

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Small Board Shop

IPC is devoting renewed energy to the North American small board fabricator. Will he respond?



**DAN
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YOU ASKED FOR IT, you got it. IPC says it's ready and willing to work with small board fabricators. Indeed, it has already held a pilot meeting at which a number of shops set an agenda of how IPC can accomplish this goal. This is a wonderful first step and I commend IPC for taking it. Now the ball is back in the court of the small shops. IPC is being cooperative and wants to help, but the question is, what should it do? What course should

be set? To find out, IPC is asking small board shops to set their own agenda.

IPC defines small fabricators as companies under \$15 million in annual sales. That translates, according to FAB-FILE, the Kirk-Miller database, to 556 of 667 North American board shops – the vast majority. In the next few months these shops will be asked to get involved, take part, and give their opinions on what IPC can do to help the small board fabricators in the best way possible. To those who for many years have complained that IPC caters to mega-sized companies while paying scant attention to smaller ones, IPC is responding. So, Mr. and Mrs. Small Board Shop, this is your moment. It is time to stand and be counted. It is time to take part.

What do small board fabricators need? Particularly, what do they need from IPC? These are not easy questions. Small shops need a forum for working together to share ideas, information, and experiences. Up to now, it has been pretty much every shop for itself. "Competition" meant "non-cooperation." We knocked the other guy whenever he was down, we undercut him when we could, and when he closed we scavenged the equipment and customers like hungry vultures. Alone, we have been weak: We have sucked up to customers and vendors because we lacked a power base for our ideas and opinions. When we rejected new equipment, vendors encouraged our customers to spec it in anyway. We have watched while contract manufacturers have done everything possible to commoditize our products. We've stood by while our industry was categorized as "dirty," full of job shops, and undisciplined.

By cooperating, we can develop an image of a well-run high-tech industry. An industry on the cutting edge of technology in America. As Daniel Burrus, the keynoter at the TMRC meeting in October, intimated, we should be viewed as visionaries, as experts, as PCB consultants to the electronics industry. I would like to see us in a position where

those who need or design boards seek our assistance. To enhance this image, we need marketing. We need a plan to get our new image across. Here are the basics:

- Develop the image that we want to project: technical expert, PCB visionary, solutions provider.
- Develop a slogan: "Want to know about printed circuit boards? Ask the experts." Or "When it comes to developing your PCB needs, you need a partner; your PCB fabricator is ready and willing to be that partner." Or "Leave the boards to the experts: the printed circuit board industry." Or "Developing your future PCB needs is not a do-it-yourself project; ask a fabricator to help ... ask an expert."
- Get the word out: Press releases, press conferences, articles, trade shows, brochures, tip sheets.

The key is to work under a single umbrella to enhance our image. This way we will position ourselves as a strong body of experts ready to help. This is just a small taste of what we can do together. Together we can make our industry not only look better, but perform better.

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Here, then, are some suggestions we can make to IPC:

- Develop a series of courses on owning a small PCB shop: managing cash flow, learning actual costs, buying new or used equipment, developing a marketing plan, how to be high-tech on a moderate budget, evaluating outside services, partnering offshore, finding and managing sales reps, running a small business, government assistance, environmental issues.
- Schedule events where small board shop owners can get to know one another better. IPC already has its Presidents Council, an excellent way to network. But it could further develop events for the small board fabricator.

IPC has agreed to help. It is offering its energy to help the small PCB fabricators unite to become stronger and better. It is now time for fabricators to participate. If you want to know more about this, call me. Or you can call IPC at 847-509-9700.

Have a great holiday season. ○

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