

Switch into high gear

National retail chains, commercial construction, and industrial upgrades are driving robust sales of switchgear, switchboard, and switch products.

Use of new switchgear, switchboards, and the various switches and components that go into the production of them has expanded, thanks to strong activity in both new construction and modernization upgrades in the CII sectors.

One new development is the growing interest in integrated switchboards (ISBs), which are being marketed as a smart means of combining several different components into a preassembled, prewired, unified modular unit.

Compared to installing separate components, ISBs can save owners, specifiers, contractors, and installers significant time and labor costs; they also can cut the required installation space in half while greatly simplifying project specification, ordering, and coordination.

"Over the past 12 months, it has been more common to see ISBs being provided," said Chris Bowler, marketing manager, electrical distribution, for GE Consumer & Industrial. "We expect demand for ISBs to grow 25% in 2007."

"Integrated switchgear products with built-in multiple capabilities are becoming the norm," said Bhavesh Patel, director of marketing for ASCO Power Technologies.

"When we first introduced integrated transfer switches made up of multiple preassembled components, the builders thought these solutions would cut into their installation income," said Tom Andino, director of national accounts for ASCO Power Technologies. "But in fact, they have found that by using these integrated products, they can actually complete more projects."

Craig Gob, marketing manager, commercial distribution equipment business, for Eaton's electrical group, agrees, and said, "ISB solutions are especially popular with end-users, who benefit from a repeatable equipment configuration.

These include retail and restaurant chains and banks, where it's important to reduce the size of the electrical equipment footprint, as well as to reduce the installed costs."

A surge in switches

Safety switches represent a core product for many distributors. "The sales of safety switches are up significantly, at about 12% per year in the past two years in both commercial and industrial construction," said Dennis Krizan, product manager for Siemens Energy and Automation. "In the past 12 months, the demand for heavy-duty switches—which represent 70% of the market—grew by about 13%. Demand should remain strong in 2007."

One area where power switching is critical is in power control systems that utilize parallel generators as back-up mission-critical power in hospitals, commercial buildings, big-box retailers, universities and colleges, and industrial or government facilities.

"Power transfer switches are designed to automatically sense power disruptions and trigger emergency backup power generation systems," explained Patel. "Today, the most advanced features include closed transition and soft-load technologies, which can allow for the blending of two parallel sources of power."

Another opportunity is the retrofit upgrading of the individual switchboard components in an existing electrical infrastructure. This particular approach is appealing in industrial facilities and commercial financial centers because downtime can be minimized.

"We are experiencing a significant growth in the upgrade and modernization of aging switchgear and switchboards, where we reduce the period of



Image courtesy of ASCO

Integrated switchboards—which are being marketed as a smart means of combining several different components into a preassembled, prewired, unified modular unit—frequently include power panels, transformers, lighting panels, lighting controllers, and lighting control panels premounted and prewired in compact enclosure cabinets.

downtime when compared to a complete replacement of the entire switchgear with a new installation," noted Steve Maling, business development manager with Square D/Schneider Electric. "With our solution, we are able to engineer and install modern circuit breaker technology into the existing structure, which can then provide faster clearing times and reduce arc flash hazard levels, thus improving safety."

"Upgrading existing equipment with new components requires less disruption to the customer's business, and typical savings can range from 30% to 40% of the cost for new gear," said Maling. ■■■

Carazo is a marketing consultant specializing in brand development and integrated marketing. He can be reached at dcaraz@optonline.net.