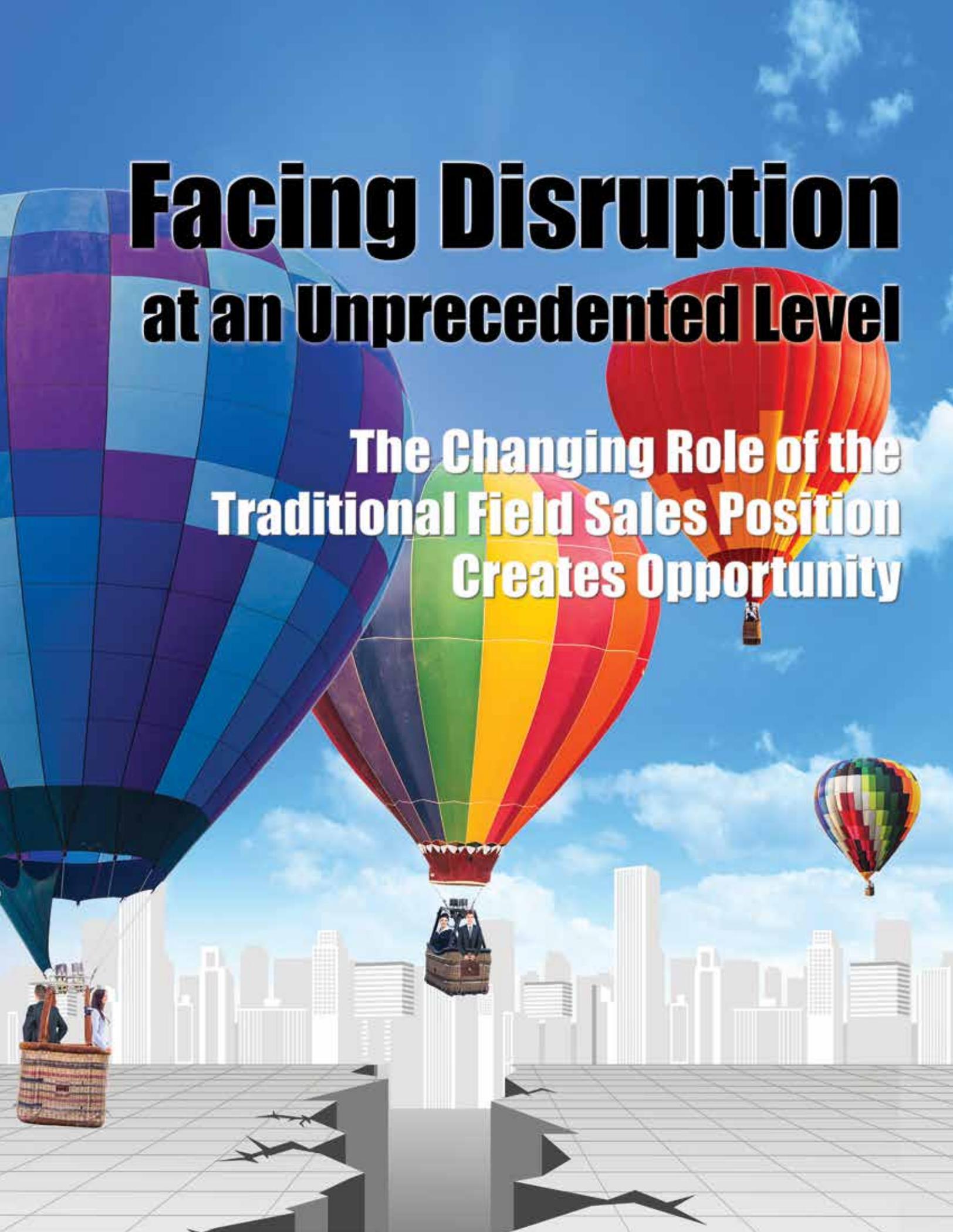
- 4 **COVER STORY:**  
Facing disruption at an unprecedented level
- 8 **FEATURE ARTICLE:**  
Business analytics: What's all the buzz?
- 15 **RISING STARS:**  
Commitment to continuous learning and development leads to success
- 16 **ERA WHITE PAPER**  
Line conflicts: Navigating to a mutually beneficial resolution
- 31 **SURVEY**  
ERA member survey

## COLUMNS & DEPARTMENTS

- 7 **SOMEONE YOU SHOULD KNOW:**  
Amy Hain
- 11 **EXECUTIVE COMMENTARY:**  
The times they are a-changin'
- 13 **FROM THE TOP:**  
'Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore'
- 14 **WELCOME, NEW MEMBERS!**
- 19 **LEGALLY SPEAKING:**  
Hell hath no fury like a principal scorned
- 21 **WHERE ARE THEY NOW?:**  
Celebrating an exceptional couple: Roger and Peggy Ponto
- 23 **THE SUBJECT IS TAXING:**  
Update on COVID-19 and the IRS
- 25 **MARKETING GROUP DIGEST:**
- Components
  - Materials, Assembly, Production & Supply
- 27 **NEWS BEAT**
- 29 **CHAPTER NEWS**
- 33 **CLASSIFIED ADS**

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SUMMER 2020



# **Facing Disruption at an Unprecedented Level**

**The Changing Role of the  
Traditional Field Sales Position  
Creates Opportunity**

Let's take a step back for a moment.

Back in late February 2020, little did we know that within a few weeks' time, we would be thrust into a disruption that — fair to say — none of us have ever experienced. While presented with an opportunity to rise to the occasion, our various strengths and weaknesses would be immediately revealed.

The 2020 ERA Conference breakout presentation panel, "The Disruption Opportunity," provided a discussion of many topics pertaining to the obsolescence of the traditional field sales position, among them APIs, RPAs, and the Amazon effect and ecommerce.

We discussed how these topics represented opportunity if we would simply take the time to understand and develop a strategy to "make a wise pivot," which consists of reallocating financial, innovative and talent resources to embrace technologies available today, thus future-proofing our business models.

The idea of an impending "obsolescence of field sales" seems overwrought and sensationalistic at first blush. However, if we're honest with ourselves, there are a lot of things that can be read into the tea leaves. Many, if not all, questions customers ask can be answered by Siri, Alexa or Google. Most, if not all, reporting and process improvements are now automated on various platforms (APIs, RPAs, ecommerce), and my Rolodex has been replaced by Salesforce. Artificial intelligence (AI), process automation, digitization; these are but three of the many heads of the inevitable "obsolescence" hydra we'll be battling to keep our jobs. Digitization isn't happening; it has happened.

Sit back in your chair, close your eyes and think of things you are proud to provide to your customer and/or your company. Here are a few of mine:

1. I am a dependable resource when my customers' world consists of just the opposite.
2. I have a wide range of skills across a large scope of technologies, allowing for true empathy when customer or company undertakes a new project.
3. I am adaptive and hyper-flexible.

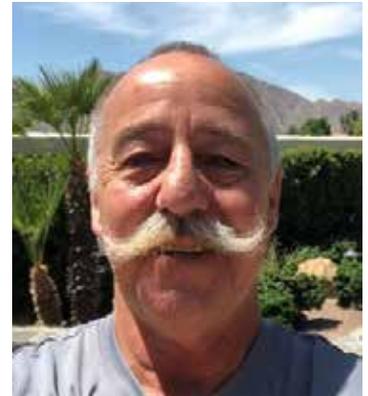
I'm going to bet there is not a single thing on your list that is binary. Nothing about the work in which you take pride is black-and-white. Most importantly, nothing on that list can be automated. Ironically, automation/digitalization is the exact technology that will enable us to get "away from the laptop and to the negotiation table." Our customers are using the very digital technologies to make more cool stuff faster than ever, and we need to do the same in order to keep up!

Automation is a friend, not a foe.

Thus, embrace making the wise pivot.

The original panel topics brought forth some very valued observations and statements from both the panel and attendees. Below are just a few:

- Intelligent supply chains being powered by AI, analytics and machine-learning bring vital purchasing intelligence immediately to the human — and sometimes bypassing the need for human — intervention.
- eSourcing brings many new software tools that allow for spend analysis options, enhanced spending habits and assessment of supplier capabilities. In short, it brings sourcing to a single virtual platform for screening customers regardless of location or constraints.
- APIs — possible/probable/happening — enable computer systems within the supply chain to talk to each other. Already, some customers are using APIs to collect pricing and delivery information, make buying decisions and place orders. In the process, buyers are eliminated and the traditional inside salesperson is removed from the equation. In essence, this is computers buying from computers, which means little to no opportunity for a salesperson to influence or guide the purchasing decision. Add next-level AI and this will move from an experimental/fringe activity to the dominant way supply chain transactions occur.
- RPAs take people out of routine tasks like expediting, confirmations, requests for data and much more, reducing the opportunities for a supplier employee to interact with a customer employee, which in turn reduces the ability of the supplier to develop a personal relationship. I think we should consider breaking this topic into two: 1) routine tasks handled today by administrative types, and 2) requests for expediting tasks and data (product information). In the first group, I don't observe a lot of additional selling, it involves people gifted at processing data. It seems like both parties have a lot to gain by automating this portion. In the second group, I believe that there is an interim step happening before full machine-to-machine communication, and that is by using AI or ML to serve up information to our teams, which makes them more efficient, more accurate, and with more options — all making them much more valuable to the customer, therefore enabling more



**Steve Cholas**

VP Business Development  
Big Zeta

*As an industry expert in digital engagement, sales and marketing, Steve Cholas has developed strategic programs for distributors and suppliers globally. With over 30 years of experience, Cholas is a marketer companies rely on to develop partnerships and strategies to achieve tangible goals.*

*Cholas' passion for the electronic industry has allowed for him to direct leading media, UI/UX and design tool brands in the electronics industry such as EET, EDN, EEWeb, Electronic Products, EBN, 21ic (China) Aspencore and Transim.*

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(continued on next page)

## COVER STORY: Facing disruption

(continued from previous page)

human-to-human communication.

- Ecommerce is being adopted by component manufacturers to contribute disintermediation of channel dependence. The potential of this today is more aligned with the larger enterprise manufacturers, and we will see this become mainstream as companies invest in the new tech platforms that allow quicker, less expensive adoption for ecommerce on their sites.
- The role of field sales is clearly being compromised and social media selling and other techniques that technology enables are helping keep our sales teams engaged as our targets isolate themselves. Younger people coming into the workforce will only accelerate the trend. Field salespeople tend to be the biggest expense item for many in the component supply chain, and as the ROI on the position diminishes, the herd is likely to be significantly thinned. It is incumbent on all of our field salespeople to use this time to acquire new skills, new tools and adopt a new way of thinking so they are not the ones thinned in the herd.

