

Consumer Understanding— Our Weak Link

#hope #consumerunderstanding #vision #uniformmessage #humanhealth

The hope and future of the lighting industry is directly tied to having a uniform, simplified message that is easily understood, accepted, and valued by the consumer that relates to the benefits of light and human health.

Abstract

The IES Visionary Challenge asks, “**Where will we be in 2030?**”, but it also asks, “**Where will we not wish to be?**” Currently, we face the grand challenge of providing **hope** to the future generation of lighting professionals. What is this hope? I believe it is the **strategic, long-term vision** which provides the opportunity for advancement, higher compensation, and professional understanding.

Our greatest challenge over the next ten years is in not addressing the most basic problems we have had for the past several decades—**consumer understanding, uniformity of message, and career destination.**

Some might see these thoughts as boring or tired conversation. But I would counter by saying, “look around you...what do you see?” Please tell me which of the current lighting organizations or industry leaders are addressing these concerns? Why is it that consumers are still confused and do not understand or appreciate the real values we offer? Does it not make sense that we lack a common message?

This necessary message equates to **Human Health**—it’s simple and easy to understand. **Good lighting provides for good health.**

Hope will be in the form of advancement and increased compensation. By ensuring that the consumer understands the positive benefits associated with good lighting design, we will be aligned with and trusted much like that of the doctor-patient relationship. Once established, we become accepted above and beyond that of the tradesperson or technician. Monetarily, we will be associated with the medical industry, which provides greater opportunities for pay.

The next generation will need inspiration—we need a well, thought-out vision to accomplish this. We can provide hope and ensure industry growth by understanding past mistakes. The time is here to pause, plan, implement, and build for long-lasting advancement, not short-term successes. This is our challenge.

Our Challenge in Vision

The IES Visionary Challenge is one that should not be taken lightly. I say this because I believe **the lighting industry has been myopic in its approach to the future**. Decisions seem to have been made by what the next dangling carrot is in technology. We are failing to pause long enough to look around...to look at the past—history. Our rush to advance technology has placed blinders on those leading the charge, and this is what I believe is our current failing.

My approach to this challenge is simple because it removes us from the racer's path and considers what truly matters to most people. What is and has been the racer's path? It has been advancing technology. The mainstream of the lighting industry is concentrated on this aspect or those matters associated to them, such as energy efficiency and waste. And although these are good, it does not address what is at the very heart of people—hope of prosperity and finding a solution to their family's need.

Therefore, **our challenge should prioritize our long-term vision on these human concerns**. This vision should also provide hope for a better place, which each of us can enjoy. What are these future concerns—by those in the next generation:

- **Career Opportunities**—what will there be? Will there be jobs available?
- **Above-Average Pay**—will the lighting professions provide enough to earn a decent living? Will they allow one to retire at a reasonable age without stress?
- **Job Fulfillment**—will these jobs be easily defined, understood, and appreciated? Will there be an understood path and destination point for achievement?

If our current generation cannot provide the answers to these basic, real-world questions, then we are disillusioned to believe that job growth will occur within the various lighting professions. Yes, this is somewhat of a bold statement, but let's think about this for a moment. How can we expect to entice the youth of the next generation into lighting careers which have no distinct path to success? How can we expect to encourage hope for those only making an average or below average wage? How can we expect to receive above average pay if we are not understood or valued by society—the consumer?

If it is our desire to grow the industry, then we must incentivize it. There is no better incentive than **to provide financial success, job stability, and job satisfaction**.

Consumer Understanding

Our biggest hurdle is the **consumer market**. To this day, most still **do not understand the nature of the value we provide**. Why is it that we have not effectively answered this question?

I believe it is because we tend to get caught up in all of the details, the technology, and this simplistic aspect is overlooked. The consumer continues to be confused and much of our work is looked at like a commodity.

As professionals, we tend to get lumped into a giant pool where we are considered much the same. This is the primary reason why our associated costs are scrutinized and effectively shopped in great measures. It is for this reason that we must go to battle to explain why products cost what they do. This is our reality, but it can change if we address the lacking root issues:

1. Where and How do Consumers Find Good Information?

There is an overwhelming amount of information out there, both good and bad. This compounds the confusion problem. So, the question becomes, why do we not have one place to find what's accepted as good and correct? Obviously, this is a huge undertaking into itself, but it needs to be tackled.

