

Newsmaker Interview:



ECi President Ron Books

Last month's news from ECi that it has appointed Ron Books as its new president puts at the helm of the industry's largest dealer technology provider a seasoned IT veteran with close to ten years' experience in the independent channel.

Books is taking on his new role at a time when independents are facing what is very much a good news-bad news scenario. The good news: unprecedented turmoil among the dealer's big box competition; the bad news, of course, is the overall economic outlook. What does it all mean for dealers and for ECi? We recently asked Books for his perspective on those questions and others like them. Here's what he had to say.

How should dealers be preparing for a year that promises to be about as uncertain as any we've faced in a long while?

Books: In difficult economic times, it's tempting for any business to try and cut costs wherever possible. Independents have to be very careful about what they cut, however.

We recently surveyed our dealers and asked about their Number One business priority for the year ahead. Overwhelmingly, the responses focused on retaining existing customers. That means independents can't be too aggressive about cutting costs, particularly in the technology area.

The big boxes reportedly spent over \$40 million on e-commerce technology in 2008. If dealers are going to compete effectively and counter the threat of losing customers to the big boxes, they've got to have a strong technology base.

That means it's not a question of cutting their technology spend but, rather, spending their technology dollars wisely and making sure they're getting the most value and functionality possible.

How should independents go about doing that?

Books: The most effective thing any dealer can do to maximize ROI is to take the time to understand all the functionality they already have through their monthly maintenance agreement.

I would encourage them to bring in one of our team or an approved consultant to conduct a business review and make sure they're really taking full advantage of the technology that's already in place.

Certainly there are additional areas such as mobile products and sales analytics that can help their business, but many dealers could be doing a lot more with what they have already to run more productively or extend their marketing outreach.

What are your own priorities as the new president of ECi?

Books: We're laser-focused on making our customers better and helping them grow and gain new operational efficiencies.

I've talked to literally thousands of dealers since I started at ECi and, on a very personal level, I'm committed to doing all we can to renew, deepen and expand those relationships. That's what's going to drive how our own business will be structured and how we serve our target industries.

Despite today's soft markets, we are continuing to implement new technology internally to raise the bar on our own best practices. Times are tough today but we all know the economy will get better and, when it does, we need to be sure that both ECi and our customers are positioned to make the most of it.


What's your sense of the dealer community right now and how well do you think dealers are positioned to withstand what's coming down the road?

Books: Overall, I feel pretty positive. We see many dealers who are doing the right things and implementing the right type of technology to battle the big boxes and conduct successful retention programs.

I feel very good about the way many of our dealers have expanded their product offering in recent years, both to maximize their revenue from existing customers and also protect themselves from outside competition.

I am concerned, though, about dealers whose only focus right now is on cost cutting. Certainly you need to be spending carefully and controlling costs. But you also need to make sure you're giving yourself and your people a fair chance to compete.

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You've already talked a little about e-commerce. The industry's technology providers and two national wholesalers have all made major investments to provide a strong online presence for independent dealers. How would you rate the success of those efforts to date and what should dealers be doing to make the most of them?

Books: The wholesalers have done a great job in recent years in terms of supporting the kind of content and functionality dealers need to compete.

There's still a lot of work to do, however. E-commerce implementation is an ongoing process and that makes it critically important for dealers to stay on top of what's available to them in the e-commerce area.

That means participating in webinars, forcing their sales reps and other key employees to learn new functionality as it becomes available and making sure they're doing all they can to use new e-commerce tools effectively.

The dealers who have committed to e-commerce and are truly running with it are making incredible strides.




What's going to be the next big thing and/or killer app in the technology arena? What will independents be doing differently in their use of technology say three years from now?

Books: Technology is in every part of the dealer's business today and is only going to become more pervasive going forward. It's in the dealer's warehouse, it's on his trucks, it's a key resource for their sales reps, their buyers and their accounting staff, and so on.

What I see coming down the road is a broadening of technology use in each of these areas. It will become even more important to make sure that all the pieces of technology running the various elements of the business are talking to each other and communicating seamlessly. And not just in the dealer's back office, but through tighter integration with OEMs and whole-

salers on one side and customers on the other.

Beyond that, dealers will become even better at using that technology to help them expand into other industries and grow revenues from their existing customers.



Any final message for dealers?

Books: ECi's entire staff is extremely committed to our dealers and the industries we serve. I personally feel there is no other software provider out there that is more committed—both resource-wise and in human terms—to the technology that will help independent dealers flourish now and in the future.

Our goal is simple: To prove each and every day that we're at the forefront of technology, that we're the overall best technology *partner* for our dealers and that we recognize *our* success depends on *their* success.