

New association sets sights on best practices, stewardship

Officially announced in January of this year, the Communications Cable and Connectivity Association is an organization whose membership comprises executive-level representatives of cabling and connectivity product manufacturers and distributors. CCCA by-laws require that members be a corporate entity, i.e. a company. Unlike some other associations, there currently is no provision for individuals to become members. With that executive-level perspective, the group is aiming to address some issues that have been challenging the cabling industry on a macro level, and to enhance the structured cabling systems industry as a whole. Through conversations with some of CCCA's members, it became clear to this writer that the group has specific objectives in mind.

Kevin St. Cyr, president of Berk-Tek, a Nexans company (www.berktek.com) and also CCCA's president and board chairman, explains that the genesis of the group's formation dates back beyond last year: "Toward the end of 2006, some expressed mutual concern that the industry's manufacturers, distributors, and suppliers did not have an appropriate common vehicle or association through which we could address emerging issues and threats, and find ways to enhance the industry."

St. Cyr adds, "Most have representatives in groups including BICSI (www.bicsi.org), the TIA (Telecommunications Industry Association; www.tiaonline.org), and NEMA (National Electrical Manufacturers Association; www.nema.org), and we will continue to be represented in those organizations."

Each of those organizations, while beneficial to some aspects of members' business, has its own special mission. Not one of those groups necessarily takes the proverbial

The CCCA has plans to address some of the industry's toughest issues.

30,000-foot view of the industry from the standpoint of product manufacturing and supply chain, which CCCA does plan to take.

Pete Lockhart, Anixter's (www.anixter.com) vice president new technologies, network cabling, and physical security, stresses that CCCA is not adversarial to other organizations serving the industry: "We're establishing ways to better support the groups we are a part of—BICSI, TIA, and CABA (Continental Automated Building Association; www.caba.org) among them. It's likely CCCA will designate liaisons between itself and these other organizations to effect regular communication."

"Issues such as counterfeiting have created a lot of confusion in our industry. Some customers don't know what to trust and what not to trust."

Product quality, counterfeiting

Among the common challenges these industry vendors face, which CCCA plans to address, are product counterfeiting, product-quality issues, the continued specification of plenum-rated cable in buildings' air-handling spaces, and environmentalism with respect to cabling systems.

Several CCCA members provided their perspectives on these topics:

- **Anti-counterfeiting and product quality.** Battling the threat of counterfeit products that has affected the marketplace in recent years—more in some geographic regions than others—is at or near the top of CCCA's agenda. "Our country has a major investment in telecommunications," says Randy Crenshaw, executive vice president and general manager

PATRICK McLAUGHLIN is chief editor of *Cabling Installation & Maintenance*.

of CommScope Enterprise Solutions. “Issues such as counterfeiting have created a lot of confusion in our industry. Some customers don’t know what to trust and what not to trust.” Many products enter the United States today that are not quite what they represent themselves to be, he notes, adding that some other parts of the world struggle with the issue as well. It’s important that customers not become disenfranchised with the products they have chosen, and often the problem lies with a single, unscrupulous supplier as opposed to the technology as a whole.

“The [environmental] concept is a lot more at the forefront of people’s minds overseas than here. If we’re not careful, that can lead to a competitive disadvantage.”

While counterfeiting is obviously bad for the business of vendors including CCCA members, Crenshaw points out that today’s advanced applications are bringing the topic to the forefront for consumers as well. “Applications are becoming more demanding,” he says. “There can be a fairly large gap between how the consumer uses the product and how that product was specified. For example, Category 5 cabling running 10Base-T was not a very rigid application of the technology. As we move up in application, these systems are getting closer to their theoretical capacity.”

And substandard systems that fail to meet the specifications of the technology they purport to be, may cast a pall over that technology as a whole.

Product-quality problems are not exclusively limited to counterfeiting, in which a rogue company uses the name and branding of a legitimate manufacturer. Anixter’s Lockhart describes another similarly vexing challenge that CCCA is taking on. “We’re calling the project ‘product certification,’” he says. “We want to separate the sub-par product that’s being sold from that which is being sold for the good of the industry. The product is not counterfeit, but it is unethical.”

Both Lockhart and Crenshaw cited patch cords as an example of some substandard products entering the market with the same markings and packaging as legitimately performing products—leaving purchasers with little if any means of differentiating good from bad. Crenshaw adds, “The issue is trying to get a common set of expectations so the customer can reliably buy product and know it is what it should be.”

CCCA executive director Frank Peri explains that the product-certification initiative seeks to weed out products that, “do not counterfeit a brand, but rather counterfeit quality.” There is an intent to deceive, he says, and often the products carry the mark of an independent-verification house, even though

the manufacturer knowingly puts into the product a material that would not meet the performance levels required to achieve that verification.

While the CCCA has not yet determined the exact means by which it will represent quality products to the marketplace, several of the organization’s members said we may one day see the cabling industry’s equivalent of the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.

- **Plenum cable.** Also on CCCA’s agenda is addressing a possibility currently in the hands of the National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA; www.nfpa.org), the organization that writes the *National Electrical Code*, which, among countless other safety issues, requires the use of plenum cable inside air-handling spaces. An opposing group has proposed the NFPA change its requirements for plenum air spaces, to specify that steel tube or conduit be installed in those spaces and non-plenum cable be allowed to run through the conduits. The CCCA’s plan is to present a single message on behalf of its members to the NFPA. The group has already put some work in on this project. According to Lockhart, one of the group’s primary objectives will be to, “talk about the topic on a scientific level rather than a lobbyist level.”

- **Environmental issues.** The other out-of-the-gate agenda item for CCCA is to take a leadership role in the cabling industry’s environmentally conscious/green initiatives. Hutch Coburn, senior product manager for enterprise fiber solutions with ADC (www.adc.com), says it is one of the primary reasons ADC joined CCCA. ADC’s vice president global connectivity solutions, Americas, is the company’s representative to CCCA. Coburn says along with the plenum-cable and anti-counterfeiting, green initiatives pulled the company into CCCA.

- **Environmental issues.** The other out-of-the-gate agenda item for CCCA is to take a leadership role in the cabling industry’s environmentally conscious/green initiatives. Hutch Coburn, senior product manager for enterprise fiber solutions with ADC (www.adc.com), says it is one of the primary reasons ADC joined CCCA. ADC’s vice president global connectivity solutions, Americas, is the company’s representative to CCCA. Coburn says along with the plenum-cable and anti-counterfeiting, green initiatives pulled the company into CCCA.

“Having spent time abroad, I think the U.S. has underestimated the impact of the green movement,” say Coburn. “The concept is a lot more at the forefront of people’s minds overseas than here. If we’re not careful, that can lead to a competitive disadvantage.” The supply chain, he states, is a significant factor in many cases because, often, the distance a product travels from manufacture to ultimate deployment comes under scrutiny.

The CCCA is in its early stages of development. Not yet having unveiled a web site and currently building its membership, the group is still establishing itself and the manner in which it will present itself to the industry at large.

When it does, the CCCA will represent a unified message from the industry’s manufacturers, distributors, and suppliers. Organizations interested in membership can contact Frank Peri (cdc@dmv.com or 904-223-4100). ✕