Another problem linked to this is due to the industry's fragmentation over the past several decades. This will be expanded upon later, but it has caused the lighting industry to splinter into many groups, all of whom have developed their own information. And because this, it has muddied the water.

Our solution is to consolidate and unify, so that one authority controls what is distributed.

2. Who is the Authority?

Is there a single, leading authority in the lighting industry? Nobody really knows the answer to this question. This supports the challenge of not knowing where to look for good information, and it is for this reason we need to have an accepted and identified source. It is my hope that it is the IES.

This authority needs to be internationally recognized, and it needs to be self-sustaining so that it can meet the demands of implementing measures to solve these problems.

Our solution is to allow the professionals (the professions) to determine this authority. Once established, then assurance and focus can be placed on consumer understanding.

3. Why are Lighting Professionals Relevant?

The lighting professional has spent years learning why we are relevant to the community, but the consumer has no idea of this. Until we break down this

understanding in terms that mean something to them, we will continue to be viewed as nothing more than a technician—one who works with light and electricity. This is the sad truth.

We are perceived as part of the construction process, which is dominated as a blue-collar job. This perception ranks us differently—lower and potentially less skilled. Therefore, we are associated with lower wages. We cannot expect to make more money if we are perceived in this manner.

This problem goes back to our ‘message’. We have not properly addressed this for the world to understand.

Our solution is to align ourselves with the medical profession—to be relevant on the same scale as the doctor by providing positive results associated with human health.

Consumer understanding is the weakest link in the chain. As an industry, we must address this problem if we are to advance and grow.

Solving the Problems

To aid in thoughtful consideration, I thought it might be best to provide steps to achieving a successful solution to this matter. Unfortunately, these topics can run deep with examples and thought. Therefore, these steps should be considered in an orderly fashion, as they build upon themselves.

The lighting industry has one primary challenge which is two-fold. It addresses our leadership and “who” will guide us, as well as “how” we can ensure consumer understanding. These elements are critical to reaching our goals.

Stage 1

Our first action needs to select professional individuals to be part of the **visionary development team—a visionary panel**. This panel should include only those who are proven, active leaders of companies and/or innovative concepts. The reason for this is to ensure we find those with real-world experience in implementing a vision plan.

It would not serve us well to select individuals with extensive academic credentials when most have never operated and advanced a business. The lighting industry is a business, and it needs to be operated as such—successfully and profitably.

Ideally, we should have a well-rounded, representative group from varying specialties or professions. This should include lighting designers, manufacturers, contractors,

specifiers, and educators. Also, we should consider the international markets—a global endeavor, which encourages unification.

Once a panel is gathered and deemed qualified to engage this visionary quest, they must be put to task. The first task should be **to identify who is in the best position to be recognized as the authority**. This selection must consider many factors: financial well-being, membership numbers, global exposure, years established, recognition, and experience.

I believe the IES is currently in the best position to accomplish this endeavor, and it could be one of its greatest achievements.

The goal of having one recognized authority will allow the industry to consolidate information, including the elimination of bad information.

Stage 2

This stage can begin once we have a fully functioning panel and recognized authority. There will be two major tasks during this phase of the building process, and it includes the development of:

A. An Easily Understood Message

As discussed earlier, a simplified message that is naturally understood by the consumer is what this is. Until this concept and message is determined, we cannot develop a vision plan that compliments it.

This message also needs to be one that unifies us all—every profession. When each profession can identify with this, then we will have success. It must be a universal message. The authority is the profession's voice, which guides the consumer.

In my opinion, this message is in our ability to provide good human health. We all naturally desire good health. And when the consumer understands and appreciates this positive relationship, we advance to higher levels.

B. A Vision Plan

The panel needs to determine a long-range plan, and that includes a 5-yr. plan, 10-yr. plan, as well as one that reaches into the next generation of lighting professionals. It should compliment and serve our simplified message.

This plan must be detailed and considerate of all the current challenges that exist. I believe Stage 1 and Stage 2 can be effective and in place within the first

5-year period. This is a reasonable timeframe, and the sooner it is achieved, the faster we can better the industry.

There are several challenges to be included in this plan:

- **Fragmentation**
- **Self-Centeredness**
- **Devaluation**
- **Professional Advancement**

Stage 3

This will likely be the most daunting challenge phase because our focus will be placed upon the many fragmented organizations, associations, and groups around the world. Our goal should be to unify these entities into one or a small number of organizations, so that a major reduction occurs.

