The Representor

THE VOICE OF MULTIPLE-LINE SELLING IN THE ELECTRONICS INDUSTRY

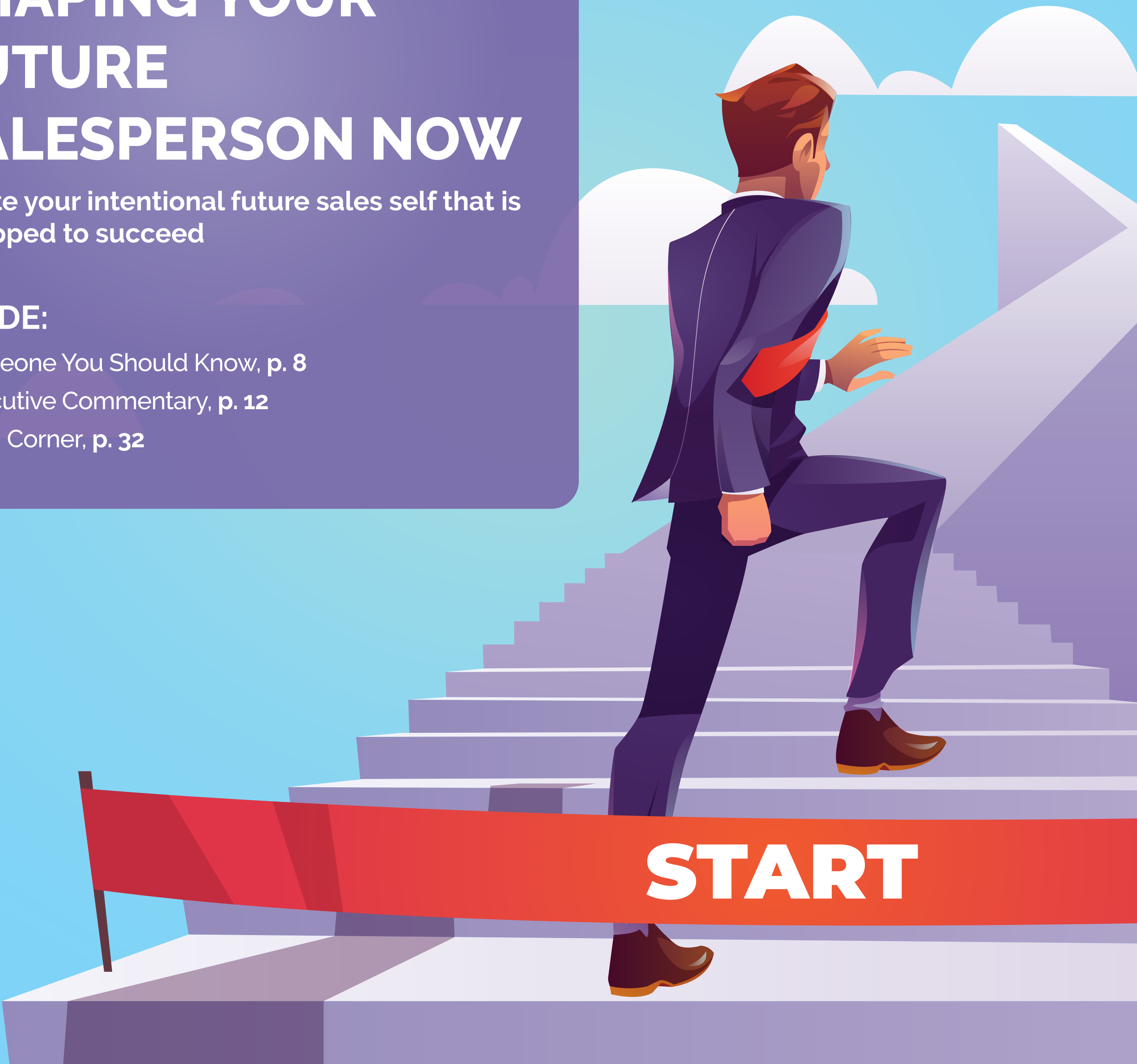
Electronics Representatives Association

FALL 2024

SHAPING YOUR FUTURE SALESPERSON NOW

Create your intentional future sales self that is equipped to succeed

INSIDE:



The Representor

Electronics Representatives Association

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

Founded 1935

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FALL 2024

SHAPING YOUR FUTURE SALESPERSON NOW

Create your intentional future sales self that is equipped to succeed

By Daniel Litts

In 2008, I was appointed to be the President and CEO of the Americas for a prominent Japanese electronic components manufacturer. Despite having a strong work ethic, some successful moments along the way, and some luck woven into the equation, I never aspired to rise to that level. In fact, my career aspirations were probably lower than what others saw in me. Looking back on my journey in the electronics components industry and specifically at that major accomplishment, the question that comes to mind is, why wasn't I more intentional about my future?

The premise of this article is taken from Dr. Benjamin Hardy's book entitled "Be Your Future Self Now," where he introduced the idea of your "future self" as the ideal version of who you want to become. If you're going to have a better future, you need to be intentional about building that future as opposed to having it unfold organically. By clearly defining this "future self," you can create a roadmap to achieve it.

Special thanks to my colleague Jody Williamson who recently presented at the Sandler Summit conference. He incorporated Dr. Hardy's concepts in developing a forward-thinking management approach to "hiring your future salesperson now." He emphasized the importance of visualizing your ideal future salesperson and taking steps to embody that person in the present moment.

This framework offers insights on how these concepts can be applied to the electronics components industry, benefiting manufacturers' reps, manufacturers and distributors.

While most of us have goals, both business and personal, only some of us are disciplined enough to work towards achieving them. These goals are typically based on an evaluation of our current state compared to our past and a projection of what we would like to accomplish in the future. In his TED Talk, "The Psychology of Your Future Self," Dr. Daniel Gilbert explores how people tend to underestimate how much they will change in the future. He explains that while we recognize significant changes in our past selves, we often believe our present self is the final version. In short, most of us don't envision ambitious changes for ourselves going forward.

Let's explore a more intentional approach to shaping our future in sales. Considering current industry trends and the evolving role of sales professionals, envisioning the ideal electronics components sales representative five years from now can provide valuable insights. By intentionally defining this future self or sales team, we can create a roadmap to achieve that vision. Before we delve into specific ideas, let's analyze the current marketplace.

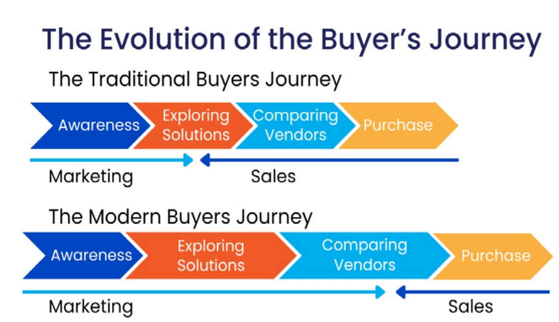
The electronics components industry has faced numerous market and economic fluctuations in the past, but nothing compares to the upheaval caused by the pandemic. The supply chain was so severely disrupted that it still hasn't fully recovered. Manufacturing processes were either halted or significantly altered. Our customers had to put new design projects on hold to focus on finding secondary sources.

As the supply side struggled to manage the crisis, companies opted to wait it out, leading to stagnation, shifts in market position and uncertainty about their future direction. Companies with strong adaptability and flexibility were more likely to successfully navigate these turbulent times.

The traditional model of selling components has radically changed, as a result. Working remotely caught us off guard and hybrid selling left many frustrated, yet it continues to gain momentum. While some have embraced the new world of digital fluency, others are waiting for the model to revert to the way it was. However, that is not going to happen.

As if that paradigm shift wasn't enough, the traditional buyer's journey has also changed. As shown in the chart below, the modern buyer's journey is longer than before. Buyers increasingly rely on digital information to evaluate their options, bringing sales reps into the process much later than usual. This shift has expanded marketing's role and responsibility in promoting components. Let's explore what this means and the changing landscape that sales reps must navigate.

The evolution of the buyer's journey



A 2022 Gartner survey found that 72 percent of B2B buyers said they prefer a "rep-free"

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experience or digital self-serve.

However, Gartner data indicated that buyers who interact with a sales rep are 2.3 times more likely to feel confident about their decision versus digital self-serve. This is likely because modern buyers are overwhelmed by the amount of information and the complexity of decisions they need to make. This often leads to decision paralysis and a higher likelihood of a no-decision outcome.

Our customers expect us to communicate in the method they prefer. Research shows buyers reported 10 unique supplier interactions back and forth across multiple channels on average during their recent purchase.

Modern-day buyers are using virtual meetings, pre-recorded video, email, LinkedIn and LinkedIn posts, text messages, phone, voicemail, in-person meetings and mail as mediums to conduct their purchasing process. Don't get stuck on the method you like the best, but communicate in the way that your customer chooses.

HubSpot revealed in 2022 that 45 percent of meetings were hybrid, and their 2023 study concluded that now 71 percent of salespeople are hybrid, defying assumptions that communication tactics would return to predominantly in-person format.

When asked if their salespeople were better in-person or in a digital environment, sales leaders responded that 66 percent of sellers are much better at helping customers in person than they are through digital channels.

To complicate things further, there are more stakeholders involved in the decision-making process. A Google B2B survey stated that there are 19 influencers, on average, involved in B2B purchases.

HubSpot found that for smaller companies with 100-500 employees, there were seven influencers involved in the process. If that isn't challenging enough, Gartner stated that 71 percent of sellers indicated that additional stakeholders are often added to the process. With the influx of these new trends, the process has become daunting to manage.

HubSpot also indicated that 96 percent of the buying community researches the reps and companies they're considering doing business with. When a sales rep first speaks with a prospect, this is the percentage that knows about your company, products and services and how they compare to the competition.

