

Prevention Is Better than Cure

There is usually some truth behind clichés and adages like the title.

For the ARTSM it is particularly relevant to the activities of our members.

Why is this?

Consider the following situation.

A specification for an item of traffic signage or control equipment is published by some Body or Authority. It is sufficiently well publicised or mandated that it becomes a necessary requirement for the sale of such equipment. That is, the user community will only accept equipment that can demonstrate that it meets this specification.

This seems straightforward enough, but does not allow for the ingenuity and wit of manufacturers. Each manufacturer acquires a copy of the specification. Their designers are given the task of making a product to meet the specification.

But each designer brings to their reading all their own experience, both of technology and of language and logic, and what emerges is a range of interpretations of the specification and thence, a range of products which are perhaps incompatible one with another, or which do not align with the users' reading and understanding of the same specification.

The result is discord, argument and wasted effort. By the time these disputes emerge money has been spent, time used, and someone will have to back down or compromise. Hardly a cure.

So how can we minimise the chances of this happening?

Early and thorough engagement with specification development can substantially reduce the problems identified above.

Consider a group of manufacturers united within a trade body, all contributing to the development of new specifications.

All can bring some awareness of user needs, or technology capabilities and limitations. Without compromising individual intellectual property or market advantage a group can inform the development of a new specification. As that specification takes form they can be confident that their own interpretation of the intent as well as the word is well aligned with

the community of manufacturers, and via the anonymity that the trade body provides, they can challenge users, policy makers and others to help with the emergence of realistic achievable specifications.

Their early engagement with the specification development means their development teams are able to move promptly to implement a solution.

The detailed awareness that is associated with the review and discussion of a product's performance encourages innovation, so that manufacturers can deliver a core product meeting the specification but may enhance this with facilities and features which they consider to be beneficial or that integrate well with other products or services in their portfolio.

The ARTSM through its working groups, its representation on BSI shadow committees and its close involvement with TOPAS (www.topasgroup.org.uk) brings these opportunities to its members.

This early and shared engagement is the prevention, and while it does not guarantee an absence of conflict or argument, divergence or disagreement it does minimise the probability of these emerging and minimise their effects when they do.

It is important that the manufacturers alone do not steer the direction, and that policy makers and users contribute to specification development. Participation in these activities then gives insights into the needs and aspirations of these other important parties in the signage, traffic control and related sectors.

Even with all these parties involved the process can still fall down.

By way of example, back in the mid 1990s puffin crossings were being promoted, and the necessary items of technology were being specified.

During the development of the nearside pedestrian signal specification a discussion at a meeting did not fully address, agree or appreciate the effects of a clash between the light output distribution and phantom rejection criteria. In effect it wanted to prevent light entering the face of these signals while requiring it to exit them in the same direction. This is at best poor physics.

The upshot was that it took manufacturers a lot of effort and money to meet the specification, many years longer than was intended for products to emerge and when they did they were considerably brighter than was wanted and probably more costly.

Even now these items of equipment glow by the roadside – and this was with all the parties at the table developing the spec. Imagine how much worse it could have been without the full range of inputs.

The ARTSM's working groups and members are active in specification development and in sharing knowledge of trends and technologies, work done elsewhere, and other factors. Members are generally aligned on understanding, are quick to market and are well placed to help new products into the market.

It recognises that innovation has to occur, but that rarely will innovation be accepted in isolation, it has to align to the environment where it will operate, good specifications can not foresee the future but they can adapt and evolve to support it.

The ARTSM wholeheartedly backs the development of applicable and relevant specifications.

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