The overall goal in this stage is to consolidate efforts, reduce confusion, share resources, and become stronger under one vision and authority. Many will be fearful of this and likely fight against it. But we need to reassure them that they will have a “voice” and position to benefit their individual needs. No matter what, we cannot take away hope—everyone deserves this. Allowing them to be included is how to make this work.

Providing Hope to the Future

Our ability to provide hope to the next generation is critical if we wish to realize industry growth. We’ve briefly discussed this topic under “Our Challenge in Vision”, but we should better explain why this is of great importance. It is because we cannot expect to grow in numbers if we cannot entice those seeking careers in these fields.

Enticement will come in the form of monetary pay for roles performed. It will also conform to us providing career paths which have a pleasant destination, whether it’s related to compensation or career fulfillment.

If my visionary challenge asks the question of where we wish not to be in 2030, then that would be by not providing hope to the future generation. Can you only imagine if we all choose to not address these concerns and we only pass along an even larger set of problems associated with our industry? It is for this very reason why I believe this is the greatest challenge for us all.

Income will continue to be one of the greatest incentives to any working condition. Another challenge will be for those who are single parents. This is directly tied to income needs, so we need to ensure that our pay structures are fulfilling and competitive. If we cannot provide this,

then these people will look elsewhere. Currently, many are distressed by their pay rate. If it's not very encouraging now, then what can we expect in the future?

The demands of the future are likely to get worse. Our ability to provide hope to the next generation is now more important than ever.

Retirement is another major concern for those working in the lighting profession. And as with many other disciplines, most tend to think about today...not the future. So, as a measure for hope in the future, what if we could better provide for this need? By defining jobs, roles, etc., we can establish defined paths to reach that destination point.

This visionary plan can provide hope and instill encouragement by considering these needs. If we can take away the guess work for students entering the workforce, then they will find more fulfillment in their jobs. This provision will act as a form of security.

The Daunting Challenges of Stage 3

Although this will not be a complete list of challenges, it will suffice to discuss those that will hinder industry growth and advancement. The first of these involves the concept of unification over fragmentation.

Fragmentation is the splintering and separation of parts. We have split the lighting industry up into many specialty groups. There are several negatives associated with fragmentation, and one of those is seen by increased confusion. There is greater confusion on who to look to for answers, as well as finding many mixed messages.

Why does fragmentation occur? In most cases, it's because these entities are looking to have a voice—to be heard. Each entity serves its members and they never fully develop because they are too small. On the global stage, most don't matter; therefore, they are not recognized.

Unification

This is the process of being united and made whole. It is the opposite of fragmentation, and it is currently what our industry is suffering from. **The key to successful unification begins and ends with consumer understanding.**

What are the benefits of unification? There are several and each should be considered in our approach to the visionary plan:

- Shared common message
- Increased revenue and availability to funds
- Increased membership and entity power

- Decreased costs due to consolidated efforts
- Decreased waste
- Decreased confusion
- Increased global exposure
- Increased opportunities for education and learning

Self-Centeredness

The term self-centeredness is only used to describe the nature of the entity. Most entities put themselves first above all else. This is a natural position to take, but it leaves the world out of the equation. Self-centeredness is a short-sighted mission.

This challenge is a big problem today because many are looking for ways to profit, advance themselves, and to be recognized. It's understandable, but we need to encourage a shift in this thought process. We must educate the whole to understand the value in sharing the same message for everyone's benefit.

Companies and entities must look at the long-term goals of the industry, as well as our professions, as part of a winning solution to a shared vision. We should all be encouraged by the idea that we will benefit because the consumer has buy-in to understanding our value.

There will be several negative impacts associated to those remaining self-centered in focus. They will never be able to compete against the well-funded, educated, and controlled experience of the unified model. In other words, they will be left behind to toil at the bottom—a losing value proposition.

Devaluation

Devaluation has been a problem for at least the past decade, and it continues to expand upon itself. It entails both products and services. So, what has caused devaluation and the negative impacts against the lighting industry? I believe it is due to **the over-saturation of the markets**.

The past several decades has shown a big increase in the demand for lighting products and lighting services. Everywhere we look, we find like products and like services. How does one consider what the difference is between one versus another? Are there exacting measures and standards to effectively divide good from bad?

This over-saturation of the markets is a big problem for everyone. From the consumer's position, it is overwhelming and extremely confusing. We could say just about the same thing from the tradesperson's stance.