In the past, this is what our sales reps felt was their role. Previously the buying community heavily relied on sales reps to impart this information so they could make educated decisions in the buying process. With the changes we're seeing, the need for a sales rep comes much later in the modern buyer's journey.

Consider the number of people involved in the buying process. They are all gathering research and sharing opinions. Within the B2B buying groups, 55 percent are experiencing dysfunction around who makes a purchase, making them 74 percent less likely to complete a high-quality deal.

This fact, combined with a preference for digital interactions, and sales reps entering into the buyer's journey at a later stage, means the number of decision-makers and influencers in the buying process has increased, and most buyers conducting extensive research before engaging with a sales rep has made for an extremely complex selling landscape.

The question to consider is: How do you or your sales team measure up with the present state of the buyer's process?

A 2023 Gartner survey acknowledged that 97 percent of sales leaders identified reskilling and upskilling their workforce as an immediate priority.

In a simplistic approach, a future sales professional or team should comprise three key elements: psychology, methodology and technology. The psychological aspect involves building relationships, managing personality behaviors and understanding group dynamics. Methodology pertains to your sales process, including communication, qualification, presenting, closing and handling objections. Technology, however, is the game changer. The ability to leverage advanced tools and methods, particularly AI as a personal digital assistant, will significantly boost productivity, efficiency and effectiveness.

With these industry changes in mind, you have a blank canvas to create an intentional future self or team that is equipped to succeed. Ambition, drive, grit, resilience, curiosity, adaptability and tech savviness are all sales competencies to include in the construction of this future self or team.

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Other skill sets to consider include:

— ***Being the disrupter not the responder.*** As digital fluency continues, do we understand the objectives that our customers, CMs or distributors are making? Are we merely responding to every request or are we really getting to the heart of understanding what their objectives are?

— ***Being the qualifier not the presenter.*** With the inception of AI and other digital tools, the amount of lead generation is forecasted to increase. The number of companies and tools available to digitally formulate leads is expanding daily. Not having someone to identify quality leads from others is certain to create a mess.

— ***Being the sense-maker not the complicator.*** According to Gartner's study "The Sense-Making Seller," decision paralysis has become rampant among modern buyers. Having a sense-maker helps buyers navigate the mass amount of information and options during the research process. This is essential to combating the rise in no-decision outcomes.

— ***Being the coordinator not the chaser.*** As the number of decision-makers and influencers involved in the buying process has significantly increased, the ability to coordinate and understand everyone's specific needs would help unify and accelerate the decision-making steps.

— ***Being the value creator not the persuasive seller.*** Traditional sales tactics like persuasive selling and relationship-building are less effective in complex buying situations where buyers need to process vast amounts of information. Sales professionals have a tremendous opportunity to create differentiated values that distinguish them from the pack, elevate relationships and build status with their customers.

Over the past five years, individuals and sales teams have all experienced significant changes. Were these changes—including personal growth, successes and overall accomplishments—the result of intentional effort, or were they reactive in nature?

The dynamics in the B2B space will continue to evolve as technology grows at an unprecedent rate. With this in mind, is your sales team prepared to elevate their role in this new buyer's journey?

Creating a future salesperson or team that can adapt and succeed in this ever-evolving landscape relies on proactive, thoughtful planning. Doesn't it make more sense to intentionally build that team now than to leave it to chance? ■

Scan this QR code to access a Sandler sales white paper!

About the author

Daniel Litts has been successfully selling and leading sales professionals for over 30 years. His career includes a successful track record in business development, channel sales and executive management in the industrial manufacturing sector with T.E Connectivity, Marshall Industries and Panasonic to name a few.

Today, Litts is President of Sandler by Ascending Performance in North Carolina. His company's primary focus is on sales training, management coaching, leadership development and organizational excellence.

Litts believes that sales growth propels companies and has dedicated his career to helping teams and individuals grow. He has a passion for developing team environments, engaging those members who focus on problem-solving and meeting their objectives, and increasing top-line revenue for clients.

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Félix Cabañas
Director, LATAM
Kruvand Associates, Inc.

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 Félix Cabañas, Director, LATAM, at Kruvand Associates, Inc., and president of the new Mexico ERA chapter.

The Representor *asked Cabañas a few questions about his time in the rep business and his experiences with ERA. Here is what he had to say.*

Tell us a little bit about yourself.

I'm the youngest of three siblings, with two older sisters. I grew up in the border town of Ciudad Juarez and, like many in this area, attended college across the border at the University of Texas at El Paso. I've been married for 25 years to my beautiful wife, Diana, and I'm the father of a 21-year-old son, who is a junior in college, and a 17-year-old daughter, who is a senior in high school.

I started my career in electronics on the purchasing side with Snap-On Tools, before transitioning to Insight Electronics, and later worked for Memec United and Avnet. Thirteen years ago, I joined Kruvand Associates, Inc.

> *Our greatest opportunities often lie in facing our fears, and fear itself isn't a bad thing—as long as we keep moving forward.*

What are some things you enjoy outside of the workplace?

I love sports, both watching and participating in them. I enjoy watching live baseball probably because I played for many years when I was younger, but I later took up cycling, which has become my favorite sport to practice for the last 18 years.

How long have you been an ERA member and how long have you been in the rep business?

Kruvand has been an ERA member for a long time, probably since the beginning of the ERA. The company has been in business for 53 years, and I have been in the industry for 24 years.

How did you become interested in being a rep in the electronics industry?

I started in the distribution segment as I mentioned above and as a distributor, I always enjoyed working with Kruvand. I was at a key inflection point in my life and after talking with Robert Logan, our CEO, the opportunity to join the company just made sense. To this day, I'm very grateful to be here.

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

The electronics industry has been good to me. My background as a distributor provided a great foundation for my career. Working with a rep firm has introduced new levels of engagement with manufacturers, distribution partners and customers. It has allowed me to expand my reach and collaborate with amazing people from different parts of the world.

Briefly describe your rep firm.

We are a family style of company. While we are all focused on the success of the business side, we never lose sight of supporting each team member, both professionally and personally. We work hard, but we recognize that behind every member is a family and loved ones, and that's what truly matters in the end. We want every individual in Kruvand to thrive and become their best version.

What are some recent innovations, best practices and innovations your firm has made?

Recently, we upgraded our CRM platform, incorporating Power BI for improved data analysis. A few years ago, we also created a dedicated social media team to help us use LinkedIn and other social media tools efficiently in our industry.

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?

Walter Tobin and his ERA team have been an invaluable source of knowledge and experience for me. Through ERA, I've also had the opportunity to interact with great leaders from other rep firms, distributors and manufacturers across Mexico, the U.S. and even South America, which has greatly enriched my network and myself as a person.

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

As a kid, and even through college, my biggest fears were public speaking and leadership. I would go out of my way to avoid speaking in public or taking on leadership roles in class projects. However, life, destiny or whatever you want to call it, continually puts these challenges in front of me.

I'm still not fully comfortable with public speaking, but I do it to the best of my abilities. I also question my leadership skills at times, but I always strive to do my best. Over the years, I've learned that our greatest opportunities often lie in facing our fears, and that fear itself isn't a bad thing—as long as we keep moving forward. ■

SOMEONE YOU SHOULD KNOW

Jen Angelo Smith
Field Sales Engineer
SJ Associates

To gain better insight into how early career professionals in the electronics industry have turned challenges into opportunities to ensure continued growth, The Representor *interviewed Jen Angelo Smith, field sales engineer at SJ Associates.*

She shared what she finds rewarding and frustrating about the rep business, from a Millennial perspective.

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

I grew up in Doylestown, Pa., and graduated from Lehigh University in 2016 with a B.S. in Bioengineering. In college, I was a fellow in the Lehigh TRAC program (Technology, Research, and Communication), which focused on supporting the advancement of technology and communication skills among students on campus.

I started at SJ Associates as a field sales engineer right after graduation, first covering the Northern New Jersey market before moving to the Philadelphia market in 2019. Now I am a junior partner in the firm, along with four other associates with 5+ years at SJ.

I currently live in Yardley, Pa., with my husband and 2-year-old daughter.

What are some things you enjoy outside of the workplace?

My favorite days are spent with my family. Having a toddler, even the simplest things are exciting because we get to see her learn and grow from every experience. We love to travel, ride bikes and go for walks around our neighborhood.

How long have you been an ERA member and how long in the rep business?

SJ has been involved with ERA for many years and I've been involved since I started at SJ in 2016. This February, I attended my first ERA conference and presented on a panel with my SJ colleagues! I joined the rep business right after college eight years ago. Even since starting my career in 2016, the industry has changed so much and I value being part of an ever-changing, adaptive industry.

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

Starting at SJ, I was told that design cycles can take 18-24+ months. Being eight years in, I find it rewarding to have been through many design cycles with customers and to be the first person they call when they are starting new designs.

Briefly describe your rep firm.

SJ Associates represents leading manufacturers offering a broad variety of semiconductors and other electronic components. SJ has been in business since the 1950s and covers the Northeast from Maine to Virginia. We have 18 FSEs, 12 of whom are what we call "Zillennials" (Millennials or Gen Zs). SJ's "Zillennial" strategy was started to develop the next generation of rep owners and to best serve the next generation of customers. We say: "The next generation for the next generation."

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

Besides our Zillennial strategy, which also offers company partnership to those excelling after 5+ years, SJ is excited about our advancements in data analytics and digital marketing to reach a broader customer base.