As we, hopefully, have started to pivot due to the unprecedented time we are experiencing, learn how to seize new opportunities! It's all about what we do to confront the inevitable forces ahead of us. Don't wait for another disruption to come to you, disrupt yourself! Companies that seize the opportunity, rather than wait until a performance decline, are forced to change and transform preemptively. How you identify and respond to disruption not only has implications for your business but also your future viability and bottom line.

One thing this pandemic has taught us is that disruption is inevitable and that we can and must learn from it. End of the day this is still a people business; what matters is how we innovate personally to establish value.

A special shout out to the panel members — Heather Fulara, Newark element14; Alex Gabbi, McCombs School of Business, The University of Texas at Austin; Chris Rooney, Tecumseh Consulting; Ali Sebt, IoT consultant; and Mark Zack, TTI, Semiconductor Group — and Michael Knight, TTI, for their early input into the discussion topics. ■

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# SOMEONE YOU SHOULD KNOW



**Amy Hain**  
Director of Global Accounts  
RFMW

*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 Amy Hain, director of global accounts for RFMW.*

*The Representor asked Amy a few questions about her time in the electronics distribution business and her experiences with ERA. Here is what she had to say.*

## **Tell us a little bit about yourself.**

I was born and raised in Chicagoland. I am the director of global accounts for RFMW, a distributor of radio frequency (RF) and microwave components. I don't like to sit still. I am always busy doing something, professionally, politically or personally. I am the mother of two teenagers, who are currently exploring options for university (How did that happen so quickly?).

## **How long have you been in the distribution business?**

My time in the distribution industry began in 2007.

## **How did you become interested in the electronics industry?**

It was an evolution, of course. When I was in university, I had no plans to enter into the electronics industry. I was carrying a full course load at school and working full-time as well (in a different industry). A friend of mine was working for an interconnect manufacturer that was growing by leaps and bounds and needed some temporary help with accounting work. He asked if I would help and I declined with fervor, letting him know that I had zero disposable time. He insisted that if you wanted something done, you ask a busy person, and I guess that sold me. I ended up really enjoying the industry. I left my full-time job to stay at that company and ended up working for them for almost 10 years but in a sales role. I moved from manufacturing to distribution in 2007 and love the fact that my role allows me exposure and influence in all areas of the business, functionally and geographically.

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

I love being involved in tech and being in a global role. Although tech will continue to present us with ethical challenges, it has the potential to be a great equalizer and I find that exciting, challenging and fulfilling. Being in a global role is also extraordinarily rewarding. As Mark Twain once said, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness." Connecting with people across regions in a meaningful way has allowed me to celebrate our differences while appreciating the value of our interconnectedness.

## **Briefly describe your organization.**

RFMW is the premier pure-play technical distributor of RF and microwave semi-conductors, connectors and components for

our customers and suppliers by providing component, value add and design solutions through a focused technical sales and marketing organization.

## **What recent innovations, best practices and/or changes has your organization made?**

Our most significant change would be the acquisition by TTI. Most of us have been through a merger or acquisition and understand that it can be a challenging time. Company cultures can clash, strategies are frequently misaligned, and often, the core competencies of the acquired company are diluted as a result. Fortunately, co-owners Joel Levine and Steve Takaki were experienced enough with M&A to be hyper-sensitive to these variables, when entering acquisition discussions. TTI's leadership and focused strategy as a specialty distributor have allowed RFMW to remain focused on its core competencies but do so with the additional power and resources needed to more successfully execute on the strategy.

## **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?**

ERA has been a fantastic resource for me. During my first year with ERA, I was able to participate as a panelist at the annual conference. In the second year, I was a member of the breakout sessions committee, and in the third year, I was fortunate enough to be able to co-chair the breakout sessions. The more involved I become with ERA, the more I see the value in the organization. The "big picture" discussions on market trends and best practices are thought-provoking, and ERA members are very focused on tactics as well. We see that our world continues to evolve and agree that we must determine how to continue to provide value as that evolution occurs. On a personal level, I've also formed friendships with some amazing people, and I'm grateful to ERA for that as well.

## **Are you active on social media? Do you follow ERA? Have ERA updates via social media been helpful to you?**

I am very active on social media and believe that it is a strong tool in today's environment. Professionally, I find LinkedIn to be incredibly valuable. Gone are the days when LinkedIn's primary function was recruitment.

*(continued on page 22)*



## Business analytics: What's all the buzz?

“What gets measured, gets improved.” A quote from famed management consultant Peter Drucker has never been more relevant than today, but it doesn’t tell us the whole story. The quote is from long before the era of big data, business analytics software and the information overload we face today.

Data analytics, typically shortened to analytics, is not a new concept. In the 19th century, the U.S. government would spend almost 10 years collecting and analyzing census data, completing just in time to begin collecting data again. Henry Ford applied measurement and time studies to perfect the assembly line. Manually collecting and analyzing data was an expensive venture and only justified in certain circumstances.

Computer technology began to make analytics more readily available, although it was still quite expensive. Computers filled rooms and took teams of people to keep running, hard drives stored a few megabytes of data and were incredibly slow. Innovations like relational databases paved the way for more widespread use of analytics.

As innovation accelerated, desktop computing put tools like spreadsheets into the hands of small businesses. Now, businesses of all sizes could perform rudimentary analytics and sort their data without programming. The birth of the internet drove further innovation in big data. Search engines could scour the internet and store the results ready to answer questions in milliseconds.

Data storage became very expensive with computing resources becoming the driving factor in cost. Now anyone with an internet connection can pull data and use spreadsheets to analyze data. The Excel Pivot Table was born. How can it get any better than this?

Cloud computing or “The Cloud” is where the innovation is happening today. Business application software vendors are just scratching the surface of what these new analytics tools can do for small businesses. Cloud-based APIs (application program interfaces) for artificial intelligence, machine learning, data aggregation via ETL (export, transform, load) are all technologies that software companies are leveraging to provide manufacturers’ representatives with business analytics tools that were once only available to the Fortune 1000. Never have we had access to more applications that are just a click away, Business Analytics and Business Intelligence software included. The tools alone don’t make the whole story. First, you must make sure you are analyzing the right data.

Leadership in the manufacturers’ representative firm should first determine the primary metrics or key performance indicators (KPIs). The KPIs should be aligned with the firm’s business plan and be customer-focused. Companies should spend time defining their customer.

Is it the company you sell to or the company you sell for? Make sure the metrics align with

your customer. Also, KPIs must be continuously evaluated as business climate changes.

Give managers the analytics tools they need to measure and manage with these metrics. Managers should not simply manage these metrics without additional consideration and should refrain from simply putting the business on autopilot. In many small businesses, the leaders and managers are the same people, so they must play both roles. This is easier said than done. Now armed with more than instinct alone to achieve the business objectives, managers have another advantageous tool.

Business analytics can help you run your business when used to manage the right KPIs. It can give you an unfair advantage when used right and be a disaster if used wrong.

A great example of this advantage is how a professional baseball team portrayed in the movie Moneyball used analytics to turn scouting and recruiting on its head. The old inputs no longer produced the appropriate outputs.

Applications like customer relationship management (CRM) and sales/commission management are invaluable tools to run your business, particularly if designed for manufacturers' representatives. CRM can help you foster strong long-term relationships with the customers you sell to and the principals you sell for by providing prompt and effective customer service and should be one of the sources for business analytics. Sales/commission management software can help you roll up your data to the end customer and distributor across all your lines, help determine compensation and much more. It should also be a source for your business analytics. You may have other systems that can be a source for these analytics.

Your team is probably managing opportunities, tracking design wins, importing commissions and more. Are you really maximizing your return on investment for all this work? There is value hidden in the data just waiting to be found and analytics can help you find it.

Who is my highest ROI principal? What is my largest growth market? What trends can help me predict future commissions? Which salesperson has the best pipeline? What design wins dropped off last month? The list goes on and on, and while the questions are important, the visibility into the data will answer questions you did not even know to ask or were possible to answer.

- Analytics gives you data visualizations that help you make decisions based on facts, not on instincts alone.
- Analytics lets you pull out hidden data like profit-maximizing markets, drop-offs, and trends.

- Analytics allows you to slice and dice the data to extract insights that give your organization a competitive advantage.
- Analytics gives you findings to share with team members and manufacturers, keeping everyone focused on the goals and KPIs.

Sounds good, right? But who has the time? Where do you start? Can you afford it? Empowering Systems has taken the bulk of the work out of analytics. AccountReporter Analytics has pre-configured dashboards for electronic manufacturers' representatives so you can skip over the work and dive right into growing your business right out of the box at a price any rep firm can afford.

Do manufacturers' representatives really need analytics? The answer is 100 percent yes. They need analytics because it gives them a higher return on the data they collect, gives immediate feedback on KPIs and visibility into their business in the past, present and future.

Today, manufacturer' representatives cannot afford to miss out on the advantages of analytics. Measure what you want to improve so you don't have to run on instinct alone.

### About Empowering Systems

Empowering Systems, an ERA Recognized Resource, has been developing business-enhancing solutions for manufacturers' representatives for more than 20 years. It develops cloud-based sales tools that empower manufacturers' representatives by streamlining administrative tasks and surfacing data they never knew they had. It allows them to focus on increasing sales/commissions and offering outstanding customer service to both their customers and the principals that they represent and provides a deeper understanding of technology trends. ■

*Carroll Boysen is marketing manager for Empowering Systems Inc. Boysen can be reached at [cboysen@empoweringsystems.com](mailto:cboysen@empoweringsystems.com).*

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FEATURE ARTICLE



# Stronger Together: Reconnecting & Reinventing for Success

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# The times they are a-changin’

The summer months are upon us. This is usually a time to look forward to getting away from the office and spend more time with the family, to travel to new places, fly on planes, check into hotels or resorts, eat at new restaurants ...

Boy, have times changed!

When did we ever think we would yearn for the days in the office, getting up at 4:00 a.m. to get on a flight to a city, to attend a meeting, to visit a customer, to share a meal with old/new friends and then to do the same thing the next day or longer?

Why do we miss the old customs of our recent past? Are we really hoping to return to the old days or some combination of the old and the “new abnormal” of the past few months? What will we take with us into our new world when this new abnormal emerges? Are we already in it? Is this how we will be living our business and personal lives for the near term? Forever?

Let me take a few moments of your time to summarize what all of us have gone through these past few months and share some thoughts on what to expect going forward.

