



Electrical distributors that are willing to invest in technology and tech-savvy staff see nothing but promise in the world of facilities management.

by Jan Niehaus



facility agility



SERVING FACILITY MANAGERS IS NOT entirely different from serving contractors...but almost. First of all, construction projects start and end. Facility management, on the other hand, never ends. Tasha Barker, co-general manager of Thompson Innovation, noted, “Facility managers need to know what’s going on inside and outside their buildings 24/7/365 to keep all of those systems operational and the facilities and occupants safe. They have to understand the business as well. Facility managers wear a lot of hats.” Thompson Innovation is a technology integration firm and sister company to Thompson Electric, a midwestern electrical contractor.

Another difference: On most construction projects, just one building type is involved, maybe a hotel or a hospital, but many facility management firms are responsible for a variety of building types. Consider Ho Chunk, an economic development corporation owned by the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska, with operations in 24 states and 10 foreign countries. A.J. Stone, Ho Chunk’s telecommunications manager, is responsible for multiuse retail-and-housing buildings, multiuse apartment-and-offices facilities, gas stations, grocery stores, and storage facilities. Stone relies on Thompson Innovation for support at many of the different building types.

Stone’s title—telecommunications manager—reveals yet another difference between serving facility managers and electrical contractors. Scott Denney, technology sales specialist at Springfield, Illinois-based Springfield

Electric Supply, explained: “More and more, there is a need for collaboration between facilities and IT. Almost everything these days has a network connection. Many of the low-voltage products we supply are the responsibility of the facilities department but are managed through the IT space.”

Kyle Hueser, director of facilities and safety at the Western Iowa Tech Community College (WITCC), affirmed Denney’s perception: “We are just about one department these days. We are that well integrated. A lot of it has to do with the fact that we need so much infrastructure to run everything, and it is all buried between buildings,” he explained, adding that Hueser is responsible for 13 buildings on eight complexes. “IT takes care of the backbone and the equipment inside. Facilities and maintenance coordinate the fiber runs, where to get power, and AC for the systems.”

Denney offered security as an example of the synthesis of the two previously separate functions: “Security used to be strictly facilities driven, but

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today the devices rely heavily on IT. As a member of Springfield's 20-member technology team, Denney is responsible for growing the company's low-voltage security business. In addition to security, low-voltage products come into play for all of the critical infrastructure for data centers, like UPS and cooling systems; IT communication delivery system components, such as cables, connectors, racks, cabinets, switches, and media converters; and AV products, including intercoms, paging, and displays.

This IT-and-facilities synthesis imposes additional knowledge and skills requirements on electrical distributors, contractors, and integrators. "Because of the merger of those two groups, we have to know the facilities side of it—mechanical and electrical—and the IT side for the management, transfer, and storage of data," Denney said. Prior to joining Springfield, Denney worked as a contractor on the low-voltage side, working with security, phone systems, and AV technology. "Now, I spend the majority of my time in the data center space, with security being a close second. During my 12 years with Springfield, I've learned a great deal about the needs of facility managers," he added.

Denney has learned quite a bit about organizational dynamics as well. "When I go into a company, one of my first steps is to make sure we have both of those parties involved. I often see that there's not a lot of communication. We sometimes help them establish and strengthen that communication," he reported.

No Big-Box Threats

One last differentiator between serving facilities managers and electrical contractors: Amazon and Home Depot are not likely to compete in the low-voltage space where electrical distributors, contractors, and integrators operate.

Denney said, "In terms of the cus-



tomers that I deal with, Amazon and the big-box stores are not an issue today. They are most likely to sell to homeowners and smaller organizations on the security side—video cameras and recorders, for example." Springfield targets larger organizations that need multiple solutions. "The key is the unification of all the facility's security infrastructure—video inside and out, security for the physical entrances, visitor management, and alarm monitoring, to name just a few. They want to manage it all from a single platform, and it usually takes a specialist to put that solution together."

Thompson Innovation has the same experience with big-box retailers, according to Barker: "There are some small business owners that use residential-grade hardware, but it is not always as robust or reliable as it should be," she said. "We add value

because we take multiple technologies and make them work together. Our technicians are manufacturer-trained on every product we sell, and we provide turnkey solutions and warranties for every product. We are there to help our clients with parts, service, and maintenance. We become a business partner."

While providing greater low-voltage product knowledge and system design skills, electrical distributors, contractors, and integrators must employ a more nuanced consultative sales approach with facility managers. The conventional, product-focused approach doesn't work with these customers.

Denney elaborated: "We analyze needs and design a unified solution, a full solution that meets customers' needs and fits within their budget," he said. "Our customers choose Springfield because of our technology team.

We offer more information, more insight, and more solutions.”

What solutions and insights do Springfield and Thompson Innovation provide to their facility management customers?

Barker provided an example: “Ho Chunk wanted different technology on the different floors of one of its live-work properties: businesses and retail on the bottom floors and residential on the upper floors,” she said. “With the solution we provided, residents can answer their doors from anywhere using their smartphones. They can see who is at the door, talk to the person at the door using the phone, and then open the door or not.”