SJ's homegrown CRM allows us to customize needs, connect with principal CRMs for data exchange and run our digital marketing engine. In the digital marketing realm, we can customize specific engineers' interests in CRM and personalize content to target the right contacts during digital email blasts, which are developed by our in-house digital demand creationist. In terms of business development efforts, we can use a more targeted approach to sharing technologies and resources with our customer base. We develop template emails and can send them to contacts with a single click from the CRM.

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

One of the most concerning issues in the representative business is how principals tend to shift their approach as customer business grows. Initially, when developing a new customer and the business is still small, principals are generally supportive and appreciative of the representative's efforts. However, as business with certain customers starts to grow significantly, it becomes counterintuitive to see principals express concerns about maintaining control over the customer relationship, often wanting to engage directly. This shift is usually driven by financial decisions made by resources at the principal who are not closely involved in the sales process, which can undermine the strong relationship the rep has built with the customer.

The challenge is to educate principals on the long-term value that representatives bring to the relationship and to work together to find solutions that keep the rep involved, regardless of how large the customer becomes. This would benefit both the principal and the rep, as the trust and

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A few Fall musings

by Walter E. Tobin
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So, here comes the fall and the dreaded Q4 in our sales/fiscal year cycle. It's probably chock full of requests of, "How will you finish the year?" and "I need your budget for 2025,"etc.

We also anticipate the change in the weather…leaves falling and breaking out the sweatshirts and sweaters. Here in Boston, we will tolerate the "leaf peepers" and another year of no baseball in October.

There is a lot going on in our world — a U.S. election approaching (no politics here!), wars/conflicts galore, famine in the Sudan continues, uncertain economic times and excess inventory galore. How do you/we allow all of these factors to "marinate" into our 2025 outlook?

Let me take a moment to reflect on some things that we face together now and in 2025:

• **Year-end close.** Many of us will want to say good riddance to 2024. Many of us thought it was going to be a turn-around year because the excess inventory that many of us made our customers take (due to enforcing NCNR orders) would magically "burn off" and would be back in the land of positive book-to-bill ratios and rising backlogs. What will we do in Q4 to try to save the year? Can it even be saved? Do we just want to "take our lumps," turn the page and start fresh in January 2025? I don't believe we can save the year in a single quarter. Be careful as to what strategy you choose.

• **2025.** What will the new year bring? What "magic" could possibly take place from Q4 to Q1 to change our sales cadence? Probably not a lot. So, look for Q1 and perhaps Q2 to be flat to 2H 2024. We always expect things to get better "in two quarters" — when probably no one really knows. Perhaps the best advice is to: Tighten your belt and continue to march.

• By the time you read this, our annual **Sales Training for Electronics Professionals** (STEP) training will have taken place. Thanks to our exclusive sponsor, the TTI Family of Specialists, we had approximately 350 registered attendees. What better time to train our front-line sales and marketing professionals than in a flat/down market? I applaud the companies that made the decision to invest in their people now, so as to be better positioned when the market turns back up.

• **electronica in Munich** on Nov. 12-15. Are you going? ERA will have a booth once again as we have for the past 30 years! Munich is a long way to go and participation is not cheap. However, we do not look at it as an expense but as an investment in continuing to take the ERA message to EMEA. There is a huge interest by EMEA manufacturers in how to go to market in the Americas. The rep model in EMEA is still predominantly the stocking rep model, who are really distributors. It is difficult if not impossible for this model to continue as the distributors have the financial size and scope to support the marketplace. We will have many reps from the Americas in our booth (#B4, 178) to talk with EMEA manufacturers who want to penetrate the Americas market. There are many manufacturers in the Americas who want to penetrate the EMEA market. We have a growing EMEA ERA chapter who will be at our booth to help plan strategies to help in EMEA. The world is so small and getting smaller thanks to the different technologies that we all use every day.

• **ERA Conference** – February 23-25, 2025. This is an unabashed plug for our annual conference. It will be sold out once again so register now and book your hotel room. Why come to our conference? To listen and to learn new ways to run your organization better, use new tools, get a peek into the economy and see old friends. The two-plus days are jam-packed with both general sessions and breakout sessions. No golf or boondoggles. (Shucks!) It is an educational conference held on the campus of the University of Texas. (Go Longhorns!) Come and prepare to be amazed!

• **Your ERA team.** We will end 2024 with some new faces in new roles. We lost our beloved Erin Collins but were blessed to find Kate Van Hise and Natalie Zullo. These two new faces are joining our "veterans" — Karin Derkacz, Clare Kluck, Ama Derringer and Susan Bannwart — to take us into 2025 and

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beyond. We are all working hard to continue to provide new and exciting benefits to our members. Stay tuned!

• **ERA Rep Value Video**. As a part of ERA trying to "skate where the puck is going," we recently posted our first of many videos on the value of the rep model. This three-minute video was a collaboration with Jeff Boos of ANRO Associates and the keen eye of Clare Kluck. Look for videos in the near future.

Whew! So many things to look at. Every month and quarter, we are given ten targets to hit and only given seven arrows, thus missing three targets. And, these are usually the ones that get talked about or scrutinized. What about the seven targets we hit? They almost never get talked about.

Someone told me years ago to focus on getting and keeping the confidence of the customer, versus booking an order. If you keep the customer as your true north, you will book your unfair share of orders over the long haul. So many of us may have given into the pressure of taking the order off the street only then to not be able to fulfill the promises we made to the customer. We end up losing our status as a trusted advisor and lose the customer — perhaps forever.

We all know what to do: make our sales calls, follow up, be open and honest and remain committed to sales excellence.

Things will get better — they always do! ■

These companies joined ERA since the Summer 2024 issue of ***The Representor.***

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- Thriving on Change 2014: How the Field Sales Function Keeps Evolving
- Guidelines to Planning a Territory Visit
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- POS – Recommended Technical Standards for Distribution Point-of-Sale Reporting
- Split Influence (Commission) Recommendations for the Electronics Industry
- Split Commission Request Form, in Excel format

ERA Meetings & Programs

Chapter Officer Leadership Training (COLT).................Nov. 6-8, 2024
electronica...Nov. 12-15, 2024
ERA Conference..Feb. 23-25, 2025

What does recovery look like?

by John O'Brien, CPMR
Coakley, Boyd & Abbett
ERA Chairman of the Board
jobrien@cbane.com

How many of us are asked in meetings, "What do you see for recovery of the electronics industry?" Let's face it, everyone is skeptical about when a recovery will occur, most people not venturing out more than two quarters to look for the growth we all know will return. Our industry is so cyclical that we often go through great periods of growth followed by short periods on flat or contraction. For those who have been around awhile, we can look back at the dotcom bust or the allocation periods, for example.

We are a resilient industry that touches so many markets that help offset downturns. We are also an adaptive industry that sees these changes and can react quickly.

What I believe we are experiencing this time around are multiple forces driving our industry, but not always in the same direction. Going back to 2019/2020 and the COVID-19 era, expectations when COVID-19 first hit and everything shut down were that our industry would face a big downturn. I remember a meeting in March 2020 when we discussed how we would adjust to an anticipated drop in sales and revenue. As our people moved to work-from-home, it drove a surge in the very products we supply to support his new work model. As concerns arose over testing and treatments, our medical markets began to thrive.

Then 2021/2022 hit and the disruption in supply chain started to take hold. Customers bought usages going out a year so they could try to maintain their production. Then when they couldn't get parts, they opened up their BOMs to cover build demands.

2023 rolled around and everyone was sitting on too much inventory. Everywhere throughout the supply chain, distributors, CEMs and OEMs all had raw materials inventory and in many cases, finished goods, that outpaced the end customer demand. So, throughout 2024, we've been tracking inventory work-downs. We've been watching end customer shipments but up until recently, design efforts were limited to sustaining engineering. Recently, we've started to see an increase in new product designs. These new designs are definitely taking longer and there are fewer going on at the same time.

So do these factors signal a recovery? I'll get back to my original premise, "How do we define recovery?" If we look at recovery as a return to sales numbers equal or greater to the heights we've seen (for us that was 2022), then I believe we are still a ways out from there. Price pressures from the OEMs are causing lower overall sales, but, with similar volumes we've seen prior. Most recently, I've spoken to a number of folks at principals, distributors and CEMs and many are looking at 2019/2020 as a comparative time frame to 2024 and beyond. Everything I outlined previously in the article "artificially" inflated our numbers, so a comparison to a more stable time may help provide greater insight into what's happening.

No matter how you define recovery, we all learned a valuable lesson over the past four years. We are a resilient industry that touches so many markets that help offset downturns. We are also an adaptive industry that sees these changes and can react quickly. Working together as reps, manufacturers and distributors, we will recover and be stronger than before. ■

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EDUCATION UPDATE

Ellen Coan, CPMR
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Telling a good story

Story telling is the key to our success every day. Whether we are selling our factory, our distributor, our boss, our customer or beyond — we want to be the BEST story teller!

Story telling basics include:

- Knowing your goal
- Choosing the right time and place
- Using a hook to get the audience's attention
- Being clear and concise
- Watching your emotions
- Being aware of your body language
- Practicing often
- Asking for feedback – always learning and improving

I'm reminded of so many stories that went well and those that did not go well as I write this. Did I jump into the issue too quickly? Was I in the right place, physically and mentally, to discuss the issue? Was I clear with my facts? Did I consider the other side of the story?

We all tend to focus on what we want to say and struggle to listen to or watch the reaction. Today's business environment is challenging and we are all looking for the best value we can offer to continue to grow our business. The 2024 ERA Virtual STEP program (Sept 24-26, 2024) was presented by professionals who shared the best practices to finding the data for our story, and kept us all on our toes to keep evolving and learning. If you missed the live sessions, they are taped and the archived STEP library is open (a small fee) to explore. Talk to ERA Communications Director Clare Kluck (ckluck@era.org.)