When our world changed in early March, none of us thought we would still be dealing with these issues four-plus months later. What began as a perceived short-term inconvenience morphed into a longer-term way of life.

What did all of you do to react to this? Plenty.

The initial two to four weeks looked something similar to this:

You immediately sprang into action and equipped your company with the hardware and software necessary to work from home. You installed various opportunity tracking software on your home computers so you could continue to update and report opportunities to your principals and maintain contact with your distributor partners.

You also wanted to ensure that you could still get in touch with your customers, both engineering and purchasing, at their home offices. Did you have their cell numbers or just their work phone numbers and work emails? Had you ever called them on their cell? Would they even take a call on their cell? How did they want to be communicated with, if at all?

It was certainly not a one-size-fits-all approach to your customer outreach initiatives.

You established a working agreement with your principals on opportunity updates, how and how often to talk via Zoom, GoToMeeting, phone or email. You also established the same dialogue with your channel partners to communicate on supply chain issues with common customers and ongoing branch training sessions.

You began to establish a cadence. You eventually began to settle into a new daily and weekly schedule, while working from a home office, possibly sharing this space with your significant other and children at home as schools were closed. All of you trying to carve out your own space, all drawing off of the same WiFi connection ...

We all began to feel good about what we had done, didn’t we? We seemed to have nailed it! We were even beginning to tell everyone that “we are not missing a beat,” perhaps even saying: “We are just as productive NOW or even more productive than we were before the virus hit!” We were so proud of our companies and our team members!

But are we really as productive? Most of us grew up carrying a bag, and still do, visiting customers and manufacturers, our channel partners, spreading the word about our principals’ products, managing our “book of business,” following up on leads, seeking out NEW customers and NEW opportunities for our principals.

How effective have any of us been on MEETING NEW CUSTOMERS, DISCOVERING NEW OPPORTUNITIES, WORKING ON NEW DESIGNS with engineers who are at home? I would argue that we may have nailed the “as productive” aspect of existing customers but may have missed the boat on developing new opportunities with NEW customers.

All of us need to pat ourselves on the back for doing a GREAT job in reacting and setting up our companies and holding on to our existing business. However, I sense that we are certainly not as productive as we were in the past. We should never confuse activity with accomplishment.

*(continued on page 28)*



by **Walter E. Tobin**  
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# ‘Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore’

In the 1939 movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy says to her dog at one point, “Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.” It’s a phrase that has come to mean that we have stepped outside of what is considered normal; we have entered a place or circumstance that is unfamiliar and uncomfortable; we have found ourselves in a strange situation. “Outside of normal, unfamiliar, uncomfortable, strange ...” — sounds like life in 2020 where many are relegated to their basement and talking to their dogs, or having their cats walk across their keyboard as Bryan Teen, CPMR, president of Tech Marketing, pointed out on a recent ERA Water Cooler video call ... but I digress.

Unlike in the movie, however, we cannot close our eyes, click our heels three times, think, “there’s no place like home,” and return to the normal, familiar and comfortable.

As I consider what we are facing with respect to COVID-19, I think about three distinct periods, which I’ve labeled Survival, Searching and Stability. (I was going to call them phases but it seems like the states have dominated that terminology, so I will purposely avoid it.)

## Period 1 – Survival | The Pandemic Outbreak

In this first period, as the reality of an accelerating pandemic materialized, our survival instincts kicked in and we focused on health, safety and well-being; but also on implementing disaster mitigation plans; re-adjusting our immediate activities; and spending a lot of time telling ourselves (and anyone who would listen) that everything would be okay and we’ll get through it, while wondering privately, “Will it really be okay?” (You might also call it the “OMG” phase). Of course, individual experiences shape our outlook, so while this might not be universally true, for the most part, I think we are well through this phase and thinking about what comes next.

## Period 2 – Searching | Looking to Reopen

So, what does come next? As I write this column, we are seeing many businesses searching for how to reopen under varied,

changing and often confusing government rules, regulations and executive orders coupled with the companies’ own internal guidelines and convictions. In this period of searching, for some, the goal is to see a path to return to the familiar. For others, learning from our time of mass isolation mandates a vision of change. The natural tension created by this dichotomy of views compounds feelings of uncertainty. This is where I feel we are today.

## Period 3 – Stability | Beyond COVID-19 (BC19)

If today we are searching, then tomorrow we will move toward a new equilibrium beyond COVID-19. I have named that period “stability.” When that will be seems to be a moving target, but I have no doubt that a) it will happen; and b) it will encompass a combination of the best of the familiar enhanced with lessons learned during this pandemic; and c) by definition it will be different.

As we consider what stability will look like and how we get there, it would be nice to be able to peek behind the curtain to ask the great and powerful Oz. Naturally, we cannot, but perhaps it would be instructive to apply some principles from another wizard to our industry.

Over his 27 year career, John Wooden, nicknamed the “Wizard of Westwood,” coached the UCLA Bruins men’s basketball team to 620 victories (including one winning streak of 88 straight games) and a record-setting 10 national titles in 12 years (with an unprecedented and likely never repeated seven consecutive championships). Coach John Wooden taught the world that integrity and character are the cornerstones of success. Three of the maxims that Wooden taught within his Pyramid of Success are as follows.

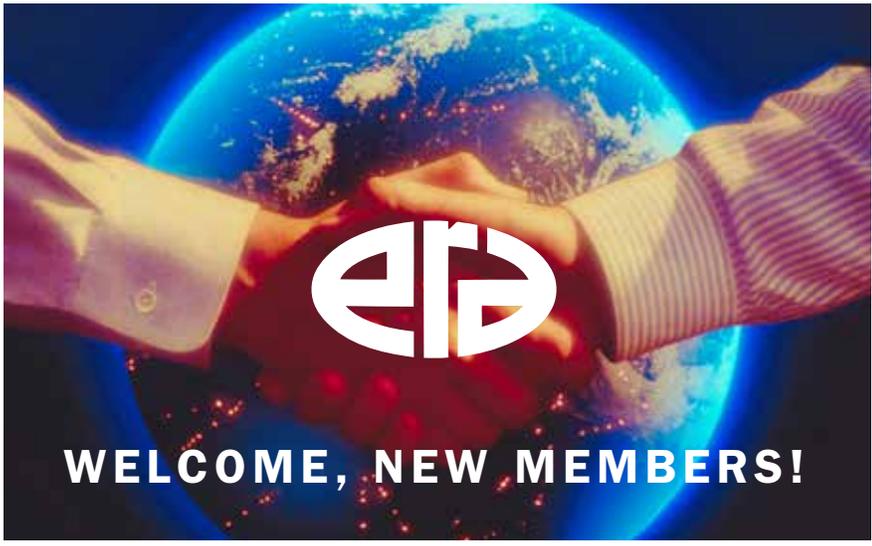
**Be true to yourself.** Given the pressure to “change something” in the midst of disruption, it is paramount to know and promote your value proposition — not trying to become something you are not but enhancing that which you are.

The unique combination of characteristics which a manufacturers’ representative brings

*(continued on page 32)*



by **Chuck Tanzola, CPMR**  
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**These companies joined ERA since April 2020.**

(The ERA chapter of each rep firm is listed in italics after the company name.)

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NEW MEMBERS

# Commitment to continuous learning and development leads to success

*To gain a better insight into how young professionals in the electronics industry have turned challenges into opportunities and ensured continued success, The Representor interviewed Hunter Starr, CSP, Territory Manager for Performance Technical Sales.*

*Starr shared key challenges he encountered after three-and-a-half years in the electronics industry and steps that he has taken to establish a successful career. Here is what he had to say.*

**Please tell us a little about yourself and what made you choose this industry as your current career path?**

I was born and raised in Raleigh, N.C. Growing up, my father was a long-time manufacturers’ rep who would eventually start his own firm. I went to East Carolina University and graduated with a B.S. in business administration. During the Summer while I was still in school, I would help out with the family business and that was my first introduction to the rep industry. Upon graduation, I went to work for an Employee Benefits Brokerage firm in Durham, N.C. After three years and being promoted within the company, I decided that it was time for a new challenge and went to work for Performance Technical Sales as a territory manager.

I have always been fascinated by how things work and helping others. Being able to support local customers on the innovative products that they are designing is really exciting to me.

**As a young professional, what are some of the main challenges you encountered as you embarked on your career journey?**

Time management and identifying the RIGHT contacts and decision-makers in potential new accounts.

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

1. Reading books like *New Sales. Simplified* by Mike Weinberg has been really helpful. I was introduced to the idea of “Time Blocking” which has helped me stay accountable to some of the “Non-Revenue Generating

Activities” that I struggled with to complete previously. Also, “Owning Your Calendar.” I found that every now and then, I would get pulled into my email first thing in the morning, and then I would look up and it would be already lunchtime. While on some days you need to play catch-up, I found that I was becoming more reactionary to customer needs than being proactive. I switched my Outlook settings to show my calendar when opening instead of email. This makes me think about where I am going to be spending my time this week, next week, and moving forward to drive revenue. Think outside of the (in)box to drive more revenue.

2. Identifying the right contacts and decision-makers within new accounts is still a difficult task. The best advice anyone can give is to remain persistent. There are some tools that I have found helpful in identifying positions and names of employees such as LinkedIn; however, phone contact initially is key in my opinion.

**As you developed in your career, what were some training tools that you found beneficial to your professional growth?**

Certified Professional Sales Consultant (CPSC or formerly CSP) training by MRERF was a very beneficial training tool for me. Early on, I struggled with asking the right questions. The introduction to the consultative sales approach was a game-changer for me. I also found that visiting the manufacturers’ facilities that I represent to see the production process and tour their facilities is very helpful in the sales process when interacting with potential customers.