So, our challenge lies in the devaluation of products and services. How does this occur and why does it happen? It occurs **due to competition**. Most everyone is looking for a better deal, a

lower cost, a better product, or a better service. If one is to sell more products or services, one must find a way to incentivize the opportunity. Most of this occurs through devaluation by providing less in materials or services, as it relates to “quality”.

What is the common theme tied to devaluation? It is the consumer. The consumer has great power in its ability to control demand, which means they can place expectations on the provider. Much of the lighting industry falls victim to commoditization—our products and services are treated like the commodity. This is bad for those looking to increase their income within our professions. Any time our efforts are treated like a commodity source, we are bound by those conditions.

Another big problem associated with devaluing products and services is that it never ends! There will always be another company or person to come along and offer less so that they can be awarded the job. It’s been said many times, but it’s a ‘race to the bottom’, which leaves all parties in a losing position. If we engage in this activity and accept these conditions, then we hurt our brand—our image. Does the lighting industry, as well as its associated professions, wish to share in unprofessional acts and poor practices? Our image must be about high-quality, professionalism and effective results.

The point of this topic and challenge is to understand it as such. Our vision must change this perception, so that we can earn a better living in our work. **This challenge is directly associated with our “message”—why we are of value to the consumer.**

Professional Advancement

This challenge is brought to our attention because it is not properly addressed. I believe this is due to the lack of a long-term plan for our industry. Has advanced education been pre-determined or planned out for those practicing the trades? Do we have a defined path towards reaching these advancements? I don’t believe we do.

If we are to engage the future generation, we must define these roadways for completion. We can provide hope and excitement by doing so, and it all must be considered by our leaders.

Additionally, as an industry, we should be providing advanced educational opportunities. Many educational programs stop short and cater to the entry and mid-level practitioners. Why is this? I believe it’s because this demographic provides for the majority of sales that feed the manufacturing process. However, we cannot expect true advancement if we do not encourage it.

Today’s leaders must buy in to the benefits of advancing the professions because this will lead to the encouragement of the next generation.

Consumer Motivation

It makes good, common sense that we approach the deficiencies of the lighting industry from that of the consumer first. And when I say consumer first, I do not mean just in providing what the consumer thinks they need. As professionals, we have the experience, technology, and understanding of what is truly best for them. However, our approach needs to address the psychology of humans and their needs.

What does this psychology mean? It means we must hone-in to the things that motivate a consumer to engage in a need or want. There are three human motivators—**Desire, Fear and Pain**. In addition, these are the same psychological motivators taught to us by sales experts. Therefore, shouldn't the lighting industry utilize them to "motivate" the consumer in understanding "**why**" **we are important and provide value to them?**

To better understand this relationship, we need to unfold each motivator:

- **Desire**—a pleasant experience and one which has strong feelings, which compels us to possess something within our reach of obtaining. It's something we want to take action with for personal gain.

The motivational elements associated with desire are Curiosity (the need to learn), Order (the need to organize, stabilize or ensure a predictable environment), Tranquility (the need to be safe), and Joy (the need to experience happiness, love and fulfillment).

- **Fear**—an unpleasant experience and one which is not desired. These experiences are generally avoided, and they are remembered as a negative experience.

The motivational elements associated with fear are Stress, Anxiety and Danger. They tend to be opposing to those elements of desire.

- **Pain**—an unpleasant experience which can be physical or psychological. Once again, these experiences are remembered and serve to be avoided in the future. Painful experiences can cause emotional events aligned to stress and depression.

The point to these consumer-first experiences is that it places the emphasis onto them and how they think. If we can successfully motivate the consumer to understand the pains and fears of poor lighting, as it relates to human health, then we can expect them to be motivated to use our services.

Our justification as lighting professionals needs to be aligned to that of a doctor. This will provide a much higher level of acceptance and relevance in the community. This is where our value lies, not in being a technical wizard with light. We benefit human health.

Final Thought

Without true leadership to implement a well, thought-out vision, we are most likely going to circle round-and-round by repeating the same old mistakes. We must break the chains that hold us back. We must provide substance for the future of our industry. This will take both the acceptance of our state-of-being, and the action to address these challenges.

Currently, we have a wealth of knowledge and expertise to lead in this visionary challenge. We have the ability to consider the past and to address what is best for the future. We must place emphasis on this future need over our own current needs. This is our real challenge—to give, not to take.