Practice on your friends and family — tell the story of the day. Did they follow you? Did you lose them with all the side stories? The acronyms? The cast of characters? Practice narrowing down your story to the information that fits the goal. In the end, we want everyone to walk away a winner. That may take a couple meetings and different approaches but you can get there — together, we are better! ■

DISTRIBUTION UPDATE

Gary Zullo
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In-person versus virtual meetings

Back in the day, (I don't want to admit how long ago!) there used to be a commercial that had a tag line, "Is it live or a famous cassette tape manufacturer I can't mention?" It basically challenged the listener to discern whether the music was live or a recording. It was a challenge to the quality of the experience and posed the inference that the recording could offer a similar experience.

Fast forward to the here and now, and apply the same concept to sales meetings. Is it possible to get the same quality of experience between live, in-person meetings and virtual sales meetings? We've been at this for more than a few years now and while we've figured out that certain task-based meetings can be more efficient in a virtual environment, there are inherent complexities in our industry — supply chain challenges and technology choice being two prominent ones — that make face-to-face engagement most effective.

The purpose of this post is to provoke thought and maybe challenge a bit of the status quo that has evolved since the pandemic. It's often become more challenging to get face-to-face meetings. The days of the regular drive-by are waning. There needs to be clear purpose and associated value articulated up front, most often directed at solving the complex issues our customers face regularly. And who better to solve these issues than the collective power of the supplier-distributor-rep firm partnership? I think most of us would agree that the most fulfilling part of our jobs is spending time with customers and getting a first-hand perspective on the impact our support has on products changing the world.

As we move towards the close of 2024, the planning process for 2025 will begin across all our partners. It's the perfect time to understand future challenges and chart new solutions. I, for one, look forward to more live and less virtual. ■

MANUFACTURING UPDATE

Ken Bellero
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Driving sales in electronics manufacturing with AI

Artificial intelligence (AI) is revolutionizing industries worldwide, and the electronics manufacturing sector is no exception. It has been the #1 topic of conversation for many of us in the electronics industry, as well as a key part of many of our future strategies.

As the market becomes more competitive, manufacturers are increasingly looking for ways to boost sales, optimize production and meet ever-changing consumer demands. AI is emerging as a key enabler in driving sales growth, not only by improving operational efficiency but also by offering deeper insights into customer behavior, enabling smarter marketing strategies and delivering innovative products.

One of the most direct ways AI contributes to driving sales in electronics manufacturing is by optimizing production processes. AI systems can analyze vast amounts of data in real-time, identifying inefficiencies and bottlenecks in production lines. With predictive analytics, manufacturers can forecast demand more accurately, reducing the risk of overproduction or stock shortages. By using AI to streamline operations, manufacturers can reduce lead times and bring products to market faster. This speed is critical in the electronics industry, where product lifecycles are short and new models are frequently introduced. Companies that can rapidly respond to changing market demands and launch new products quickly will have a distinct competitive edge, translating directly into increased sales.

Product quality is a critical factor in driving sales. AI-powered quality control systems use advanced algorithms to detect defects in products that may not be visible to the human eye. These systems can inspect products at every stage of the manufacturing process, ensuring consistency and reducing the chances of faulty products reaching the market. AI can enhance innovation in product development by analyzing consumer preferences, market trends and feedback. It can help manufacturers identify new opportunities for product enhancements or entirely new product lines.

Personalization is becoming a key trend in sales and marketing strategies. AI plays a crucial role in this by providing manufacturers with valuable insights into customer behavior and preferences. Through data analytics, AI can segment customers based on their purchasing history, preferences and behavior patterns, allowing manufacturers to tailor their offerings and marketing efforts more effectively. AI-powered recommendation systems can suggest complementary products or upgrades to customers, increasing the likelihood of additional sales.

AI's ability to analyze data in real-time allows manufacturers to create smarter, more targeted marketing strategies. Companies can optimize their digital marketing campaigns by identifying which messages resonate best with different customer segments. This level of precision helps manufacturers invest marketing dollars more efficiently, focusing on strategies that yield the highest return on investment.

Another significant benefit of AI is predictive sales analytics. By analyzing historical sales data, market conditions and consumer trends, AI can forecast future sales with remarkable accuracy. This insight helps manufacturers make informed decisions regarding production, inventory management and marketing strategies. AI-driven insights enable manufacturers to optimize supply chains, ensuring that they have the right products available at the right time. This ability to anticipate demand and adapt accordingly can prevent lost sales opportunities due to stockouts or excess inventory, ultimately maximizing revenue.

By optimizing production, improving product quality, enabling smarter marketing and personalizing the customer experience, AI empowers manufacturers to remain competitive in an increasingly fast-paced market. Embracing AI technologies now positions our industry for sustained success in the future, helping businesses achieve both immediate sales boosts and long-term growth.

A personal note from Ken Bellero

After 25 years of dedicated service at Schaffner EMC Inc., including 13 years as president, I am announcing my retirement, effective Sept. 30, 2024. (prior to the publication of this article) My journey at Schaffner EMC has been immensely rewarding, and I am proud of the growth and success we have achieved together.

I want to extend my sincere thanks to my colleagues and partners in the manufacturers' rep and distribution community. Your support and collaboration have been invaluable, and I cherish the long-term relationships we have built. Although I am retiring from Schaffner EMC, I will continue to serve on the ERA Executive Committee, representing the manufacturing sector.

I plan to stay active and remain available to my friends and colleagues. Please feel free to reach out to me at my new email address, kenbellero@gmail.com, or call me on my cell at 732-910-1717 anytime.

Thank you for your support and friendship over the years—it has truly been a privilege to work with all of you! ■

INDUSTRY UPDATE

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2024 Mark Motsinger White Pin Internship highlights

The summer of 2024 marked another successful chapter for the ERA White Pin Group's internship program! We extend our sincere thanks to the interns and rep firms who participated. This summer, all three interns gained valuable insights into the rep model and the electronics industry. Here are some key takeaways from the committee's check-in calls:

Intern: Ethan Bowers
Firm: RW Kunz & Associates

Ethan Bowers spent his summer at RW Kunz & Associates, immersing himself in every aspect of being a manufacturers' representative. His experience ranged from principal training to CRM reporting, and he even had the chance to make customer follow-up calls. A particularly memorable moment was spending "windshield time" with a veteran supplier, soaking up industry wisdom.

Ethan was able to visit customers and learn how "everything cool happens in the backroom with the engineers." One of his most positive discoveries was the depth of analytics available to the sales team, especially from tools like Budde Marketing. His biggest surprise? Realizing that sometimes, even with your best efforts, you don't win the business—and it may be due to factors beyond your control, like supply chain issues. As Ethan reflected, "I can see how you want to win, but you don't want to reach too far and then break a promise."

Exciting update: After earning his engineering management degree from Missouri University of Science & Technology, Ethan has now joined RW Kunz & Associates full-time as a sales associate under the mentorship of his father, Mark Bowers. He's already making his mark, starting with digital innovations like introducing electronic business cards to the team. We wish Ethan continued success as he grows his book of business in the Missouri and Southern Illinois territory!

Intern: Julia Rowe
Firm: Pinnacle Marketing

Julia Rowe, a business marketing major at East Carolina University, had a rewarding experience during her internship at Pinnacle Marketing. A standout moment was shadowing outside sales on four distinct sales calls, including a factory tour that "gave her blisters from walking the massive factory floor." She enjoyed witnessing the cutting-edge technology being built in Pinnacle's territory.

Julia also worked with inside sales, diving into CRM systems and helping service customers and suppliers. She applied her passion for marketing to Pinnacle's LinkedIn strategy, creating a content calendar with posts scheduled well into the future for all their principals.

Reflecting on her experience, Julia said, "What I like most about the rep business is that every day is different. With so many different suppliers and products, there's always variety and continuous learning." When asked if young people without a technical background should consider the electronics industry, she enthusiastically responded, "Absolutely. People are willing to teach you about the products. It may be a bit harder, but you can do it. This industry is full of opportunity."

Intern: Nathan Dubsky
Firm: Staffco

Nathan Dubsky, a dual major in business analytics and entrepreneurship at the University of Cincinnati, made an immediate impact during his internship at Staffco. Like many rep firms, Staffco faced the challenge of managing data across multiple platforms. Nathan leveraged project management software to create internal processes that supported data migration and integration, and he automated several tasks along the way.

With the data centralized, Nathan developed actionable analytics and metrics to drive sales activity. He became proficient in PowerBI, filtering and analyzing data to create more than 20 new views for the sales management team. Charlie commented that "Nate has elevated our team's ability to use analytics at both the tactical and strategic levels."

Before his internship ended, Nathan had also designed a weekly scoreboard to track progress on opportunities and supported the sales team with analytics during principal meetings. Staffco is excited to have Nathan continue part-time during the fall semester, where they plan to get him involved in some sales calls.

Next generation of talent

The ERA White Pin Group, in partnership with ERA National, continues to foster the next generation of talent for manufacturers' representative firms across North America. Through the Mark Motsinger White Pin internship program, three highly coveted internships are awarded annually, offering college students a valuable opportunity to engage with the electronics industry, either during the summer or throughout the academic year.

We look forward to welcoming many more applicants for the summer of 2025! For more information, visit the ERA website, where the White Pin Internship program is featured under ERA Resources. ■

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

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A challenging year, but great summer — thanks to ERA networking events!

This year has been a challenge for most in our industry. Although we have certainly experienced worse, I subscribe to the assessment that 2024 has been a "correction" year in many ways, and I am anticipating that things overall should be more stable as we progress into 2025. Many may look forward to entering Q4 knowing that it brings them that much closer to putting this year behind them, but even in this challenging business climate, I can look back at the summer of 2024 fondly thanks to the network that ERA has exposed me to.