**What are some industry networking events that you have attended that would be beneficial to other young professionals in the industry?**

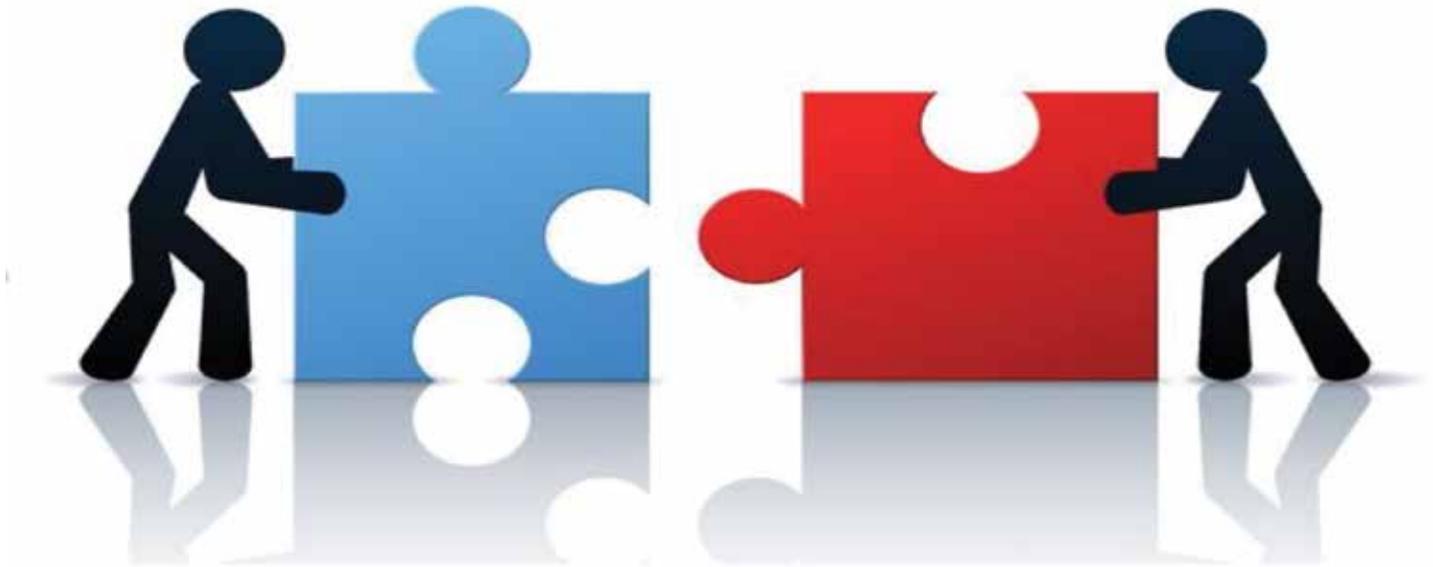
I have attended the CPSC and Certified Professional Manufacturers’ Representative (CPMR) programs (completed year one), as well as EDS, the ERA Conference, and the Carolinas ERA Chapter Golf Tournament. Our local ERA chapter has been very welcoming and helpful over the past few years. It seems

*(continued on page 32)*



**Hunter Starr, CSP**  
Territory Manager  
Performance Technical Sales Inc.

# Line conflicts: Navigating to a mutually beneficial resolution



## Introduction

When companies evaluate moving to the manufacturers' rep model as their go-to-market strategy, one of the primary objectives is to build on the complementary line portfolio of the rep. From a rep perspective, a complementary product portfolio that aligns with the target markets and key customers in their geography is critical to their growth. These fundamental goals are clear and are the foundation for mutual success.

When the interpretation of the word "complementary" by the rep is perceived as "conflict" by an existing or potential principal, these mutual goals are at risk.

This paper is intended to assist both reps and principals in providing guidance on suggested ways to objectively categorize perceived or potential conflicts. The intent is to provide alternative approaches for consideration to resolving conflicts in a way that can allow the rep/principal relationship to continue to drive the growth in revenue and profits that both parties are working together to achieve.

## Problem statement

In 2019, there were more than 15,000 mergers and acquisitions (M&A) in the U.S.<sup>1</sup>, with many more pending going into 2020. Although the COVID-19 impact on business has

temporarily delayed some of this M&A activity, it is also conceivable that the resulting pandemic economic impact on many companies will drive this activity to an even higher level.

The recent and ongoing M&A activity will undoubtedly result in many manufacturers' reps with expanded product and technology offerings in potential conflict with those currently on their line cards.

Also, being that reps' product offerings are directly aligned with the markets and customers they serve, their current lines are always striving to introduce new and alternative technology which could also be perceived as a conflict by another of their lines.

The challenges this poses for a rep are both strategic and financial. Strategically, the line card represents a portfolio of products and technologies that define the rep to their customers. They are invested in these lines, in some cases for many years. A loss of one can diminish the rep's total value to their customer base. Financially, if a choice has to be made to drop a line due to a perceived conflict, the loss of commission revenue can significantly impact the rep firm's ability to re-invest into the tools, personnel and technology required to support the demands of its principal, as well as the evolving customer design and purchasing requirements.

The principal also can be negatively impacted if their rep must decide on dropping another line or being terminated as a result of a perceived conflict. If the rep opts to leave, the principal now must search, hire and train another alternative rep firm. The loss of developed relationships and the learning curve associated with this new line can be lengthy, and the cost associated with this can be significant.

These facts all support the need to address perceived or potential conflicts with an objective, open-minded approach. The mindset instead should be: How can we make this work for our mutual benefit?



### Conflict classification

When a manufacturer's rep and their principal address a potential conflict, it is obviously critical that the principal reviews this from a perspective that provides an understanding of the true impact on their business in order to evaluate appropriate next steps. Very often, the potential conflicts would be referenced as either "hard" or "soft." When addressing something as consequential as conflicts, these terms need to be put in a more definitive context rather than leaving them to a general and somewhat broad interpretation. It starts with classifying the potential conflict into three categories:

**Alternative product** - The referenced conflict is a direct replacement to the principal's product or technology or is so closely aligned with their brand, it cannot be differentiated. For example, a product that is the same in size and performance and would be a drop-in replacement. It might also be a product or technology (though not an alternative) whose brand is defined as the principal's primary competitor.

**Evolving product** - The referenced conflict may be a product or technology that the principal is either planning on evolving to a focused product in the future or one that it is de-emphasizing and has an exit strategy in place for it. Does the exit plan include an alternative product for its current customers, or is the market or application for these product(s) no longer a strategic target for the principal?

**Opportunity** - How would a perceived conflict represent an opportunity for a principal? Does this referenced conflicting line fill a gap in a principal's product portfolio that positions it as complementary? If the rep can fulfill customer needs with the "gap" product, will it reinforce the

Rep and principal's customer position and deter customers from pursuing a competitor with a broader line, potentially risking all the business? This "gap" approach often works with products such as switches, connectors, micro-controllers and other technologies where manufacturers differentiate their product offerings for specific markets and applications.

Each of these classifications has different implications to a principal and each has a variety of options to consider when working through them with the rep. The next section will address some of those options.

### Conflict resolution

As noted, the classification of the conflict will help define the impact on the principal's business. Would it have a negative impact, or could it ultimately have a positive one? In all cases, there are options to consider that would enable both parties to mitigate any potential risk and continue to enable the rep, strategically and financially, to support the principal's growth objectives.

The following are some examples of how principals and reps have resolved conflicts. The intent is to share these approaches in order to provide alternatives for consideration when a potential conflict arises.

**Example** - A rep's principal (principal A) acquires a company, who has a product that now puts them in potential conflict with one of their other lines (principal B). The rep had a significant decision to make. Will they have to resign one of these lines, both of which are very important to their business, or can a coexistence approach be proposed that will satisfy the principal's concern relating to conflict and allow the rep to remain financially whole in the process? The following options are proposals for consideration:

- It was determined by principal B that the conflicting product was one that they were planning on de-emphasizing as it did not fit their long-term strategy. As such, all parties agreed to exclude the existing principal B customers for this product from principal A's rep agreement for a predetermined time period. Thus, protecting principal B's business until the conflicting product was exited.
- Both principals recognized the quality and value of the rep in question so principal A agreed to exclude the acquired product from the rep's contract and put in place a process to exclude them from any associated IP. Principal A opted to have its field team of FAE's support the product rather than add the cost of direct salespeople.

*(continued on next page)*

- With an agreement from both principals, the rep brought on an additional resource that would support specific customers for principal A. Principal A worked a co-funding commission plan for this additional resource. A “firewall” was in place for this person that excluded access to all principal B’s information as well as a principal specific NDA. A neutral third-party was used to audit the firewall.
- When reviewing the strategies and product capabilities of both principals, it was evident the conflicting product had different target markets and applications. Principal B was allowed the first right of refusal on opportunities to ensure the specific customers in question could not be supported by them and then they would be referred to principal A.
- After reviewing alternative options, it was concluded that it indeed was a direct conflict that could have a negative impact on both principals. Principal B recognized the strong value proposition of the rep, their customer relationships, the inherent knowledge of their business the rep partner had acquired over the many years, and the experience and quality of the sales team. Although other reps were potentially available, the cost of onboarding, training and potential lost customer relationships would take a long time to recover. They then proposed that if the rep firm terminates principal A, they would work with them on developing a commission compensation plan for a period that would provide recovery of some of the lost commission from terminating principal A.

### Conclusion

As noted in the introduction to this paper, one of the cornerstones of the manufacturers’ rep value proposition is its offering of complementary products. As their principals grow

through M&A and strive to provide customers with more cost-effective and improved alternative technologies, this inherently presents the potential for unintended conflict. It is important to assess these perceived conflicts from a broader perspective and to look at every alternative, such as those noted in this paper, to make it work for the mutual benefit of both the manufacturers’ rep and the principals.

### Key takeaways

- M&A will continue to create potential line conflicts.
- Classify the potential conflict to better understand the impact on the principal’s business.
- Propose an equitable resolution that can mitigate any potential impact.
- Resolution should always consider the cost impact to both the rep and the principal if a change to the relationship should occur. ■

### Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the following ERA manufacturers’ representatives members who contributed to this white paper by providing insights on this important topic.

- Mike Swenson, president, Mel Foster Co.
- Craig Anderson, president, Sumer Inc.
- Perry Thornton, president, Pinnacle Marketing
- Russ Skog, president, Brandon Associates

### References

<sup>1</sup> *M&A in North America in 2019 was 15,000 according to IMAA.*

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# Hell hath no fury like a principal scorned

In the lengthy annals of sales rep-principal relationships ending badly, the shabby treatment Eliot Essagof received from his principal deserves exceedingly prominent mention.

The business of Essagof and his Connecticut sales rep firm, Trade Links LLC, doesn't roll easily off the tongue. They promote the sale of products in the thermoset and plastics industry, focusing on urea and melamine molding compounds.

For decades, Trade Links represented Claudio Colombo's companies located in Mexico and Italy. The Mexican facility is owned by BI-QEM Mexico, which Colombo also owns.

BI-QEM and Trade Links entered into a sales representative agreement (SRA) in 1999 that renews annually, provided Trade Links exceeded minimum sales requirements. Each year, Trade Links did so and remained in full compliance with the SRA.

## Background

In 2008, Colombo moved production and sales to a facility he purchased in Florence, Mass., that became BI-QEM Florence. Colombo agreed that Trade Links would serve as the exclusive sales agent for the new Florence operations and that the existing SRA would cover their business relationship involving BI-QEM Florence. And indeed, Trade Links did receive monthly commissions on BI-QEM Florence sales at rates set under the SRA.

