

Crest of a wave

The design cycle moves at such a dizzying pace that, nowadays – and depending on the size of the customer – the sales engineer’s traditional ‘once a month’ phone call may miss a design in opportunity. Distributors are being forced to brave the breakers of rapid product evolution to provide greater levels of technical support through a variety of different channels in order to move with the ebb and flow of the customer’s needs.

Indeed, the role of the distributor has undergone a transformation from simply being a fulfilment orientated components provider. It’s now equally important – particularly in attracting leading franchises – that the distributor demonstrates an ability to create demand for components through design activities, something with which broadline distributors have always struggled.

How different levels of technical support can help keep designers on the crest of innovation’s wave.

By **Mike Richardson.**

Local distributors are often seen as offering greater technical expertise in each individual country, but as oems and ems providers move design activities offshore to optimise resources, design centres in several countries are used on a complex project. As a result, both demand creation for suppliers and design support for customers needs to be provided on a global basis.

To meet this challenge, Nu Horizons Electronics has this simple philosophy: if the distributor can help customers to dif-

ferentiate their products and get to market faster by supporting them to create cost effective designs, it will build a more enduring relationship than if it just delivers products when they’re ordered. At the same time, creating demand on behalf of its principals will have a similar affect up the supply chain.

“Many factors distinguish a truly technical distributor from one that simply claims to offer technical support,” began managing director Tony Frere. “Perhaps the most important factor is the distributor’s commitment to training – both for its personnel and for customers. Many of Nu Horizons’ suppliers provide structured training programmes for distribution field sales engineers (FAEs), field sales engineers (FSEs) and product managers. FAEs will spend about 25% of their time in training. This includes both classroom based courses held around the world and distance learning modules. Participants are required to pass examinations set by the component manufacturers. Manufacturers of the most technically challenging products, such as

Illustration: Henning Löhlein





fpgas and microcontrollers, often have formal certification programmes for FAEs that demand distributors reach required standards of expertise in order to retain their franchises.”

As globalisation continues to grow in electronics manufacturing and design, so it is with distribution. Manufacturers increasingly rely on technical distributors for the education and support of end customers. Distributors hold the key relationships across a greater range of customers than any component manufacturer could hope to reach. Only those distributors that commit resources to training and technical support will meet the needs of both customer and principals. And only those that can give design support across the globe will be successful with the largest customers in the industry, because they're global too.

“A truly technical distributor now commits up to half of its resources to technical support for customers,” offered Frere. “Fast and accurate order fulfilment is vitally important, but it's the level of technical expertise that will determine who succeeds in distribution over the next few years.”

According to Aspen Electronics' managing director Howard Venning, there are two types of electronic component distributors – leaders and followers.

“Leaders are typically technical distributors, offering the critical components sought out by product designers to give them a technological edge over their competitors,” he explained. “Broadline distributors are followers, selling everything from microprocessors to nuts and bolts.”

But, as Venning concedes, designers definitely need both types of distributors. A true technical distributor takes a ‘consultative sales approach’, working with the customer to ensure the product specification meets his needs and is designed in correctly. Naturally, ‘follower’ distributors sell these critical and high tech products too, but without the consultative sales support, a customer may not have all the technical or market information available to make the best design trade offs to meet strict project requirements.

Getting up to speed quickly with a new technology is critical as product life cycles

are reducing and markets become more competitive. Smart designers recognise that technical distributors can help them short circuit the learning curve.

The designer may be in the middle of a design phase, struggling to implement a new type of device or technology. They have a working solution, but can't quite work out how to improve it. In other cases, the highest possible performance may be less important than cost. Size and form factor, as well as manufacturability, may have a greater impact on cost of ownership than the designer realises.

“It's this ‘fine tuning’, guiding the customer through technical and applications issues, discussing different versions and options available from various manufacturers and ultimately towards the optimum solution that makes all the difference,” noted Venning.

When it comes to designing in new products and technologies, the ‘leader’ distributor offers the greatest value, as access to this specialist product knowledge will save time and money. “Leader distributors guarantee swift time to market, enable product differentiation and ensure design constraints are met,” he concluded.

New horizons

To target design engineers, RS Components employs both online and offline media to promote the latest wave of product innovations. Designers can keep track of the new product solutions they might have previously been unaware of to broaden their horizons.

“We're introducing solutions that are complementary to each other, but which will, hopefully, stimulate design engineers to think about products that they never realised they wanted,” explained RS Components' market development manager Richard Eden. “Our goal is to provide an information resource where ideas can enable designers to consider different technologies. We've built product ranges that sit across many technologies and applications and provide a variety of solutions.”

Eden suggests sales teams cannot always visit customers individually. Instead, RS provides a wealth of information to prospective customers by highlighting new

products in its range. Customers become empowered to use RS' website and discover more about the new products they've been guided to.

“We can't provide true technical distribution, because we offer such broad product ranges compared to a specialist technical distributor with a niche product range,” noted Eden. “However, what we can offer is some subtle differences in the level of service to what they might nor-



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Tony Frere, **Nu Horizons**

mally get from distributors that have to track the sale.”

Eden says the majority of broadline distributors require pertinent information about a customer's project and whether they can pick up some volume business on the back of it.

“We are effectively geared to offering production samples - not mass production,” concluded Eden. “We don't ask all the challenging questions; instead we offer greater confidentiality and anonymity to our design customers.”