This summer was very busy with networking opportunities throughout our industry, and our ERA chapters worked particularly hard by arranging events at the chapter level, including a few that I was lucky to attend. Much time and effort goes into planning these events, and they would not be possible without the volunteers who help organize them, the reps, manufacturers and distributors who sponsor them, and those who attend. On behalf of myself and ERA, we thank you all.

Although the overall market remains soft, the events that I attended contributed to a great summer. It is always comforting being surrounded by industry colleagues, especially my fellow ERA members, and this is particularly true during challenging times. Be it a new acquaintance or an old friend, spending time with my fellow ERA members is always a rewarding experience. The conversations are always passionate and I am filled with a sense of camaraderie. I typically learn something that helps me improve personally and/or professionally, and I am always reminded afterwards how lucky I am to have the support of my fellow ERA members in what is such an amazing industry.

The word "best practices" is commonly used to summarize many of the great things that come out of a typical conversation at an ERA event. Sharing best practices is the cornerstone of ERA's annual conference, where the general session and breakout session topics are designed to provide attendees with best practice takeaways. Yet the opportunity to be part of a conversation where valuable information like this is shared is not only found at the conference. Best practices are commonly part of any conversation between ERA members, especially at a networking event, and ERA's chapters organize them throughout the year. I am very grateful for the ideas that I gathered while attending ERA events this summer, and I encourage you and your team members to capitalize on these learning opportunities by participating in the next ERA event near you.

Best practices are commonly part of any conversation between ERA members, especially at a networking event, and ERA's chapters organize them throughout the year.

An ERA membership provides access to so much, but at the top of my list continues to be the ability to network with brilliant people who continually help me improve in so many ways. I have tremendous respect for the power of the individual, but the power of the collective has a compounding effect that can be invaluable, especially during challenging times.

The relationships that I have built through my ERA network remain a primary source of my collective power. Continually communicating with my ERA friends, especially in person at ERA events, remains the bedrock of these relationships. Participating in these events helped make the summer of 2024 a great one. I want to thank my ERA colleagues for helping me be a better person in many ways, and ERA for helping me find and nurture these relationships. ■

REP UPDATE

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Understanding independent sales representative commission plans

In the realm of sales, independent sales representatives play a pivotal role in driving business growth. These professionals, often operating on a commission-based compensation model, are integral to connecting products and services with potential clients. However, the structure of their commission plans can significantly impact their motivation and performance. One trend that has been gaining attention is the decline in commission rates, which can have detrimental effects on both sales representatives and the businesses they represent.

Often I get questions from executive-level managers, looking for ways to spike sales volume. "What incentive plans work well to get your team to hustle for Acme Electric?" Interesting question. If the company in question is basically functional — meaning they do not have systemic dysfunctionality in the area of quality, communication and responsiveness, they are customer-centric and are in a viable technology, and have some level of industry presence — the obvious answer is to provide a strong commission rate. To the executive asking the incentive question, I would urge you to consider for a moment that a 6-7 percent commission rate would differentiate you from 80-90 percent of your peers and competition. For the example above, a $20 part would cost a manufacturer an additional cost of $0.40 to go from 4 to 6 percent, and would buy you so much more focus by any representative organization's sales team.

I have always been fascinated with representative contracts that reflect declining commissions as part of their structure. Here is an example of a contract proposal that I received recently, showing commissions declining as sales increase:

Cumulative Sales (per customer opp)	Represented list
Up to $1M	3 percent
$1M to $3M	2.5 percent
$3M to $5M	2 percent
$5M to $10M	1.5 percent
>$10M	1 percent

Giving this some thought, it hit me that the assumption of this type of downward commission structure with increasing sales volume can be assumed to hold the following possible paradigms:

1. Profit always declines with volume.
2. Margins are so low, we expect to see less profit as volume increases.
3. Margins are so low, we need to shave off 2 to 4 percent from industry standard rates. (typical 5 percent)

Note: With average sales prices of these particular components at $10-$20, going from 5 to 1 percent represents a reduction of commission from $1 per part to $0.20 per part. Is $0.80 per part going to make or break the deal?

Profit—To be or not to be

When you evaluate the actual savings of reducing commissions, as in the above example, you see that it is assumed that the total resulting savings to the customer is maximum of $0.80 on a $20 average selling price (ASP). I cannot help but wonder how dysfunctional a business is that cannot get an incremental margin increase off a $20 part.

The evidence does not hold up when you question the cost accounting. First, we see typical salaries for these technology companies paying out substantial salaries for direct resources: FAEs, field sales people (often with salaries over $150k before benefits) and lots of wasted expenditures. Spending six figures at trade shows, massive executive salaries, budgets for capital equipment at 10 percent or more of annual revenues. And yet, field sales has to be discounted.

Is the problem that cost accounting is structured to minimize profit, avoiding taxes on net income? Is the problem that our industry has seen the profit degradation for components? In the above example, the company in question shows on their public financial disclosures that they are making close to 40 percent profit margins. Its earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization (EBIDA) and key financial indicators look positive. I would add that a declining commission rate has definite impact on how motivated a sales team would be to focus and devote energy and attention to this particular product technology. It is not a simple question of profit erosion. I believe it is more of a question of the value placed on investing in the sales organization.

This brings up an interesting point about profitability. Whatever happened to the ability of an organization to reduce costs as volume increases? Why don't we assume that commission rates can increase with increased sales and quantity volume? It points to a negative bias

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supported in our industry about how sales as a function is viewed in regards to the value contribution to the organization.

You may ask, what if the business is substantial? For example, what if there are a plethora of $10 million opportunities that would dictate a 1 percent commission, but the volume makes up for it? I guess it comes down to ROI. The CPMR courses for representative owners cover ROI on a line-by-line basis. When I attended back in the day, it was an eye opener to take a fresh look at what the individual line represents in returns. The impact of maintaining personnel levels, inside resources for reporting to the supplier's CRM, maintaining a distribution manager and program, sales meetings and trainings that are not cost-covered by the supplier — if you are a representative, the costs are real! Sometimes those largest commission revenue lines are the least profitable!

While declining commission rates might offer short-term financial relief for companies, they can have adverse effects on motivation, turnover and overall sales performance.

Some signs of hope

There are great examples of suppliers that have figured out how to differentiate themselves from the recent trend to discount commissions. I can speak to this from recent personal experience. We recently signed a military/aerospace line that pays 8 percent across the board. At first introduction, the sales level for this particular supplier was somewhat limited in the territory. I am not surprised to see a four-fold increase in sales in less than nine months of representation. Coincidence?

Contrast that with a line that recently reduced commissions due to a national decline in sales POS. After a 30 percent reduction in commission rate, their sales have continued to remain flat. Again, coincidence? I try to explain to my sales team that an 8 percent line that books a $1 million dollar order is the equivalent of a 4 percent line booking a $2 million order. Simple math, but sometimes we forget that actual ROI we see as representatives.

The basics of independent sales representative commission plans

Commission plans for independent sales representatives (what we pay our field sales team) typically come in various forms, including:

Straight commission. Sales reps earn a percentage of each sale they make. This model is straightforward and aligns the rep's earnings directly with their performance.

Base salary plus commission. This plan provides a fixed base salary with additional earnings based on the sales achieved. This hybrid model offers financial stability while still incentivizing performance.

Commission draw. Sales reps receive a regular payment (draw) against future commissions. This system ensures they have a steady income while incentivizing them to earn more through sales.

Tiered commission. This structure offers increasing commission rates as sales volumes surpass predefined thresholds, motivating reps to exceed targets.

Residual commission. Reps earn ongoing commissions from repeat sales or recurring revenue, rewarding long-term customer relationships and retention.

I encourage you to engage sales representatives in the design and evaluation of commission plans. Their input can provide valuable insights and help create a more effective and motivating compensation structure. Representative owners, like me, have probably seen plans that work and plans that are not productive. No matter what commission plan you have, you want to question your representative to make sure they have a healthy commission award plan, one that pays out based on productivity and reflects your contribution to the representative organization. Your contribution should be transparent and directly positively impact the individual field sales representative.

Invest more, expect more

In the given examples, there are myriad variables that make this a "not so simple." Evaluation of the impact of reduced commissions on sales force productivity can be affected by complex variables.

One thing that every executive should consider is where are you investing your money? Is it on operations to curb cost? Even if you are 100 percent successful in reducing costs, you have a limited result, as reducing costs to zero would not add any revenues to total sales. Why not focus on driving growth? I would challenge every executive sales manager to give the increased commission strategy a try and see what the results are in 30/60/90 days. Make sure it is communicated, exceeds the industry standard of 5 percent and is supported down the chain of command. Invest more, expect more!

Independent sales representatives are vital to the success of many businesses, and their compensation plans play a crucial role in their performance and satisfaction. While declining commission rates might offer short-term financial relief for companies, they can have adverse effects on motivation, turnover and overall sales performance. By adopting best practices and ensuring that compensation plans remain fair, competitive and motivating, companies can sustain a productive sales force and drive long-term business success.

The cost of sales is a real challenge. Consider the cost of "no sales" and everything we know about profitability formulas kicks in. Ninety percent of the relative health of any organization is based on revenues! The way to bust through the sales ceiling is… incentive! ■

ERA XCOM DIGEST

Locking up a sales rep in perpetuity? A presumptively bad idea

by Adam Glazer
ERA General Counsel

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

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Many otherwise sound rep contracts are subject to termination for any reason or for no reason. Even if the parties agree to an initial contract term of three or more years to give the relationship time to develop and to enable the rep to create demand for the manufacturer's products, most reps understand that if their three-year agreement allows termination on 30 days' notice, they don't really have a three-year contract. Instead, they're working on a 30-day contract.