The trouble began in late 2017 when Colombo apparently tired of paying commissions as required in the parties' contract, and approached Essagof about terminating the SRA and joining BI-QEM as an in-house sales executive. The job offer would have yielded considerably lower compensation, making it easy for Essagof to turn down. Upset by this response, Colombo reduced the role of Trade Links in the business and threatened to withhold commissions.

Further, Essagof was asked to coordinate thinly disguised "meet and greets" between key customers and both BI-QEM's sales manager and the new sales rep BI-QEM engaged in the Trade Links territory. Essagof protested this flagrant effort to take over its accounts without a response from BI-QEM.

Seeking dialogue with Colombo, Essagof wrote to him in May 2018 proposing they modify the SRA to enable both parties to satisfy their mutual goals. In response, Colombo sent a notice to Essagof dated May 31, 2018, that BI-QEM would not renew the SRA when it expired at year-end.

When Essagof reminded Colombo that the SRA renewed automatically unless Trade Links failed to meet its minimal sales goal and that it always had, Colombo acknowledged the contract provision but claimed it no longer applied because BI-QEM had not set minimum sales goals in recent years. The SRA, however, vested BI-QEM with no such ability to avoid its automatic renewal.

Trade Links continued to protest the increasing efforts to marginalize its role, and Essagof was then summoned to the Florence production facility where a BI-QEM official suggested to him that the termination notice was a "negotiating tactic" intended to soften him to Colombo's request. He was also reminded of Colombo's superior ability to sustain prolonged litigation should he continue to resist.

The very same day, Trade Links exercised its contractual right to demand arbitration against both BI-QEM Mexico and BI-QEM Florence for interfering with its rights under the SRA.

BI-QEM Mexico's response took the form of filing suit in New York state court seeking to put a hold on the arbitration proceedings, while BI-QEM Florence did the same in Massachusetts state court. Both efforts proved unsuccessful.

The BI-QEM entities then asked the American Arbitration Association (AAA) to halt the proceedings, an attempt that also failed. The AAA hearing proceeded in October 2018, and BI-QEM chose not to attend. Instead, facing a certain adverse arbitration decision, BI-QEM withdrew its notice of termination one day after Essagof testified before the arbitration panel.

With termination no longer looming, the parties settled their dispute, and Trade Links dismissed its arbitration claim. In January 2019, Essagof and Colombo met in

*(continued on next page)*



**by Gerald M. Newman**  
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**Adam Glazer**  
ERA General Counsel

## LEGALLY SPEAKING: Scorned principal

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Switzerland to discuss their business relationship and the SRA. Rather than developing any newfound respect for his longtime sales rep, Colombo presented Essagof with a new operations manual enabling BI-QEM to strictly micro-manage Trade Links' activities.

To no surprise, Essagof rejected this approach and countered by inquiring about overdue commissions. Colombo's response was to threaten to "shut down Mexico and Florence" and file for bankruptcy "so that you get nothing," or to "liquidate and reincorporate under a new legal entity so that Trade Links no longer 'has a contract with anyone.'"

Then, BI-QEM continued telling customers over the following months, to place orders with it directly, and to provide Trade Links with no sales and order information. Commissions due on these orders also remained unpaid.

Trade Links then terminated the SRA based upon BI-QEM's many breaches and filed suit in Connecticut federal court alleging, among other claims, breach of contract, breach of the covenant of good faith and fair dealing, and violations of the Connecticut sales rep protection statute.

The BI-QEM entities moved to dismiss.

### **Trade Links contract claim readily survives**

Organized after the SRA was signed, BI-QEM Florence argued it neither was an affiliate of BI-QEM Mexico, who signed the SRA, nor did it have an independent contractual relationship with Trade Links, and therefore, it had no liability under a breach of contract theory.

The rejoinder from Trade Links was that under the applicable law, BI-QEM Florence did indeed qualify as an "affiliate," and that having lived under the terms of the SRA when it served its interests to do so, a "course of dealing" was established that precluded BI-QEM Florence from suddenly contending it was not bound by the SRA's terms.

In a written decision released in March 2020, the court rejected this attempt to dismiss the contract claim. At the early motion to dismiss stage of the proceedings, all that was necessary was that Trade Links allege the elements of a breach of contract claim and its complaint adequately pleaded each element. Such allegations are accepted as true when a motion to dismiss is brought, and they satisfied the court that Trade Links adequately stated a claim for breach of contract. The rest could be sorted out at trial.

### **Good faith and fair dealing allegations are sufficient**

The Trade Links Complaint pled four distinct violations of the duty of good faith and fair dealing, a duty implied into every Connecticut contract (similar to most states). Trade Links alleged that BI-QEM wrongfully: 1) impeded its rights under the

SRA; 2) sent its notice of termination in bad faith; 3) pressured Trade Links to stop the arbitration; and 4) withdrew its termination notice to avoid an unfavorable arbitration decision.

BI-QEM sought dismissal on the grounds that these claims were duplicative of the breach of contract allegations, but the court found that allegations 3) and 4) were not included in the complaint's contract theory, and therefore, this claim was not sufficiently duplicative to warrant dismissal. A separate claim for breach of the implied duty of good faith and fair dealing was adequately set forth by Trade Links.

### **Trade Links entitled to seek relief under Connecticut's sales rep statute**

Like most states, Connecticut provides statutory protection to sales reps who have their commission payments withheld after termination. The Connecticut statute entitles reps to seek recovery of two times the amount due when a principal "willfully, wantonly, recklessly or in bad faith fails to pay" commissions, and also enables recovery of attorney's fees and court costs.

Seeking to dismiss the claim brought by Trade Links under the Connecticut sales rep statute, which applies "after a contract between a principal and a sales representative is terminated," BI-QEM contended that it had rendered the statute inapplicable by withdrawing its notice of termination before it became effective. This argument required the court to crawl a little deeper into the Connecticut statute.

"Termination" is defined in the statute to mean "the end of the business relationship between a sales representative and principal, whether by the principal or the sales representative ...". The court found that Trade Links "plausibly alleged that its business relationship with BI-QEM ended on May 31, 2018," the date BI-QEM sent its notice of termination.

Although BI-QEM purported to withdraw it, Trade Links set out in the complaint how the effort "was not really a withdrawal." BI-QEM continued to marginalize the Trade Links role and continued withholding commissions, which certainly resembled a termination. As a consequence, BI-QEM would continue to face potential liability for the double damages made available under the Connecticut rep statute.

### **Takeaway**

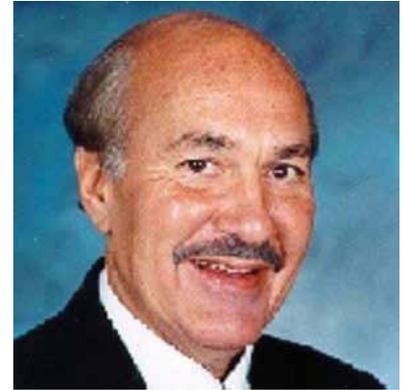
In a significant victory for Trade Links and the larger sales rep community, the motion to dismiss was accordingly denied for each of these common sales rep theories against non-paying principals. Threats to "shut down" the company to avoid paying commissions or to file for bankruptcy "so that you get nothing" are generally doomed ploys by unscrupulous principals intended to intimidate inexperienced reps. ■

## Celebrating an exceptional couple

Can husbands and wives live and work happily together 24/7/365? Most people would say no, but somehow, some way Roger and Peggy Ponto made it happen! They are truly an exceptional couple! Both are talented, professional retired reps who have made numerous contributions to ERA with their smarts, time and energy. Both have roots from best-in-class companies. Roger as a VP of the prestigious Shure Brothers Company and Peggy from one of the most celebrated rep firms in our industry, the Mel Foster Company Inc. How's that for credentials? Perfecto, IT WORKED!

Read on, it's a great story.

— Harry J. Abramson



**by Harry J. Abramson**  
*Founder (Retired)*  
*Electronic Salesmasters Inc.*

### Where are Roger and Peggy Ponto now?

#### Roger Ponto, CPMR

In 1979, and after a 17-year tenure as a national sales manager at Shure Brothers, I relocated to a suburb of Seattle to join an existing representative organization as head of their consumer products division. Quickly I had the firm join ERA to become an active member. While at Shure, we became the first significant manufacturer to endorse qualified ERA reps. Immediately, I was recognized for the understanding I had as a past manufacturer/principal in managing rep relationships. I founded Roger Ponto Associates in 1980 with my future wife Peggy and son Scott. I held several leadership positions with ERA from 1985-1997. In 1985, I was elected to the executive committee serving in various roles including chairman, VP/ audiovisual group, VP/ education and director of industry development. I was inducted into White Pin at the Bermuda Conference in 1986 and as a Life Member of ERA in 2000.



Throughout my years as a member of ERA and the numerous conferences I attended, I learned a great deal from my fellow reps who willingly shared their invaluable intellectual property.

Outstanding mentors like Jack Berman and Gene Foster were focused on improving the rep function. The electronics industry has always been ever-changing, and representatives have had to be adaptable and forward-thinking in order to meet the needs and

opportunities available.

Our home in the Seattle area was near the U.S. Coast Guard Admiral's Quarters for the 13th CG District.

In 1999, the Admiral asked both Peggy and me to become charter members of a new Navy League of the United States Council being organized in the area. In 2001, I was elected president of that council, the Lake Washington Council NLUS and served for two years. I was later elected as national director for NLUS and served for seven years. The Navy League is a 100-year-old citizen maritime support organization serving the Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and Merchant Marines. In 2010, a three-star Coast Guard admiral honored me with the Distinguished Public Service Award, the highest award the Coast Guard can present to a civilian.

In 1999, Roger Ponto Associates was dissolved. My son, Gary, and I created GP Marketing, specializing in security and surveillance products. Meanwhile, Scott started Ponto Associates serving the consumer and computer marketplace. To this day, both companies continue to thrive.

