



Flipping the script

Sheldon Edelman (left) of Ohio-based Edelman's Supply and Steve Berger of Conn.-based Modern Plumbing listen during a discussion in the "Selling in the Internet Age" seminar at the Forte Buying Group Summer Meeting.

Forte Buying Group gives its members new material, chances to learn at summer meeting.

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Photos by John McNally/Supply House Times

Jeff Valles and Tom Cohn have delivered strong content at Forte Buying Group meetings for a long time. Valles – Forte’s director of membership services – believed the group’s summer meeting was going to follow a typical schedule; seminars, workshops and receptions. But in the end Valles felt the July meeting in Rosemont, Ill., was the perfect time to shake things up.

“There has been a dramatic shift in retail during the past five years. Forte is convinced you can’t continue to go to market using the same tried-and-true approaches that the industry has leaned on in the past,” he said. “Instead of doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results, we wanted to look inward to better understand how peers within Forte are responding to a new market paradigm and to learn from one another what’s working and what isn’t.”

Forte focused on the practical functions of technology and social media

for its members’ businesses. The second day of meetings at The Westin O’Hare opened with wholesalers and kitchen and bath showroom operators filling up the hotel’s State Room. The conference room was overrun with attendees for the “Using Tablets in the Showroom and Beyond” seminar, which had to be moved to a larger hall in order for everyone to have a seat.

Recently, Forte created a partnership with its manufacturer members. Those companies gave Forte members greater access to its electronic catalogs and price lists and, in turn, Forte researched apps that make those catalogs and price lists easily accessible and user-friendly for showroom salespeople. Now, salespeople can show potential customers different styles, colors and specifications right at their fingertips with an app that Forte thoroughly vetted and recommends.

“Printed materials are limited and out-of-date soon after the ink dries,” Valles said.

Howard Frankel, president of Central Plumbing Specialties in New York City, agreed.

"If you get them into our store we can help control the information level and let them see as much as they need to see," Frankel said. "That focus helps us so we're not competing in our own store."

Originally, Valles hoped the tablet seminar would be more theory on how to best optimize the catalog app, but it morphed into a group workshop. More tech-savvy Forte members chimed in on how they've learned to use tablets in their professional and personal lives, and tried to show less-advanced tablet users how effective the devices can be.

Frankel brought his iPad along for the meeting, but admits he isn't the most astute operator. Still, he understands how the Internet is changing the way he does business.

"It's a much more challenging environment. Information technology issues are more a part of the job now," Frankel said. "Our Web design is done out-of-house, but every day we think of ways to make it better. I came to this conference to learn ways to maximize the value of our website. I understand that if we are not moving that way eventually we will become obsolete."

Figuring it out together

After the first-day product meetings, Cohn, Forte's executive director, ran a "Selling in the Internet Age" seminar and group discussion. From the start, Cohn had the nearly 60 seminar attendees break into groups to discuss the best ways their businesses can:

- 1) Convince customers why they should buy from them.
- 2) Best demonstrate their value to customers.
- 3) Communicate their team's ability to specify, stage and support customer projects or jobs.

Group discussions lasted for nearly half the allotted seminar time. For the first question, the resounding idea was to focus on providing customers with case histories of past projects. ("Gives you credibility," Cohn said.); staying vigilant on your company's online reputation on popular sites such as Yelp.com and Angie's List ("Gives you a chance to respond to criticism," Cohn said.); and developing relationships with your customers.

For the second question, Cohn reminded Forte members "You're not going to out-merchandise the Internet." Cohn tried to remind members that a company such as Apple only sells five products (desktop computers, laptops, iPods, iPads and iPhones) and car manufacturer BMW has scaled back on the models of car on its line.

"There are members of this group that only sell eight types of faucets," Cohn told the group. "They seem to be doing alright."

David Bishop, a managing partner in sales and marketing consulting firm Balvor, ran the seminar "How to Use Social Media Tools to Market Your Business," and gave Forte wholesalers the chance to understand the value of other social media and consumer programs such as Pinterest, Google+, Groupon and QR Codes.

"Having just a website is no longer enough," Bishop said. "Just having a Facebook page is not enough. You need to push because you need to build a base."

Bishop told the attendees to "create a custom and consistent look across the various platforms to reinforce brand awareness."



Central Plumbing Specialties President Howard Frankel (left) and Brent Hughes of Nicklas Supply work on iPads during the "Using Tablets in Showrooms and Beyond" seminar at the Forte Buying Group's Summer Meeting in Rosemont, Ill.

"You have to know how the various platforms are helping to grow your business," Bishop added. "Remember to take a balanced communication approach. It's also about listening and responding."

Bishop took the wholesalers through the buying cycle; the pre-shop, the shop and the post-shop. For the pre-shop, an overwhelming majority of customers start on the Internet. Nearly 92% of customers, he said, take to Google to find information on products, companies and prices. Then the customer will take to Google Maps or MapQuest to find directions to a store. Bishop stressed to the Forte members the importance of having the most up-to-date information for their companies on these sites.

During the shop, customers use their cell phones or iPads to continue their decision-making process. Bishop noted 38% of customers call their friends for advice on a product, while 25% and 24% look up prices and product reviews online, respectively.

Bishop recommended – if it's feasible – to empower a wholesaler's salespeople to allow for on-the-spot price matching. "These customers are already in your store," Bishop said.

The post-shop is when a customer will take to the Internet or social media to positively or negatively review their shopping experience. This is where a wholesaler has an advantage because it can use a competitor's negatives in customer satisfaction against them.

"Point out if they buy online the best they can do is next-day shipping, while with you it's in stock today," Bishop said.

Valles received a lot of positive feedback after the meeting from Forte members and hopes to broaden the scope of the meetings in the future. The old way to run a Forte buying group meeting is over.

"Who knows what a buying group will look like in the future?" Valles said. "It used to be all about making sales, but there is a culture in having a showroom. There is a bonding and a desire to learn from one another." 