

By the Book

Buyer Beware?



Dr. Roger Blakeway, President, U.K. SCTE

roger.blakeway@btopenworld.com

Roger has been involved in standards work since the late 1980s. Increasingly worried about the lack of MSO input into standards generation he joined the BSI Cable Committee at the beginning of the EN50083 series development, eventually taking over as its chairman. He now leads the U.K. delegation on the relevant committees at CENELEC and IEC, and participates as a technical expert on several working groups.

The current issue of the SCTE journal *Broadband* contains a couple of papers dealing with problems surrounding drop cables and connectors. Whilst sub-editing these papers I was reminded of a couple of instances this year where the subject had cropped up and heated discussion has ensued. I'll return to these later.

It is generally accepted that the final drop (i.e., customer connection/install problems) accounts for a disproportionate number of call-outs or "truck rolls." This is not too surprising since failure rates for parts of a network are "N x component reliability." No matter how reliable the connection, the magnitude of "N," the number of customers, far outweighs any other component count in the network.

It is therefore ironic (I thought about using "pathetic") that the final drop is generally treated with such a cavalier attitude outside of the confines of the engineering group in many MSOs. Whilst the latter may spend a great deal of time specifying the type and quality of drop cable, evaluating connectors for ease of installation and reliability, specifying correct tools and even detailing installation procedures, there often seems a significant gap between this "ideal" and the actuality in the field.

Leaving aside the use of subcontractors, who may or may not be using fully trained/certified installers and who are normally working to fixed price per install, we still have the issue of how the buying department has interpreted the engineering requirements for component quality, performance and reliability.

In the "good old days," it was engineering that decided which vendor could supply the optimum solution; now, with the all-important "bottom line" taking precedence, engineering's role seems to be to generate specifications that can be read (but not necessarily understood) and used by the "procurement department" to get the cheapest solution. If



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this was the cheapest solution that met the engineering requirement then I guess nobody would argue, but whereas engineering often factors in whole-life costing when making recommendations, this rarely gets taken into account at the buying stage. After all, annual salary reviews are more about another 10% reduction in bought-in costs.

OK, back to the discussions that prompted this rant! The first one took place at the recent SCTE Cable-Tec Expo and involved a well-known supplier of quality passives. Despite pushing the boundaries of performance and functionality, as well as pure quality, they were finding themselves out-priced by suppliers offering "same as last year but cheaper" — an appealing offer to the hard-pressed buying exec! The only

answer seemed to be to bring out a range of "inferior" products (my words, not theirs), in other words, create a "basic" range that could compete, more or less, solely on price. I thought this was a sad indictment on our industry.

The second instance, which does hit even the basic product range, occurred at the ANGA show earlier in the year. One of the well-known, major suppliers of connectors was forced to take out injunctions against several exhibitors that were offering the identical connectors from their stands. When I say identical, I do of course mean "in appearance," even down to the trademarks! Talking with the guys who had been "cloned," I realised that the problem was not just one of competing sales (after all, which buyer wouldn't take product with "the same spec and identical" if it was offered direct from "the manufacturer" at a discounted rate?); the real problem lay in the poor materials and plating used that caused failure of the connectors in the field. Since they bore the name of the injured party, it was they who were getting all the flack and bad-mouthing. The PR was so bad that, in several cases, they had offered to replace all the faulty connectors, even though they had not supplied them in the first place!