



A Need for Compatibility

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The feeling of dread hit just about when the seatbelt-on light went off during my flight from Chicago to Atlanta. I was on the first leg of a three-part business trip that would keep me out of the office for the week. I had several articles yet to complete and planned on getting some writing done on the plane and, later, at the hotel.

Then I realized I forgot to pack an essential component to my plan: My laptop power cord. Ironically, I was on my way to the HDX Technology Conference.

I never had to buy a power cord before and wasn't even sure if you could buy just a cord, apart from ordering a replacement through the manufacturer. I didn't remember ever seeing a power cord section at any of the big-box electronic retailers, but figured that was my best option.

As I panic-walked through the airport I spotted a kiosk selling portable electronics and stopped to ask if they could help. The salesperson plucked a large bundle from the shelf, took my laptop and proceeded to check mating compatibility between it and the numerous adapter tips in the bundle. About halfway through testing them all she found a match. Grateful, I paid the \$140 for the bundle of wires and adapter tips.

I had no idea there were so many different computer power-supply options. The type of cord and plug never factors into the computer selection decision. It's a necessary commodity I never gave any thought to until I left it hundreds of miles behind.

Fittingly, compatibility was a key topic during the HDX Technology Conference, hosted by HDExchange, the non-profit group that develops electronic commerce standards for the aftermarket. Among HDX's initiatives is the Price File Library, which standardizes product information communication between manufacturers and distributors.

Just as every laptop seemingly has its own unique AC input, every manufacturer has its own way of communicating product information and pricing to its customers. For distributors,

managing the various formats can be a time-consuming process. Getting the files, then opening, cleaning and cross-checking them can just about be a full-time job, and the opportunity for error is there every step of the way.

According to HDX Executive Director Edward Kuo, there are about 40 distributors and 30 manufacturers using the Price File Library, and HDX is aggressively driving its proliferation. In addition to saving users time and money through greater automation and improved accuracy, the potential is there to grow revenue. The system allows manufacturers to distribute product support materials – such as brochure copy and studio photography – that can help distributors build a professional-looking online storefront, with engaging visuals and accurate, in-depth product information.

As more companies subscribe to the Price File Library and as more information gets added to it, its usefulness will grow and new, revenue-generating applications for the information will emerge. However, as with the adoption of most new technologies, the biggest reluctance, Kuo says, is a willingness to change the status quo. "Even though it's blatantly obvious everybody hates the way they're doing it," he adds.

But they are making progress and events like the technology conference help build consensus and inspire new ideas. After all, it wasn't too long ago when electronic purchase orders and invoices were eyed with skepticism. Just as the industry adopted technology standards in those areas, it's just a matter of time before everyone agrees upon a technology standard to communicate pricing and product info. Universal use of the Price File Library won't create a technological Utopia, but, Kuo says, it will lay the foundation for the aftermarket to move forward and do a lot more. Greater productivity, improved accuracy and new ways to serve the customer should make most any distributor happy.

The kind of happy one gets with a fully powered laptop tethered to an outlet by a compatible cord and plug. ■