Engineering as customer service writ large

By Michael Mastromatteo

Engineers hoping to enhance the image of the profession might do well to adopt a service orientation in their interaction with colleagues, clients and the wider community. It may sound like an unsustainable commitment, but at least one practitioner is doing his best to make it happen.

As part of his wider commitment to customer service, engineer Gary Thompson is active with PEO's Engineer-in-Residence (EIR) program. Here, the independent practitioner conducts an in-class experiment on energy for a class of Grade 2 students.

Electrical engineer Gary Thompson, P.Eng., likes to take a customer service approach to each of life's professional, business, community and even social interactions.

At the risk of seeming overly preoccupied with what might be considered the commercial trappings of group dynamics, Thompson believes the basic "golden rule" approach is the best way to do business as an engineer, educator, colleague, mentor or committed community supporter.

Thompson is a Thornhill, Ontario-based independent practitioner with more than 10 years of experience in the electrical energy industry, and in business strategy development. He includes the CEng (Chartered Engineer) on his credentials list, not simply as a matter of pride, but because he believes the British Institution of Electrical Engineers' (IEE's) designation says something about a titleholder's ability to find engineering solutions through the use of innovation, creativity and professional judgment. Thompson also serves on the members' board of the London-based IEE, considered the largest engineering society in Europe.

Thompson's particular experience centres on finding solutions, particularly in terms of the sales and marketing of technology-based products and services. His recent professional experience includes marketing and product line manager with the Delta Group, and business manager (construction projects and engineered products) for Siemens Canada Ltd. He has also been involved in supervisory and project-management roles with Schneider Canada, Elecsar Engineering and Asea Brown Boveri (ABB) Inc. Thompson has also been active with at least four Canadian Standards Association technical writing committees.

Duty of care

What might set him apart from dozens of other engineers struggling with the usual demands of a competitive, sometimes misunderstood, and under-valued profession is Thompson's personal emphasis on what he calls the engineer's "duty of care" to the public.

"Ontario has a structure that provides an environment of professionalism and consistency for engineers," he recently told *Engineering Dimensions*. "I consider the P.Eng. title a badge of honour. It represents a sense of accomplishment and portrays a high standard of expectation. I am a licensed professional engineer, because it is required if I am to practise within the context of a duty of care to the public."

Thompson not only holds the duty of care to the public in high personal regard, he also believes it can extend to the wider engineering community. "My years in the industry have taught me that whenever this is fully understood and practised, the quality of engineering performed is at its highest. Unfortunately, members of the public who procure the services of engineers seem to have very little understanding of what it means and its relationship to the solution that they are paying for."

Thompson recounted an experience some time ago in which he had the opportunity to submit a proposal on a project, only to lose to a company that offered a slightly lower price. "It was made very clear to me by the prospec-

tive customer that he was not willing to value the services of a professional engineer over those of someone who could just do the job. I believe that this type of attitude prevails today and is one of the contributors to engineers' low market compensation."

Gary Thompson (left) and a colleague discussing a recent engineering project.

Such an attitude would make Thompson an ideal candidate to argue the merits of quality-based selection, an emerging practice among architects, engineers and other building and design professionals that emphasizes quality, sustainability and overall life-cycle costs rather than price.

The emphasis on project management, and on finding novel solutions to tricky engineering challenges, appears to be the culmination of the original inspiration that moved Thompson to pursue engineering in the first place. "My childhood included an early introduction to the various methods and tools related to building and maintaining a residence," he said. "This led me to pursue a career in electrical engineering. My choice was to work in actual hands-on and solution environments as compared to purely theoretical ones. I do what I do because I enjoy it."

Human standpoint

As with many PEO members, Thompson believes today's practitioners should be on the lookout for ways to enhance the role and image of the professional engineer. To that end, he maintains an interest in PEO and has volunteered his expertise on the Experience Requirements and other PEO committees.

A native of Kingston, Jamaica, Thompson attended the University of Technology of Jamaica, before arriving in Toronto in the early 1990s. He then attended Ryerson University and graduated with a bachelor of technology degree. He later obtained a master of business administration degree from the Schulich School of Business (York University). He was licensed by PEO in 1994.

Having received his initial engineering training in Jamaica, and working on many international projects, Thompson qualifies as an engineer familiar with international standards and engineering training. Thomson holds a licence to practice in Jamaica, the United Kingdom and Ontario. This accounts for his interest in efforts to integrate internationally trained professionals into the Canadian workforce. Through his involvement as a member of the board and membership chair of the Jamaican Canadian Association, and as current chair of the City of Vaughan Community Relations Committee, he knows well that some Caribbean-educated engineering graduates experience great difficulty in obtaining the one year of Canadian experience required for licensing.

"There are so many people who have come to Canada from the Caribbean and they face that kind of situation," Thompson said. "It's a big struggle for them and for their families."

Thompson would like to see regulators adjust their experience and educational equivalency systems to recognize candidates' credentials "from a more human standpoint."

Leading by example

Besides his volunteer work for PEO and the groups already mentioned, the husband and father of two has been involved with the York Region Children's Aid Society and the York Region Catholic School Board.

At the same time, Thompson looks continually for opportunities to upgrade himself and add value to the profession. "As I call for enhancement of our profile within the community, I also realize that my responsibilities and the expectations of my self-regulatory role become even more significant," he says. "I have strived to maintain a practice of continued education, by attending courses and seminars that keep my knowledge base and skill level in line with the current technologies and practices. This goes a long way in allowing me to add value to my customers and enhance the professional aspect of my job, resulting in a practice that is relevant and meets the needs of the customer."

Thompson also looks for opportunities to meet the needs of the next generation of engineers through mentoring, and encourages the practice among his veteran colleagues. He says younger engineers have been telling him that the profession is yet to enjoy the respect and recognition that it deserves. "The young individuals I meet are engineers because they like engineering, not because they see a career that will rapidly improve their personal wealth," he said. "The public needs to see our regulating bodies as references for procuring professional services. Recent utility infrastructure failures should highlight to the public that it needs to make the connection between professional engineering services and safe and efficient infrastructure, whether that be roads, water, electricity or buildings."