Peggy and I drifted into full retirement and in 2014 moved to Port Ludlow, Wash., on the Olympic Peninsula overlooking beautiful Puget Sound. We are enjoying the golden years of our lives together while actively participating in community activities. I will be

*(continued on next page)*

*Harry Abramson founded Electronic Salesmasters Inc. in 1972. He established industry notoriety by virtue of his firm's peak performance, hundreds of articles and speaking appearances at ERA's national conferences and chapter meetings and sister trade association MANA. He has an electrical engineering degree from Temple University and entered the electronics industry as an engineer at RCA in Camden, N.J.*

*His ERA involvement includes serving as vice president of the Components Group and president of the Ohio Chapter. Under his leadership, the chapter was awarded the National Chapter of the Year Award. Abramson recently was recognized with ERA's prestigious Life Membership Award.*

*You can reach Harry J. Abramson at 216-406-4119 or email him at [hja725@yahoo.com](mailto:hja725@yahoo.com).*

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?: Roger and Peggy Ponto

(continued from previous page)

89 in August of this year and can be reached at roger@ponto.com.

### Peggy Ponto

In 1987, ERA meant one thing to me, and it wasn't the Electronics Representatives Association. This changed the day I walked into Mel Foster Technical Sales in Edina, Minn.

Gene Foster, president, and David Volke, VP of consumer products, decided it was time to bring a female into the consumer side of the company. Ads at that time in the Minneapolis Star and Tribune were still listed: help wanted, female, or male. I was in the middle of a divorce with two sons, and this ad sounded interesting. Long story short, after three interviews I was hired as their first outside female sales representative. For most of the factories we represented, I was the first woman in their outside sales force. I had been there three days when they took me to Chicago where we attended a sales meeting at Shure Brothers. Roger Ponto, who was a national sales manager for Shure at that time, told me later he was aware he now had a female rep in the audience. I, on the other hand, didn't understand much of what he had to say. Of course, this exchange didn't happen until several years later.

I was not at Mel Foster very long when I knew I had been hired into one of the pioneer companies in the industry. I quickly began to learn about the ERA. At this point I must stop and say, I believe I "cut my teeth," so to speak, in one of the finest representative companies in the country. From day one, I was treated with respect along with help from all of the employees. Never was I talked down to or treated differently than any of the male employees. Everyone there extended a helping hand and made it possible for me to grow beyond anything I ever thought possible.

In 1980, I moved to Seattle where I was going

to learn how to play golf and plant flowers. That only lasted a few months. Ultimately, Roger and I decided to try merging our two families while starting Roger Ponto Associates.

So much for golf and flowers...

With Roger's son Scott, Roger and me, Roger Ponto Associates was launched. Both Roger and Scott were known in the territory, so I looked beyond the lower 48 to find a place that I could carve out for myself. My first trip to Alaska was for 10 days. I fell asleep on the return flight while waiting for takeoff and were well underway when I came to. How many ways can you say EXHAUSTED? After that one trip, Alaska became my territory.

From 1980 until 1985, when Roger and I were married, I finally attended the ERA conference as a spouse. There, I came to know many women, most rep principals' wives who were the strong, silent rod behind their men. In 1985, I began to attend the conferences as a sales representative and quickly learned the importance of the ERA function. By that time, more women were starting to be seen in the industry, some even as rep principals. Strong women who began to take their place in this once "male-only" industry became important leaders. As our rep firm grew I spent more time in the office giving up my much-loved dealers and territory of Alaska to Roger's son Gary.

Gene Foster and the electronics industry came into my life when I needed it the most. I will be forever thankful to him and David for taking a chance on me.

I jokingly would tell people I had a non-sexual affair with 10 guys for the years I was working there. Because of them, I became the strong, independent woman I am today. Thank goodness that was something my husband and business partner, Roger, can live with and not feel threatened. ■

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## SOMEONE YOU SHOULD KNOW: Amy Hain

(continued from page 7)

It's a great networking tool. It helps me stay current on supplier and customer news to better understand their needs and how RFMW may provide value in delivering solutions. It's also a great source of news, as contacts and organizations share product and market trend information, financial results, economic updates and more.

In today's environment, it's tough to walk into a customer meeting and conduct research. LinkedIn and other social media outlets help me do that research proactively so that when I conduct the visit, the discussion is targeted and solutions-based. I do follow ERA on LinkedIn, as well as Facebook, and find the information shared to be useful.

### What are some things you enjoy outside of the workplace?

I enjoy endurance sports (long-distance running, primarily), travel and reading. I am also very politically active.

### What is one interesting fact that people may not know about you?

On the weekends, I am a flying trapeze instructor for TSNY Chicago. If you are in Chicago, come fly with us! ■

# Update on COVID-19 and the IRS

The IRS is doing its best to make things easier for taxpayers in this pandemic period. The newer information seems to be getting more lenient as time progresses. Many of the changes involve retirement plans, specifically IRAs, 401(k)s, and profit sharing plans, but not pension plans.

Starting with people under the age of 65, here is the current situation. The IRS rules affect the following people:

- a. Those who have or have had COVID-19.
- b. Those who have been quarantined, furloughed, laid off, or have suffered reduced hours.
- c. Unable to work because they can't obtain child care.
- d. Having pay or self-employment income reduced due to COVID-19.
- e. Had a job offer rescinded or delayed due to COVID-19.

Taxpayers under 59.5 won't be charged a penalty for withdrawing retirement funds up to \$100,000 under the above conditions through the year 2020. Unfortunately, they will owe the income tax. However, there is other news. They can opt to report the income over a three-year period (2020-2022), which is important because not only is the tax deferred, but the tax bracket is also lowered. Further, the amount can be repaid any time within those three years, and the prior period returns can be amended to recoup the tax paid.

Plans can allow loans to participants up to \$50,000. Between March 27 and Sept. 22, 2020, the limit has been raised to \$100,000.

For those rare individuals under 59.5, who entered into an agreement to receive periodic

payments from their retirement plans, they are stuck — no relief.

For those over 70.5 who are required to withdraw a Required Minimum Distribution (RMD), there are a number of concessions.

The RMD for 2020 has been waived; if you can afford to leave your funds in the plan (or any portion thereof) you can do so.

Originally, the IRS said that funds withdrawn as all or part of RMD after a date in March could be paid back by July 31. This has been revised. Any amount taken out of a retirement plan (other than pension plans) from Jan. 1, 2020, on, can be returned by Aug. 31. This includes people who turned age 70.5 in 2019 but delayed removing their RMD until April 15, 2020.

Note that the new law changed the age at which the RMD takes effect from age 70.5 to age 72 effective for the year 2020; so there should be no new entrants to the RMD rules for the year 2020.

**COMPANIES** – If you have your own retirement plans, you must make plan changes to agree with the above changes to your plans. The IRS has given you until Jan. 1, 2022, to incorporate the required changes. The IRS has also prepared a recommended amendment for your plan, and this can be found in the appendix to IRS Notice 2020-51.

Finally, on a completely different note, incorporated in the 2019 tax law changes is a provision entitling taxpayers who no longer itemize their deductions to deduct on page one of the Form 1040 the extremely generous amount of \$300 for charitable donations. Maybe it's the start of something big.



**by Stanton B. Herzog, CPA**  
*ERA Tax, Audit & Accounting Consultant*

*Stanton B. Herzog, CPA, principal in the firm of Applebaum, Herzog & Associates, P.C., Northbrook, Ill., serves as ERA's accountant and is a regular contributor to The Representor. He is available to speak at chapter or group meetings on a variety of financial and tax-related topics. He also participates in Expert Access, the program that offers telephone consultations to ERA members.*

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**Become an ERA member at ERA.org.**

**The Southwest Chapter of ERA will be hosting a round table event  
in September ... more information coming soon!**

As I sat down to write this article, I happened to have the Winter 2020 issue of *The Representor* on my desk. The cover story was titled, “2020 Industry Forecast: A review of key trends, challenges and opportunities.” The third paragraph of the article began, “While all indicators point toward a positive 2020, some uncertainty remains.” It is clear now that the overarching theme of 2020 is uncertainty. In the thesaurus, you will find the following synonyms for the word; unpredictability, unreliability, precariousness, variability, disquiet, uneasiness and anxiety. It’s safe to say that we are all probably feeling a few of these emotions as we face the second half of this year. When will the pandemic subside? How will we work in the midst of, and after it? Where will the numbers stand on Dec. 31, 2020? Questions such as these are on the lips of the majority of manufacturers, reps and distributors; not only here in the U.S., but across the globe as countries live through various phases of the COVID-19 onslaught.

In the middle of this though, I have witnessed amazing resilience, ingenuity, persistence and creativity exhibited by the three “legs” of our industry stool — manufacturers, reps and distributors. In spite of some “Zoom fatigue,” there have been brilliant efforts to stay in touch by all three constituencies via video conferencing and other forms of not-in-person communication. In many ways, we haven’t lost much ground and we have learned new skills and adopted new tools in the bargain. Don’t get me wrong, as an avowed field salesperson, I have been climbing the walls, anxious to again hit the road and visit customers. Eventually, though, we will emerge from this COVID-19 cloud and we will be better for it. Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, famously said: “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” You can be sure that we will see this illustrated over and over again in the coming months. At least of this, I am certain.

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In the Spring issue of *The Representor* I wrote about the importance of communication. At that point, little did I know that we were about to face a much greater challenge in communicating with our customers, our coworkers, our factories, friends, and yes, even our families. We must stay at home and find creative ways to visit. It is tough if you have someone in the hospital or nursing home. We have learned to FaceTime or Skype with friends and family. We attend church on Facebook or live stream on YouTube. We wear our masks, wash our hands and social distance.

We went, overnight, from scheduling sales calls, factory visits, trade show planning and bustling business activity to, canceled sales calls, travel bans, canceled trade shows and “How we gonna do this?” The pandemic drastically altered business plans and forced all to regroup and put together a workable approach to business going forward. Hopefully, there were some safeguards in place.

Last summer, a fortuitous lightning strike resulting in a fried phone system, including internet, etc., forced us to do something we had been saying for some time that we must do — upgrade our server. We went with VoIP phones that allow us to have an office phone wherever we have a computer. Software upgrades and a lot of cloud-based stuff allows us to basically function, again, wherever we have a computer connection. So, when the shutdown came, fortunately, we were prepared. I shudder to think, “What if ... ?” It’s hard to plan for things like COVID-19. But this experience should prompt us to constantly be aware of and plan for the unexpected.

In the absence of face-to-face sales calls and factory visits, I’m sure all of us have become much more familiar with Zoom, GoToMeeting, Skype, YouTube and endless conference calls.

I have news for you! Those will be a part of our routine for some time to come. I suspect that “work from home” will continue to play a significant role and that will make our communication skills much more important in dealing with this “new normal.” We must become very proficient in using the available digital options when working with our customers and factories. We certainly hope that face-to-face communication will be possible again soon, but we must be prepared to deal with the realities of the moment, whatever that may be.

