IPC's new president has put the attention back where it belongs: on member needs.

Want to know how new IPC president John Mitchell is? He still calls members "customers." It's, as they say in Las Vegas, a "tell," a verbal tic that gives away what someone is thinking.

In this case, that's a good thing. When we met with Mitchell in the IPC offices in Bannockburn, IL, on Aug. 9, he wasn't quite four months officially into the new job. But over the course of our conversation, the former Bose and Alpine Electronics executive quickly showed where his head is at, stressing repeatedly that the 55-year-old association needs to refocus on its members.

At that point, Mitchell had spent much of his first few weeks visiting OEMs, fabricators and EMS companies, asking again and again, "What are your big challenges?" Most ticked off two to seven items each, for an aggregate 35 issues, of which 30, he said, IPC has some effect on. That list now becomes the battery for the IPC engine. "Where we put our effort is where we can help," he says.

IPC has come under criticism from many quarters over its insular nature and brusque relations with other organizations and even some members. Mitchell, who comes across as highly detailed and involved, did not shy away from that discussion. In fact, he capitalized on it. Recognizing the IPC culture needed to reposition from how to grow IPC to how to help the members, Mitchell has restructured the organization to better underscore the notion of IPC staff member as account representative. "We help IPC members realize the benefits IPC can give them. We need to be local in feel."

Not that every program needs an overhaul. Mitchell noted the strengths of the technical programs and trade shows as two areas that are functioning properly. "IPC has done some pretty good things. We have some good basic stuff. The standards provide commonality across the globe."

Likewise, the Apex Expo exhibition is a "great thing", he says, although improvements are always possible. Mitchell, who has two decades' experience in consumer electronics, noted that the CES attracts the entire chain from designers to supplier to customer. "It's a massive meeting of the industry, where we can accomplish a great deal." He wants Apex Expo to accomplish that same lofty goal, suggesting daily "themes," such as medical, automotive and consumer to appeal to a wider audience.

One area IPC has encountered challenges is in meeting the demands of a wide variety of constituents, some of whose needs are in conflict. Mitchell is quick to acknowledge addressing those tensions won't be simple. "There are different benefits IPC needs to provide to different-sized organizations. We need to be flexible enough and listen to the members to do this well. For the smallest companies, I don't know the best way to help them yet, but we will figure it out.

“I have to provide 10 times the value, 100 times the value, whatever it is. That’s how we’ll determine what we should be doing. Does it add value to our members? It shouldn’t be only for the benefit of IPC. It’s all about providing member value.”

An engineer by education and training, he is optimistic, however, about how the technology can both bring members together and present an unbounded future. “Printed electronics is an awesome opportunity for growth in the US. The industry can get together with graphics manufacturers and raise their expertise and find new markets. Our job is to transfer technology and information on the importance of that technology.”

Other opportunities, he adds, for IPC to help its members include market research and government relations. “It’s not just about only doing things for the future, it’s about helping the current business situation. We look at how to close the gap.”

Our conversation turned to working with other associations, something IPC has occasionally struggled with. Mitchell said, “Associations don’t have to function like businesses and be competitive with each other. There are huge collaboration opportunities.” Interestingly enough, two months later, he agreed to move IPC’s semiannual task group meetings to SMTAI, a move that will firm up support of the latter event, while saving time and money for countless IPC members.

Government relations are another complicated area. IPC’s membership is worldwide, and many MNCs either have their own lobbyists or are reluctant to support efforts that might hamper their competitiveness outside the US, facts Mitchell readily acknowledges. “It’s largely about the medium and smaller organizations. GR is tricky for IPC. We can’t say, ‘We will fight an issue that will only help US manufacturers.’ But global issues, we can go after these. Conflict minerals – even though that is US-focused, the MNCs want to build one product that is used everywhere. We mobilize when we can bring science to the issue.”

Mitchell’s enthusiasm and thoughtfulness make him the right person to lead IPC, and he’s ready for the challenge. “We’ve got a good foundation. We are in a very stable position. Here, we have opportunities to serve our members.”

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HEADED UP
John Mitchell