Other agreements take the preferred approach of renewing automatically on their anniversary, unless either side gives advance notice of non-renewal. However, these agreements can often prove less than clear about the parties' right to end their relationship. When such an agreement does not clearly spell out termination rights, just how does a party call it quits?

The relationship begins

This question arose after Service By Air, Inc., a shipping and logistics company, contracted with Beach Forwarders, Inc., back in 2010 to become its exclusive sales agent in Virginia. Their agreement had a three-year term and then renewed perpetually for consecutive one-year terms. In an unusual move, this contract gave only the principal, Service By Air, the right to terminate, in its sole discretion, by providing 30 days' notice prior to the annual renewal date.

Beach Forwarders' ability to terminate under the agreement was limited to if Service By Air materially breached. In such a case, Beach Forwarders was required to provide 30-days' notice of a claimed material breach, and Service By Air then had the right to cure within an additional 90 days. If it did not, the contract stated Beach Forwarders "may terminate this Agreement effective ten days after delivery to Service By Air of notice of termination."

Oddly, the contract's termination clause ended with this sentence: "A termination of this Agreement by Agent for any other reason shall be deemed a termination by the Agent without cause." No other language in the parties' agreement addressed a termination without cause or explained what would happen upon a without cause termination.

The relationship sours

By 2020, the parties' relationship deteriorated and Beach Forwarders wanted out. Taking a tough line, Service By Air informed its sales rep that any attempt to terminate would breach their perpetual contract. This led Beach Forwarders to file suit in the Chicago federal court seeking a judicial declaration that, because the one-sided language did not enable it to terminate and could lock it up in perpetuity, the parties' agreement was terminable at will under the law.

As in many states, a contract of indefinite duration is indeed presumed to be terminable at will under Illinois law. Yet, Service By Air answered by urging the court to strictly adhere to the contract's terms. Only it had the right to non-renew the contract, went the argument, and because Beach Forwarders failed to cite a material breach and provide proper notice, it could not validly terminate. Service By Air acknowledged the contract was for indefinite duration, but claimed the presumption that it was terminable at will was overcome by the contract language requiring notice of a material breach and a right to cure.

The trial court disagreed, and issued a declaration that Beach Forwarders could lawfully terminate. Service By Air appealed.

The relationship is appealed

Upon taking up the matter, a three-judge panel of federal appellate judges noted how the parties' agreement "would renew automatically for an additional one-year term (presumably, without end) unless Service By Air stated otherwise." The higher court determined this language "triggered the application of Illinois law governing contracts of indefinite duration, which has long recognized that such contracts are presumptively terminable 'at the will of the parties.'"

However, the appellate court also noted that when an agreement is terminable only for cause or upon the occurrence of a specific event, then the specified event must occur for the contract to end, meaning it is not an "at will" contract. "Under Illinois law, a contract without a set term is terminable at will, absent a clear statement that the contract can only be terminated based upon the occurrence of

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certain conditions or events."

The court cited an earlier decision that explained the rule by saying: "The presumption of terminability allows separation in the business world, unless the parties clearly provide otherwise. It is the business equivalent of no-fault divorce."

In another cited decision involving a rep who sued a principal after getting terminated, the court ruled that: "There is a decisive difference between saying that A may terminate if B breaches and saying that A may terminate only if B breaches." Naturally, Service By Air attempted to compare itself to the manufacturers in these earlier cases, but its contract was clearly different.

The appellate court pointed to the contract language stating that after the 90-day cure period, Beach Forwarders "may terminate this Agreement," and remarked how conspicuous it was that the provision lacked "any language of limitation or exclusivity, such as 'except as herein provided' or 'unless.'" Without such language, the cure provision does not "contain a clear statement that a material breach is the sole or exclusive basis for termination by Beach Forwarders."

Also failing to escape the court's attention was the incongruent sentence at the end of the termination provision providing: "A termination of this Agreement by Agent for any other reason shall be deemed a termination by the Agent without cause."As the court recognized, "nowhere does the Agreement expressly state that it can be terminated only for cause, nor does it impose a penalty for terminating without cause."

Finding that the parties' agreement "lacks a clear statement that the contract can only be terminated based upon the occurrence of certain conditions or events," the court felt the default rule that contracts of indefinite duration are terminable at will went unrebutted. Thus, Beach Forwarders properly terminated, even without an express right to do so set out in the parties' agreement.

The relationship's lesson

The upshot is that courts in Illinois and in many other jurisdictions will likely treat continuous or perpetual contracts without escape hatches as terminable at will by either party, unless they contain unusually clear language providing that the right to terminate is contingent upon the occurrence of certain conditions or events. Even then, many courts do not favor perpetual contracts and may well look for any grounds to deem them terminable at will. ■

Probate, explained

by J. Christian Manalli
Partner, SFBBG

J. Christian Manalli is a partner in the Chicago law firm of Schoenberg Finkel Beederman Bell Glazer LLC. Manalli concentrates his practice on federal tax, estate planning, probate and general business matters.

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When a loved one dies it can be difficult to know how to access their assets, manage their mortgage and other debts, and wind up their affairs. With limited exceptions, the only way to access assets owned by a person in their individual name is through probate, even if they have a valid will. Many people have no idea what probate is — only that they know they want to avoid it. The fictional probate case of Jarndyce v. Jarndyce featured in Charles Dickens' novel Bleak House paints the probate process as a hopeless morass; a quagmire in which the only beneficiary is the legal system itself and the lawyers, clerks and judges within it. Fortunately, probate has come a long way since Charles Dickens' time, and I intend by this article to demystify it for you.

Probate is a legal process required to access a deceased person's assets and pay their debts. Probate only deals with assets held by a deceased person (a "decedent") in their name alone and does not involve assets owned jointly with another person, assets that pass by beneficiary designation (such as life insurance and retirement plans), or assets owned by a trust. If the decedent left a valid will, the probate court will appoint the party named in the will (and qualified to act) as the executor. The executor is tasked with collecting the decedent's assets, paying their debts and disposing of what is left over in accordance with the provisions of the will. If there is no valid will, the probate court will appoint a person to act as administrator to collect the assets, pay their debts and distribute the remaining assets to the decedent's heirs in accordance with state law. When a person dies without a will, state law provides which heirs are entitled to receive the assets and in what proportion (often called the law of descent and distribution). State law also provides who is entitled to nominate or act as the administrator, according to an order of preference.

Probate law has developed over centuries to account for a variety of situations and deal with them as fairly as possible. However, your state's probate laws may not line up with your personal preferences. Accordingly, if you want to ensure the right people receive your property on your death and that the right person is appointed as executor, it is best to create a valid will.

After a loved one dies, it is necessary to engage a lawyer to prepare the required documents to apprise the court of certain information, including the approximate value of the decedent's assets, whether the decedent left a valid will, and the identity of the heirs who would receive the property if there was no valid will. Certain notices are required to be given to the beneficiaries named in the will, as well as the heirs who would be entitled to receive the decedent's property if there was no valid will. In this manner, all interested parties are given notice of the opening of the probate estate and an opportunity to challenge the will, if applicable. The probate court will examine the original copy of the will and make a determination as to whether it was validly signed and witnessed. If the will is determined to be valid on its face, an interested party may file a challenge to the will's authenticity or the decedent's capacity to execute it, within a certain time period.

The probate court requires the person seeking to act as the executor or administrator to obtain a surety bond in an amount sufficient to insure the assets of the estate. This surety bond requirement may be avoided if it is waived in the will. The surety bond is essentially an insurance policy covering the assets of the estate and is typically required to be renewed annually until the estate is closed. In addition, the executor or administrator is required to publish a notice in a local newspaper to all potential creditors or claimants of the estate with a deadline for filing claims against the estate. The probate estate must remain open and assets sufficient to cover all claims should not be distributed to the heirs or beneficiaries until the claims period expires. In Illinois, the claims period is six months from the date of publication of the claims notice, or two years from the date of death, whichever is earlier. However, states vary widely as to the length of the claims period.

Once an executor or administrator is appointed by the court, the court will issue a document often known as "letters of office" confirming that the executor or administrator is authorized to manage the assets and liabilities of the estate. The executor or administrator

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uses this document as proof of their authority to act on behalf of the estate when they go about administering the estate. Administering the estate involves collecting the decedent's assets (for example, from banks and other financial institutions), managing and/or selling real estate or corporate interests, preparing and filing tax returns and dealing with creditors (such as mortgage holders and credit card companies) and any other potential claimants.

The executor or administrator may allow and pay creditor claims or reject them. If a claim is rejected by the executor or administrator, the claimant may file its claim with the probate court and the court will determine whether the claim is valid. Once the assets have been collected, valid debts and expenses of estate administration have been paid, and all necessary tax returns filed, the attorney will prepare an accounting on behalf of the executor or administrator and submit it for approval by the beneficiaries (in the case of a will) or the heirs (if there is no will). Once the accounting is approved and signed receipts have been obtained from the beneficiaries or the heirs (as the case may be), the estate is ready to be closed. The attorney will prepare the documents necessary to close the estate, present them to the court and obtain an order closing the estate and discharging the executor or administrator from their duties.

The probate process is designed to protect a person's wishes expressed in their valid will, and to balance the interests of their beneficiaries, heirs and creditors. However, especially if you do not have a valid will, probate is a "one-size fits all" solution that does not always produce the best results for your loved ones. Moreover, even if you have a valid will, going through probate can be a time-consuming and expensive endeavor that can and should be avoided, if possible. Next quarter, please watch for my article about how to avoid probate and the advantages of preparing a trust-based estate plan. ■

[1] Some states offer an alternative to probate court for small estates with assets below a certain amount. In Illinois, for example, this is known as a "Small Estate Affidavit" and can be used when assets otherwise subject to probate are below $100,00 in the aggregate.