I’m an optimist. I believe that we will learn from this and use the experience to become more efficient and do a better job for our principals, our customers and ourselves. If we don’t ... well, you get the picture, and it’s not pretty.

## COMPONENTS

**Bob Evans, CPMR**  
EK Micro  
Rolling Meadows, Ill.

## 2020: uncertainty remains

## MATERIALS, ASSEMBLY, PRODUCTION & SUPPLY

**Troy Gunnin**  
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## Plan for the unexpected



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The Florida-Sunshine ERA Chapter promotes and advances the growth and professionalism of our members through education, networking, peer discussion groups and service to our customers and community.

**For details on Florida-Sunshine ERA, go to  
[erasunshine.org](http://erasunshine.org)**

## ERA CONFERENCE COMMITTEE ANNOUNCES 2021 THEME

The ERA Conference Committee revealed the theme — “Stronger Together: Reconnecting & Reinventing for Success” — of the 2021 ERA Conference, scheduled Feb. 28 – March 2 at the AT&T Executive Education and Conference Center in Austin, Texas.

The committee, which has been tasked with the planning and development of the ERA Conference, aims to build a 2021 conference program that echoes the theme of reconnecting and reinventing, while providing invaluable content that reflects the needs of electronics reps, distributors and manufacturers to come together during the current business environment.

“The 2021 ERA Conference could possibly be the first time when reps, distributors and manufacturers are together again,” said 2021 Committee Chair Craig Anderson, CPMR, President of Sumer Inc. “The theme, ‘Stronger Together: Reconnecting and Reinventing for Success,’ will focus on how reps, distributors and manufacturers can re-tool to bring value to our customers as the sales role is transformed. As such, the conference committee is crafting a conference that will be beneficial to any firm operating a sales team in the electronics market today.”

ERA CEO Walter Tobin added, “This year’s committee comprises more than 60 volunteers who hold various senior rep, manufacturer and distributor roles. We are excited to announce the theme for our 2021 conference, which captures our commitment to deliver an event that brings the industry together for three consecutive days of reconnecting and reinventing for success. The world will most certainly look different, but we encourage you to attend and help our industry be ready for the ‘new abnormal’ in 2021!”

## GLOBAL SEMICONDUCTOR SALES INCREASE 5.8% YEAR-TO-YEAR IN MAY

Worldwide sales of semiconductors reached \$35 billion in May 2020, an increase of 5.8 percent from the May 2019 total of \$33 billion and 1.5 percent more than the April 2020 total of \$34.4 billion, the Semiconductor Industry Association (SIA) reported.

“The global semiconductor market in May remained largely resistant to the widespread economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is still significant uncertainty for the months ahead,” said John Neuffer, SIA president and CEO.

## SMARTPHONE SHIPMENTS WILL NOT RETURN TO GROWTH UNTIL 2021

The global smartphone market will experience an overall decline of 11.9 percent year over year in 2020, with shipments totaling 1.2 billion units, according to the International Data Corporation (IDC).

However, according to Sangeetika Srivastava, senior research analyst with IDC’s Worldwide Mobile Device Tracker, despite the dismal outlook, 5G is still being viewed as the catalyst throughout the forecast period, which she said “will play a vital role in worldwide smartphone market recovery in 2021.”

## IN MEMORIAM OF ELDON W. KLEINSCHMIDT

It is with great sadness that ERA must report the passing on Jan. 2, 2020, of Eldon W. Kleinschmidt. He was 88.

In 1973, he and his wife Doris Sturm founded, owned and operated KMG Sales for many years. He was a member of Wisconsin Chapter before it merged as Chicagoland-Wisconsin ERA and served as a chapter delegate. He was inducted as a White Pin member in 1986.

He is survived by his wife Doris; daughters, Debbie (Dave) Petersen of Racine, Susan (Michael) Knitter of Schaumburg, Ill.; grandchildren, Sarah (Jason) Strommen, Christopher (Kayla) Petersen, Jonathan Knitter, Stephen Knitter; great-grandchildren, Braden, Dylan, Aubrey, and Charlotte; brother and sister-in-law, Ralph (Rosemary) Sturm of Merrill, Wisc.; nieces, nephews, other relatives and many dear friends.

## IN MEMORIAM OF PAT D’ANNA

ERA is saddened to report the passing of Pat D’Anna on June 27, 2020. He was 80

D’Anna spent 48 years in the electronics industry in his beloved home state of Michigan. His tenure included positions at Intel, Arrow, and finally as a manufacturers’ rep with Catalyst Sales, where he worked for the past 11 years before retiring in January 2020. Pat was highly respected and trusted by his principals, customers and distributors.

A beloved father of Gina (Billy) Pauley. Loving grandfather of Brianna, Sophia and Rose Patrick and step-grandfather of Sydni and Selene Pauley. Dearest brother of Tony (Geri) D’Anna, Tina (the late Jim) Hoch and his sister-in-law Clarlene D’Anna. Dear uncle to many nieces, nephews, great-nieces and great-nephews.

## EXECUTIVE COMMENTARY: The times they are a-changin’

(continued from page 11)

The past few weeks have really shown the manufacturers’ rep model to be the most optimum sales model, not only in these crazy times but at all times. Many manufacturers’ direct sales force has faced severe layoffs due to fixed cost of sales, limited customer reach and limited knowledge of the territory. These are strong advantages that the rep model brings to our industry.

As a rep, you have several different products and technologies to Zoom with an engineer on when you get him/her on a call. You can “package” the various technologies from one of your principals with other principals’ products to offer a total solution to the engineer. The rep’s approach of a total solution selling model versus an individual socket sale has certainly shown itself to be most effective over the past several weeks. The reps are our industry’s “canaries in the coal mine” so to speak – to get an early entrance into the customer’s design process and “light up the target” for your principals.

So, I give the reps a HUGE THUMBS UP! for the job that they have done since the virus hit!

Depending on where you live, we are now in Phase three or four of reopening and many folks might hope that they are “done” and will run in place until we get back to normal and back to business as in the past.

But I submit that we will never get back to those days. We cannot simply put the pieces of the puzzle back together as the total picture of the puzzle has changed and all of the pieces are now different. You cannot solve a new puzzle with old pieces or old thinking.

Do you think you can remain with this run-in-place model until we emerge into the new abnormal? Not if you want to keep your principals happy, your rep company competitive and stay on top of your customers’ design efforts and ahead of your competition.

While states are beginning to reopen, when will your customers? When will the distributor branches reopen? Will they even let you in? When will you reopen your own office? What physical changes will you need to make to your own office? What will your customers’ lobbies look like? Will they even allow anyone in? If so, they may limit your visit to the main lobby with social distancing in place possibly only fitting one or two visitors in the lobby at one time and scheduling time between visits to properly clean the tables and chairs. They may maintain a strict schedule that could result in your requested appointment being scheduled out MANY weeks beyond your requested date.

It is obvious that a “maintain” strategy is one of mediocrity and will set you up for failure.

What do you think the definition of face-to-face (F2F) will be moving forward? Do you think your customers will now define F2F as a Zoom call? It is hard to read body language or shades of intent on a Zoom call. However, we cannot reject this new way of supporting our customers. While we need to advocate for an in-person experience when times eventually allow, F2F will be a combination of Zoom and in-person meetings. Do not run from this new tool, embrace it.

What new tools will you be arming your sales folks with? What new training are you putting them through now so they can be ready when the lobbies reopen? How can you gain an advantage over the competition?

Let’s look at one example.

Over the past few weeks, I am sure that you have tried to support your favorite restaurant by ordering takeout food. What have restaurants done overnight to secure your takeout business? What changes have they made to their websites to secure your business? They have posted a takeout menu, provided an automated process to order, to select a time to pick up food and pay online. They have provided no-touch delivery to your car. They implemented this almost overnight and made it easy for you as their customer to buy from them. They reacted immediately to your needs.

What changes have you made? How will you support your customer or distributor moving forward? What changes have you made to your company website? What does your website say about your digital image? Does it have hot links to your manufacturers? What does it say about your team? Your technical abilities? Your design in capabilities? When was the last time you visited your company website? Manufacturers’ websites often have hot links to your company – what will it tell a perspective customer who is looking for information when they land on your home page?

What about your distributor training? Many of the branches may not open for a while. I recommend that you get on the branch training schedule NOW. It is easier and quicker to conduct distributor training on Zoom than to get an audience in front of the entire sales team at the branch. The branches are scheduling their training session now, get in the queue!

How are you handling samples? As you know, we have always used sample requests as an early indicator of a new design or redesign. However, the delivery of these samples becomes a bit complicated in today’s times. Some manufacturers are beginning to ship samples directly to the customer at his/her home to avoid an extra set of hands touching them

(continued on page 30)



*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.*

## **ERA's Chapter Officer Leadership Training (COLT) Is Postponed to Fall of 2021**

Due to COVID-19, the corresponding demands placed on ERA's rep company members and the issues around being able to ensure safe airline and hotel travel, the decision has been made to postpone COLT until the fall of 2021. All scholarships earned will roll over and will be eligible for an additional year. All chapters are encouraged to consider sending participants in 2021 to share best practices in chapter leadership to help continue to drive a strong chapter network.

### **CAROLINAS**

Carolinas ERA hosted a BYOB (breakfast) virtual networking meeting on June 5. The toast topic, "Selling in a COVID-19 World: Sharing Ideas for Customer Engagement," offered members a forum for discussions on this timely topic. The chapter plans to continue its bi-monthly breakfasts and also held a virtual board of directors meeting on June 19.

### **CHICAGOLAND - WISCONSIN**

In May, the chapter hosted "Improving Internet Search Results for Sales Growth," a virtual event that provided a review of the 2020 ERA Conference general session, "The Secrets to Sales Growth," presented by Sam Richter, founder and CEO of SBR Worldwide/Know More. The remote meeting discussed internet search results and best business practices. The chapter also plans to hold a virtual coffee break in July.

### **INDIANA/KENTUCKY**

The chapter is busy planning its industry golf outing, scheduled Friday, Aug. 28 at the Golf Club of Indiana in Lebanon, Ind.

### **METRO NEW YORK**

Metro New York ERA's 5th Annual Charity Golf Outing has been scheduled for Sept. 24. The event, to be held once again at St. George's Golf & Country Club in Stony Brook, N.Y., will benefit the Long Island Cares for local veterans.

### **MICHIGAN**

In May, the chapter hosted a Water Cooler call that featured an interactive discussion among chapter members. Topics discussed during the call included rep firm and distributor plans to reopen, how members are managing

through the current times, what are members hearing about customers, what are customers' positions on visitor/supplier meetings as part of their reopening plans. Also discussed was the role of the field sales rep navigating the current business environment and ideas on how reps can strengthen their roles in the supply chain. With the success of the Water Cooler call, the chapter plans to schedule another one soon.