Stone added, “It is relatively newer technology. The higher-ups wanted it, so we made it happen. Now we have the system in place at several of our

apartment buildings. I expect that we will see this a lot more in the future: tenants gaining or granting access through their smartphones.”

Ho Chunk’s relationship with Thompson will likely extend far beyond the 18 years they have clocked so far, ever since Stone decided to update the video surveillance equipment in its stores in the 1990s. “We made a commitment to test the equipment at a couple of our stores. Once we tried it, we went ahead and installed the same stuff in all our stores. Thompson is good at supporting us. I have a set of contacts, and they are very responsive when we need to get something taken care of ASAP,” Stone said. Barker concurred: “He calls, and we come running.”

Like Stone, Hueser appreciates Thompson’s responsiveness. “Thomp-

son people are easy to reach. We have their direct numbers, including their cell numbers. Their response time is very good,” Hueser said.

The college has a preventive maintenance agreement with Thompson Innovation, and Thompson Electric has supplied wire, transformers, panels, and other products and services for new construction projects at WITCC.

Hueser has relied on Thompson Innovation since he accepted the position of director of facilities and safety 16 years ago. He recalled: “When I came on board, there was another fire alarm system in place. We had some of Thompson’s equipment too. Thompson’s system was better, and they were giving us better service than the other company.”

The smoke detectors that Thomp-

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son has installed in many of WITCC's buildings are addressable. "The detectors and alarms are intelligent. We can tell exactly where the smoke or fire is. Eventually, all of our buildings will be converted to addressable alarms," Hueser explained.

Hueser is especially pleased with a budget-shaving improvement currently underway, thanks to a Thompson partner company. "Iowa law requires us to have an outside company monitoring our fire alarm system. The service costs us \$20 per month per building. However, if all of the alarms are tied back to one controller, then there is just one fee. Soon, all of the

"There have been no big challenges getting the new technology into our old buildings. There hasn't been a time that Thompson couldn't make it work." Access control is achieved through a combination of ID cards swiped at the door and a doorbell that alerts staff to the presence of an individual without an access card. After talking with the individual and ensuring no security risk, staff can remotely unlock the door. "Thompson does maintenance and repairs on our systems and updates the technology, usually to get the newer bells and whistles, such as higher resolution and better picture quality on the surveil-

"One of the biggest things coming into technology as a whole is artificial intelligence—AI—and how it affects the way we can look at the things happening inside businesses and buildings."

—TASHA BARKER, Thompson Innovation

alarms will be fiber-networked back to the main building, saving us the \$20 monthly fee for every building plus the cost of the equipment," explained Hueser.

In addition to being highly responsive, "Thompson has some very high-quality people working there. And they are a local company. That means a lot," Hueser said. Mutual commitments to the local community are often the key to superior service provider-client relationships. "Thompson supports our school. The company president is on our foundation board. This is valuable in the public eye. And Thompson Innovation was here in May for a job fair geared toward our students," Hueser said.

Students in the South Sioux City (Iowa) School District also benefit from Thompson Innovation's expertise. Many of the district's 10 buildings are older, but according to Drew Stansberry, technology coordinator,

lance equipment," Stanberry added. Over the years, Thompson has provided building security through CCTV, access control, intercom communications, and a fire alarm system.

Looking Ahead

"It's not really a big secret in the industry: Ethernet will be the backbone for a long time to come for getting information to and from devices. The products at the ends of the cables will constantly change, becoming outdated every few years. At the same time, they are becoming more commodity based," Denney said.

In the IoT world, software is what automates low-voltage hardware. "Software is becoming more important to customers, including analytics software. There are many companies developing video analytic software programs for facial recognition, object detection, people counting, vehicle flow, virtual perimeters, and other

functions. All of these help automate the process of managing security at facilities," Denney said.

Denney continued: "In three to five years, there will be even better cameras, but customers want to use the same software. There is a constant drive to provide a better user experience, better analytics, and better algorithms to analyze data. The market-leading software companies are developing their products with open architecture, to be adaptable to many different devices."

Barker offered this forecast: "One of the biggest things coming into technology as a whole is artificial intelligence—AI—and how it affects the way we can look at the things happening inside businesses and buildings. This intelligence reduces the amount of data storage that's needed, and storage is the most expensive aspect of video surveillance."

And while storage requirements may be shrinking, speed is definitely expanding. "The biggest change is bandwidth," said Barker. "We will continue to see advances in cable systems to transport data at the speeds necessary for devices to function correctly. Category 6, 7, and 8 cables are leading the way to increased bandwidth over greater distances while eliminating crosstalk. A lot of buildings have network cabling and cyber-technology, but a lot of industries have not yet adopted network cabling. They will need to, and this renovation will mean more work for contractors and electrical distributors."

For electrical distributors, contractors, and integrators serving the facility management market, there's high potential in low-voltage solutions. ■

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