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.

COLT

There is still time to register for COLT 2024, ERA's virtual chapter officer leadership training, which will be held Nov. 6-8, 2024, from 12:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. (ET) each day.

The training will provide creative ideas and practical knowledge — such as member recruitment, hosting events, using the tools available on the ERA website and organizing educational sessions — all to help chapter leaders elevate chapter activities and networking opportunities.

Chapter leaders who complete COLT this year will receive one complimentary attendee registration for the 2025 ERA Conference in Austin, Texas. (Non-transferable and one per chapter.) More information can be found at: https://era.org/event/colt-chapter-officers-leadership-training/.

ARIZONA

Arizona ERA would like to welcome Drew Vojslavek from TTI as the chapter's new distribution chair. The chapter is also planning a "Why ERA?" luncheon to all non-ERA members on October 18 to recruit more rep firms. Arizona ERA's 4th annual golf tournament is scheduled for May 14, 2025.

INDIANA-KENTUCKY

Indiana-Kentucky ERA's golf event at Golf Club of Indiana in August was a fantastic outing! The chapter sincerely thanks everyone for their participation — the Board, all the volunteers and especially the sponsors. The outing was represented by nearly 100 reps, manufacturer members, and most if not all distributor partners.

The chapter was able to donate $1,000 to Hunger, Inc., a local garden and food pantry. Foursomes led by R.O. Whitesell and Rathsburg tied for first place but a hole playoff deemed R.O. Whitesell the 2024 winners.

EMPIRE STATE

Empire State ERA held its annual charity golf tournament on August 5 at Clifton Springs Country Club. This year's tournament was dedicated to the memory of Chuck Tanzola, and his family was on hand to represent their charity, the Willow Glen Christian School. Special thanks to Kathie Cahill for facilitating selection and distribution of the charitable donation as well as acting liaison to the Tanzola family. It was a great day of golf to celebrate and remember Chuck and the way he impacted the electronics and ERA communities.

PACIFIC NORTHWEST

In September, Pacific Northwest ERA held a get-together in conjunction with the Electronic Manufacturers Association for approximately 30 local manufacturers and electronics representatives. The party was at By-By Birdie, an indoor miniature golf facility.

The next major event for the chapter will be the NEDME SHOW (Northwest Electronics Design & Manufacturing Expo) at the Wingspan Convention Center at the Washington County, Oregon Fair Grounds on Oct. 30, 2024. The chapter sponsors the lunch boxes and coffee service for this convention, and will have a booth at the show to promote ERA membership. Many local ERA members will also have booths and will be displaying their lines. Visit NEDME.com for more information. Join us as an exhibitor or visitor on October 30, 2024. PNW ERA is also hosting a party for NEDME exhibitors and technical session speakers at a nearby restaurant on the evening of Oct. 29 after booth exhibits have been completed.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

The 19th Annual Sagebrush Summer Social was a resounding success, blending camaraderie with top-tier networking. As the third social of the year, it brought together leaders from the electronics industry across Los Angeles, Orange County and San Diego. Steve Farley and the Burnt Toast Band energized the evening with live music, creating a vibrant atmosphere for making connections. Thanks to the generosity of sponsors — particularly headliner Triad Magnetics — the event was open to all.

Next up is the Annual Golf Tournament on Oct. 19, benefiting Operation Homefront and military families. Set at the beautiful Black Gold Golf Course, the tournament promises friendly competition and networking among professionals. The day will conclude with a post-tournament banquet for further socializing. Astron Electronics is this year's platinum sponsor, and there are still opportunities to join the fun or support the event through sponsorship.

The year's highlight comes on Nov. 12 with the highly anticipated economic outlook event at the Marriott in Costa Mesa. Featuring a keynote speech by Ivo Tjan, chairman and CEO of CommerceWest Bank, the event will focus on the presidential election's impact on California, the nation and global markets. The evening includes dinner, insightful analysis and a Q&A session with Tjan, offering a rare chance to engage with a top banking executive.

"Ivo's economic outlook covers crucial topics impacting our industry. Hosting this event is critical. If you're looking for a reason to attend, look no further—this event is a must for everyone in our community," said Scott Steck, SoCal ERA chapter president.

CHAPTER NEWS

STEP
Sales Training for Electronics Professionals

A successful STEP 2024

Nearly 300 attendees take a "step" up in their professional development

The fourth annual STEP (Sales Training for Electronics Professionals) event, sponsored by the TTI Family of Specialists, took place virtually on Sept. 24-26 and was a hit!

Each year, ERA is proud to host this live, dynamic educational program for electronics components sales professionals. The sessions are presented by a mix of industry sales professionals and professional sales trainers.

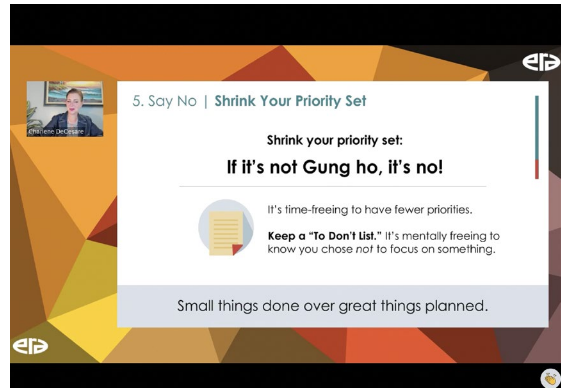
In 2024, the nine STEP training sessions covered these nine topics: effective meeting and account call preparation, AI applications for sales, understanding the engineering design cycle, customer experience excellence, knowing your customer, sales psychology, pruning your sales pipeline, asking the right sales questions and amping up your motivational mindset.

ERA thanks the speakers for sharing their knowledge and resources, the STEP 2024 planning committee for their time and effort and the audience for its lively participation throughout the training!

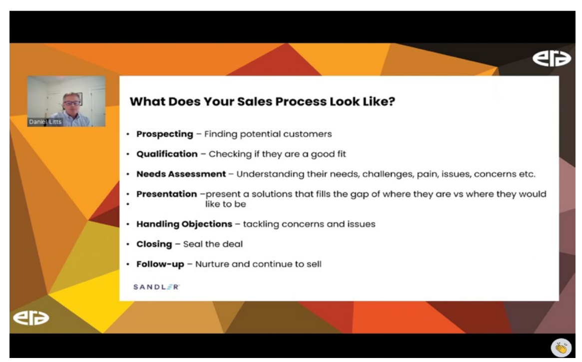
For those who missed it or for those who are interested in accessing past years' training, all STEP programs are recorded, archived and available for purchase at era.org/step.

We hope to see you at STEP 2025! ■

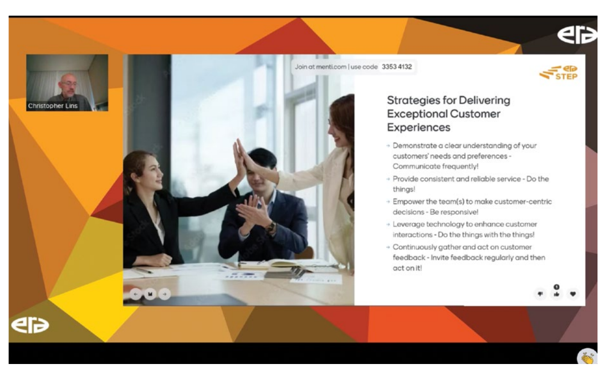
Post-event survey results showed that 85% of 2024 STEP attendees would recommend the sales training event to a colleague!



Above: Charlene DeCesare, senior consultant at the RAIN Group, talks to STEP attendees about amping up their motivational mindset.



Above: Daniel Litts, president of Sandler Training, presents a session on pruning your sales pipeline.



Above: Chris Lins, vice president and general manager, Americas, Powerbox USA, offers his inisghts about providing exceptional customer experiences.

STEP 2024

Matter — the smart-home standard: New boost for smart home devices

By Ben Garcia, field application engineer at Rutronik

Matter is an open smart home standard that aims to improve interoperability between devices from different manufacturers. In December 2019, Project Connected Home over IP (CHIP) was unveiled as a new standard backed by a coalition of leading tech companies, including Amazon, Apple, Google, Samsung and the Zigbee Alliance (now known as the Connectivity Standards Alliance or CSA). In May 2021, the first specifications were laid down, and the project was officially renamed Matter. The release of Matter 1.0 in October 2022 marked the beginning of certification for the first devices. The first update, Matter 1.1, was released on May 18, 2023, followed by Matter 1.2 in October 2023, and the latest version, Matter 1.3, was released in May 2024. The CSA has announced plans to adopt new versions of the standard twice a year.

How does matter work?

The primary goal of matter is to enable seamless integration and control of smart home devices, allowing them to communicate effortlessly. Matter supports multiple communication technologies, such as Wi-Fi, Ethernet, thread and Bluetooth low energy (BLE). This flexibility means that users can connect their smart home devices directly and securely over the Internet without needing additional hubs or components. For example, a smart TV added to Apple Home can also be used via the Google Home app on Android devices. Matter's user-friendly interface simplifies control of smart home devices and ensures future compatibility with new technologies.

Key features of matter

Multi-admin operation. Matter allows devices to be accessed through multiple systems at once. As mentioned above, a smart TV added to Apple Home can also be controlled via the Google Home app on Android devices. This feature enhances user convenience and ensures that devices remain compatible with future technologies.