### **NORTHERN CALIFORNIA**

Northern California ERA Executive Committee recently awarded scholarships to two of its chapter rep members to attend the Certified Professional Manufacturers' Representative (CPMR) training program. The scholarship recipients are Lori Bruno of Luscombe Engineering of San Francisco and Jacob Medina of Straube Associates.

### **SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA**

Due to the effects of the pandemic, Southern California ERA Chapter members are employing new sales techniques previously discussed during the in-person educational meeting held in January in Oceanside, Calif.

In May, the chapter held its first virtual owners' forum, which was well attended. The group discussed the current global events and their impacts on doing business. The June meeting addressed the pluses and minuses of virtual meeting programs and their functionality.

The chapter is planning virtual monthly meetings for the remainder of the year focusing on topics such as line profitability, excel tutorial and succession planning. Additionally, the chapter is exploring virtual trade show options and looks forward to the day when they can safely host an in-person meeting.

### **SOUTHWEST**

Southwest ERA announced that, due to COVID-19 concerns, the chapter has decided to hold a virtual event that will include the entire chapter territory, instead of hosting three separate city meetings as in years past. The virtual event will be conducted as a round table forum. Discussion points will include how everyone is meeting the challenges of the current economic climate due to COVID-19, and open dialogue about what attendees have been experiencing recently with their customers, distributors, rep firms and manufacturers. The goal of the event will be to dive into how members are handling these challenges, and discuss best practices and ideas moving forward. The call will be hosted in September. Date, time and more details to follow.

## EXECUTIVE COMMENTARY: The times they are a-changin’

(continued from page 28)

and thus bypassing the rep. You used to insist that the samples be delivered to YOU so you can deliver them to the customer, either at their home or at an off-site meeting. However, you may support these samples “drop shipped” to the customer and follow-up with a video demo call.

You then get a chance to review this design, get a sense of the block diagram and possibly ask, “What else are you working on?”

Continue to use samples as a Trojan Horse to get a Zoom call or in-person appointment when allowed.

What about buddy calls with your distributor? Of course! Get aligned with your lead distributor salesperson at EACH ONE of your accounts and set up Zoom buddy calls with engineering.

How about design reviews? Look at upgrading your customers’ designs by offering newer and better products. Now is the time to do preemptive strikes and look at EOL parts or “not recommended for new design” status parts. Be proactive. Your customers will thank you.

How about some non-solicited price reductions? Are you selling them parts that may be legacy devices and that your principal and distributor are realizing an extra-ordinary high-profit margin? Why not approach the customer with a price reduction? Have you ever done it? Was it ever done to you? I can assure you that your customer will never forget it! The price reduction result is so much more impactful than if the customer goes out for a bid and you then give them a substantial price reduction. They may feel that you were ripping them off all along! If you do a preemptive strike, you will win a customer forever, often at a very small cost.

NOW is the time to “sharpen your skates” for when things reopen.

Here are some suggested action items that you need to do NOW to have a solid advantage:

1. Look into Microsoft Office 365 and SharePoint — a powerful tool for your rep company.
2. Upgrade your company’s software solutions — make sure it links to your internal database and is updated.
3. Upgrade your LinkedIn account to Premium/SalesNavigator package – this may cost each individual approximately \$800 per year, a small investment in your business; rep owners may be able to get a group discount. We held an ERA Water Cooler call focused specifically on LinkedIn Sales Navigator tips. The call was recorded and is available on the ERA website to both ERA members and not-yet-members.
4. Tips on Google search tricks of the trade. ERA featured a session on this topic at our most

recent conference. Presenter Sam Richter offered some pretty amazing information. Look into it.

5. Review/upgrade your website. You can do this with a relatively small investment. ERA can lead you to companies to help you if you are interested.

6. What sort of internet service do you have at home? Look into adding a second modem for your business that is separate from your home use and keep your family off of it! This may be perhaps at an additional expense of \$200 per month — your business is well-worth this investment.

7. Upgrade your IT platforms in the office. When were they last looked at? Get your IT provider to do a review of your service.

8. Upgrade your laptops. How old are they? Do they have video/camera and hotspot capabilities? Arm your sales teams with the best weapons, NOW!

9. Upgrade your online video conferencing account. What sort of Zoom, Teams or GoToMeeting account do you have? Many free video services are crashing due to the lack of a solid backbone. Upgrade to a higher level paid package. It is well worth the investment

10. You are getting bombarded with emails on virtual training, software, etc. Look into a few of them, some are really worth the investment

11. The ERA Water Cooler calls and ERA Talks podcasts are open to all ERA members and not-yet-members. You may pick up some great ideas from your peers. All past sessions are archived on [era.org](http://era.org). Give them a listen!

12. Use some of the monies that you are saving on T&E and gas today on sales training and these new tools so you can stay ahead of your competition.

13. YOUR company will be recognized quickly as BEST-IN-CLASS in the market, allowing you to beat your competition.

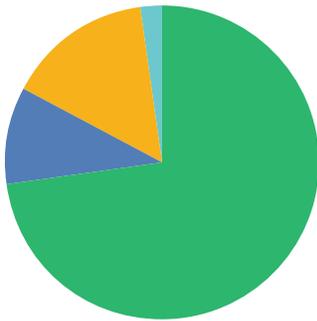
We will come out of this ... someday ... but the world will look different. Our customers will expect more from us. Your principals will expect more from you. Your employees are looking to you to take action now to ensure their long-term viability. We all need to act NOW.

As always, ERA is here to help you as needed. We are out there advocating a strong relationship between the rep and the distributor to work in partnership to deliver a strong product offering from the manufacturer — the three legs of the stool working together to deliver service excellence to the end customer. This is a pretty simple formula and magic happens with all of us working together. Frankly, it’s an unbeatable combination. ■

# ERA member survey

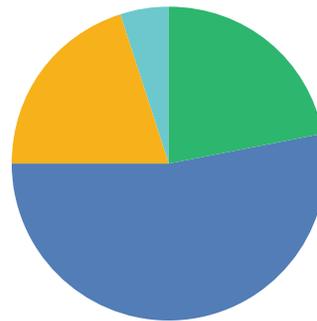
In June 2020, the Electronics Representatives Association (ERA) conducted a brief online survey of its members on the impact of COVID-19 on their business and what returning to work may look like for their organization. Over 100 members participated in the survey. Featured are highlights from the survey results.

Please identify your firm



Rep 73%  
 Distributor 10%  
 Manufacturer 15%  
 Service Provider 2%

How would you rate the overall state of your firm today?



Very Good 22%  
 Good 53%  
 Average 20%  
 Weak 5%



### Major Business Challenges

- Lack of Face-to-Face Meetings
- Access to Customers
- Travel Restrictions
- Adding Value for Principals
- Commission Payment Slowdowns
- Hiring and Training New People
- Lines Going Direct
- Weak Buyer Demand
- Deferred Shipments



### Keeping Employees Engaged

- Microsoft Teams
- Video Conferencing
- Daily/Weekly Meetings
- Virtual Happy Hours and Coffee Breaks



### Communicating with Partners

- Webex
- Microsoft Teams
- Phone
- Email
- Video Conferencing



### Preparing for Reopening

- Already Open
- Extra Cleaning/PPE
- Staggering Times in the Office
- Social Distancing
- Continuing to Work from Home
- Office Layout Reconfiguration



### Market Declines in 2020

- Consumer
- Oil and Gas
- Aviation
- Industrial
- Transportation
- Automotive



### Growth Markets in 2020

- Automation
- Medical
- Military
- Testing Equipment
- Sanitation

## FROM THE TOP: Survival, searching and stability

(continued from page 13)

to the industry — local knowledge and flavor, synergy of non-competitive offerings, developed trusted advisor relationships — has inherent value to customers, manufacturers and channel partners, and transcends the capability of video conferencing to replicate it (no matter how many “Hollywood Squares” you have).

The specific combination of goods and services that each manufacturer offers to the market base makes your company distinct. Focus on your core competencies and amplify your distinctives. Does anyone really believe that it is in an automaker’s long-term strategic interest to produce ventilators?

Providing a channel for distributing products to the marketplace and the myriad of services and complexities associated with that function are best served by those well equipped to do so.

Fundamentally, being true to yourself is about maintaining the essence of an entity.

**Flexibility is the key to stability.** Flexibility is about adapting to changing conditions and circumstances. In the realm of coaching basketball, it is about adjusting the game plan as needs dictate. It doesn’t change the characteristics of the team and its members, but rather applies those members in different ways. I am truly in awe of the creative adaptation that I have seen (usually on a video conference) in the industry during this time.

**Be at your best when your best is needed.** This is the top of Coach Wooden’s pyramid and it serves as a daily call to action. Getting through the pandemic will take our brains, no doubt, some courage, and a lot of heart. The collective best in all of us is needed and will make us stronger as we travel through this time together!

As always, I welcome your comments and feedback and can be reached at [ctanzola@fusionsourcing.com](mailto:ctanzola@fusionsourcing.com).

p.s., Don’t forget to mark down Feb. 28 – March 2, 2021, on your calendar for next year’s ERA Conference. I hope to see you in Austin! ■

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## RISING STARS: Hunter Starr

(continued from page 15)

like at almost every networking event I attend, I am learning more about the customers in the area and the needs they may have, as well as establishing targets to pursue with our distribution partners to drive future revenue growth.

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

As I attend the major networking and industry events year over year, I am seeing more and more young professionals. This is encouraging, but I do think that it’s important for the long-term health of ERA and our industry for manufacturers’ reps to actively recruit younger and more diverse candidates into the industry. Flexibility in schedule, uncapped earnings potential and a technology-driven industry are all attractive to young professionals in my opinion.

### How do you see your profession and the industry evolve 10 to 20 years from now?

In the next 10 to 20 years, I am sure there will be changes; increases in the use of Webex & GoToMeeting services in lieu of face-to-face meetings; as technology advances, I could also see customers using 3D printing more and more in the design and production of their products.

However, I feel that there always will be a need by manufacturers to further understand the individual markets around the country for their products which is conducive to the rep model.

### Professionally, what keeps you up at night?

I always strive to meet my commitments. As a rep, if I commit to a customer that a final answer on a delivery date when they are line down, or if I commit to having a proposal to them by a set date and it doesn’t get completed, it does bother me. I try to under commit and over-deliver to ensure this doesn’t happen. ■

## Electronics Representatives Association



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