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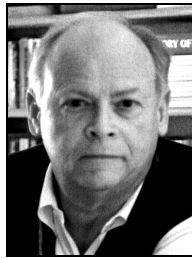
The case for nonproprietary systems

In our industry, there are two basic approaches to distribution of Fire Alarms:

1. Through manufacturer's local branches, or authorized distributors who sell direct and through electrical contractors. (PROPRIETARY)
2. Through Wholesale Distributors that sell to dealers (such as my company and 100+ others in the Denver Metro area) who can re-sell thru contractors, or direct to the end user. (NON PROPRIETARY)

In new construction, the owner, to have a building constructed that meets all the applicable codes, usually hires a GC to complete the job. If the applicable codes require fire protection, the owner will not receive a Certificate of Occupancy until that system is installed and accepted by the local AHJ. (Authority Having Jurisdiction). Typically, the owner delegates that to the General Contractor to receive the bids and make the selection for a system that will satisfy the current code requirements. Once completed the GC moves on to the next project, whereas the owner now has to live with his building as is, save warranty issues.

It is not until the warranty of the fire alarm expires that the owner has any real contact with the supplier and now servicer of that system. It is then that he discovers that he has limited options on who services and maintains his fire alarm. He may notice that the price of service or repairs of the system is higher than he expected. He may call on an independent company like ours (as has happened on numerous occasions) and ask if we can take over the service and repairs of the



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fire alarm. Sadly, this seldom is an option. Since we cannot purchase the proprietary equipment at reasonable prices, we would probably not be able to save him any money. And it is usually cost-prohibitive to try to replace the equipment.

There are some major brands of NON-Proprietary fire alarm equipment that are available to every installing company in our industry, even those that are tied into the proprietary brands. Two of the most frequently used are Fire-Lite and Silent Knight. They are both subsidiaries of Honeywell, which also has subsidiaries that are of the proprietary variety. An inspection of the certifications and approvals will show that the non-proprietary brands stand up to the same tests and have achieved the same approvals. Except in the rarest of circumstances, the non-proprietary brands have all the horsepower required to satisfy the code requirements and the local authorities.

So why are there proprietary formats in the first place? With a proprietary brand, once the system is installed, the "Authorized Distributor" has a customer for the life of the installation. I believe that this is a recipe for poor service and inflated prices. The customer no longer has much in the way of choices.

What can you do to make sure that you are not unpleasantly surprised?

Do your homework! Tell your builder you want to be involved in the selection of the fire alarm. Find out for yourself what kind of options you have for monitoring, service and repairs on the brand of equipment you will be installing. Don't believe me just because you saw my article in this column. Don't believe everything the seller tells you, just because he is with a reputable company, especially if you receive conflicting opinions from two "reputable companies."

Let me make it clear that I am not saying that proprietary systems are not quality equipment. To be legal in fire alarm installations, equipment either meets the requirements or it doesn't. I believe that for the most part, all of the systems out there that have the required certifications (U.L.®, etc) or listing that is required for your application are of a quality that will handle your needs. I am just saying that if you choose a non-proprietary system, you will have freedom of choice in who you get to service your system. Would you rather have a field of 1-3 choices or a field of 100+ choices (which do not exclude those that seek to be exclusive with their proprietary systems). It levels the playing field and I believe that having more choices is good for you, the end user as it encourages us, the providers, to provide excellent service. Competition holds prices down and raises the level of service you receive. The challenge with new construction projects is that the end user is usually left out of the loop on the choice for a fire alarm system, but he has to live with the choices that were made for him.