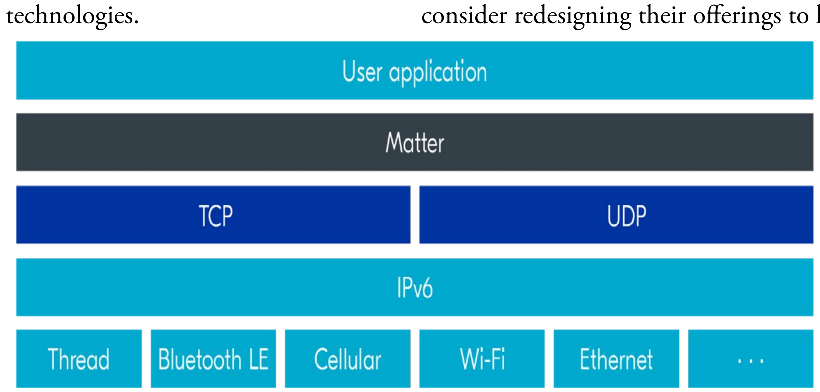
Cross-vendor data exchange. Utilizing the IPv6 network protocol, Matter enables devices to communicate directly without requiring a hub, as long as they are on the same physical network. A common data model facilitates this direct communication, making it easier for devices to work together. With open standards such as WiFi/WLAN (IEEE 802.11), Thread (IEEE 802.15.4), Ethernet/LAN (IEEE 802.3) and BLE, Matter supports a wide range of devices and allows easy initial wireless connections during installation. Some products, like Apple TV 4K and Samsung SmartThings Hub, combine Matter controllers and border routers.

Integrated security. Security is a top priority for matter. Many smart home devices are vulnerable to cyberattacks due to outdated software and weak passwords. Matter addresses these concerns with a "Secure by Design" approach, featuring Device Attestation Certificates (DAC) to prevent counterfeiting, tap-proof communication and robust encryption protocols. This focus on security aims to alleviate the concerns that often deter consumers from adopting smart home technology.

Limited device availability

Despite the promising features of matter, the availability of compatible devices is still limited. As the standard is relatively new, the selection of matter-enabled products is limited, but the market is expected to expand as more manufacturers introduce compatible devices. The ease of use and technical sophistication of matter make it likely to replace proprietary connectivity technologies in the future. Users will appreciate the simplicity of managing multiple devices through a single interface after a straightforward setup.

However, device makers may face challenges in differentiating their products. As the market evolves, manufacturers need to consider redesigning their offerings to highlight innovation while adhering to new EU requirements. New regulations in the EU that took effect on August 1, 2025 over New Information Security Requirements for Wireless Devices and Enforcement of Certain Provisions in the EU AI Act impact Matter and other IoT standards.



The future of Matter

As the smart home landscape continues to evolve, Matter is poised to play a crucial role in creating a more interconnected and user-friendly environment. Keep an eye out for Matter-compatible products hitting the market soon, and get ready to enjoy a smarter, more seamless home experience! ■

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

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

Scan QR code for more ERA Member Services information:

2025 ERA CONFERENCE REGISTRATION AND SPONSORSHIPS OPEN

In case you missed it, registration and sponsorships are now open for the 2025 ERA Conference — "Power of Influence: Elevate, Expand, Evolve!" We hope to see you at next year's event, scheduled for Feb. 23-25 in Austin, Texas. Attendance is past 65 percent capacity, so if you are considering attending, do not wait.

You are also encouraged to sign up and join the prestigious roster of 2025 ERA Conference sponsors. Most sponsorship levels include complimentary attendee registration(s). Show your support of this great event while guaranteeing your attendee spot!

ERA's room block at the AT&T Hotel & Conference Center is fully booked. ERA has available room blocks at the nearby AC Hotel and Hampton Inn & Suites Austin @ The University.

Visit era.org/era-conference to register, secure a sponsorship and view hotel information.

ERA PUBLISHES "WHY CHOOSE A REP?" VIDEO RESOURCE

ERA proudly introduces “Why Choose a Manufacturers’ Representative?” — a new video resource that promotes five key advantages that manufacturers’ reps provide to a principal: local knowledge; synergistic product selling; relationships & territory coverage; longevity & experience; and affordability. This is yet another resource ERA members can use to advance the function of the manufacturers’ rep model in the electronics components space. We encourage our members to share this video with your principals and customers, or even embed the video in your own website. The video is on the front page of the ERA.org website — be sure to view and share!

ERA WELCOMES NEW TEAM MEMBERS

ERA is pleased to announce Kate Van Hise has joined ERA as Events Manager to replace Erin Collins who recently left ERA. Kate resides in Rockford, Ill., and is a graduate of Illinois State University. Kate joins us with superb experience in managing different types of events and conferences, facilitating sales training and listening skills courses. Kate will be managing the 2025 ERA Conference in February 2025.

The association is also excited to welcome Natalie Zullo to ERA as Operations Specialist, a new position. Natalie is a graduate of East Carolina University and resides in Greenville, N.C. She comes to ERA from the healthcare industry with a specialty in family and community services and child development. Natalie will be involved in many different areas of ERA, supporting the team with her strong operational and organization skills.

Welcome to the ERA team, Kate and Natalie!

COLT 2024 REGISTRATION IS OPEN

A reminder that registration is open for ERA's annual Chapter Officers Leadership Training (COLT) program, taking place virtually this fall from Nov. 6-8! Open to all ERA chapter leaders and potential leaders, COLT offers dynamic instruction focused on effective chapter management and planning tactics.

An excellent way to connect with other chapter leaders, COLT is your opportunity to gain creative ideas and practical knowledge about member recruitment, successful event hosting, educational sessions and leveraging ERA National's resources to enhance chapter activities and membership engagement.

Whether you're currently in a leadership role or aspiring to one, don't miss this valuable training. There's no registration fee—ERA National offers this program free of charge to our members! Chapter leaders who complete COLT this year will receive one complimentary attendee registration for the 2025 ERA Conference (one per chapter), scheduled for Feb. 23-25 in Austin, Texas.

Visit: era.org/era-events/colt-2024-registration for more information and to register. ■

RISING STARS: Jen Angelo Smith

(continued from page 10)

rapport developed by the rep should continue to be leveraged, even as the business scales.

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?

Attending the ERA conference in February 2024 was a great experience. I found the networking opportunities to be so valuable! As one of the main “recruiters” at SJ, I’m always interested in how other reps, as well as manufacturers and distributors, hire young talent. Sharing our expertise with hiring and learning how others are successful is beneficial on both sides. I also have been able to connect with other young women in the industry, which has been a really good way to build a support network. We can relate professionally and socially, and I’m lucky to have these great connections!

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

I’m expecting my second child, a baby boy, in early November! ■

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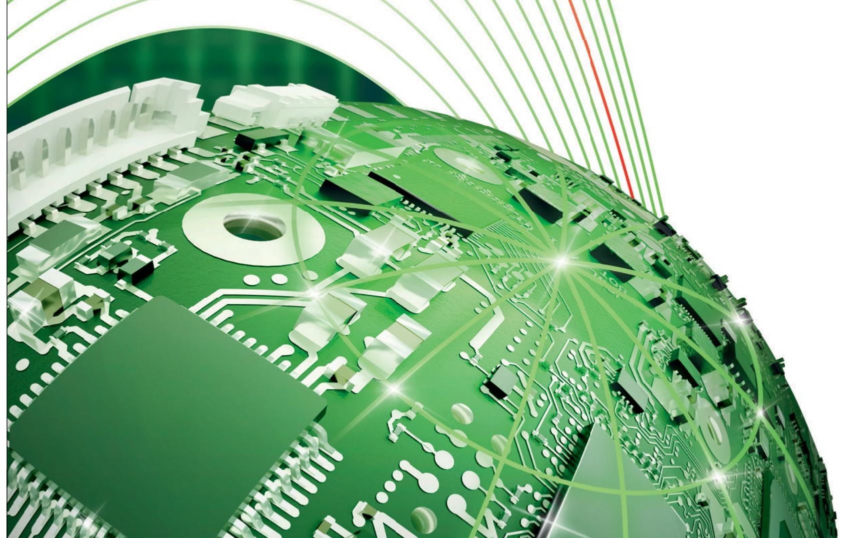

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Electronics Representatives Association
1325 S. Arlington Heights Road, Suite 204
Elk Grove Village, IL 60007

KYOCERA AVX

Supporting Your Component Needs

ABOUT US

KYOCERA AVX is a leading global manufacturer of advanced electronic components engineered to accelerate technological innovation and build a better future. As a wholly owned subsidiary of KYOCERA Corporation structured to capitalize on shared resources and technical expertise, KYOCERA AVX has an expansive global footprint comprised of several dozen research, development, and manufacturing facilities spanning more than 15 countries and staffed with talented personnel dedicated to innovation, component quality, customer service, and enabling a brighter future through technology.

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- Circuit Protection
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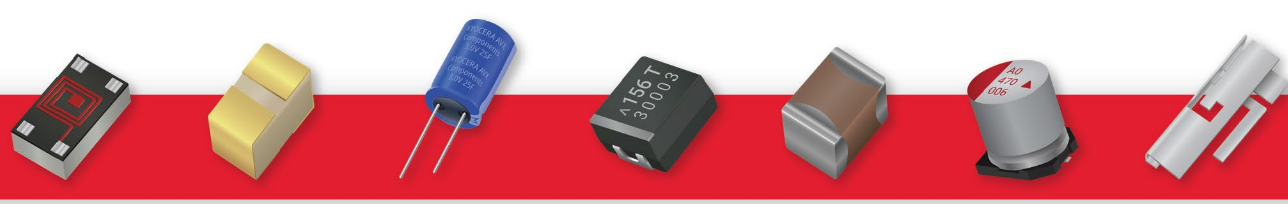
- And More...

MARKETS

- 5G
- Aerospace
- Automotive
- Communications
- Consumer Electronics
- IoT
- Industrial
- Medical
- Military
- Transportation



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