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What's the Good Word?

WHAT FINISHERS REALLY WANT FROM SUPPLIERS

"Put in a good word for me with your people."

This was the request made of me at a trade show last year by a supplier of proprietary chemistry (we'll call him Fred) who was seeking our company's business.

Put in a good word? Put in a good word? What does that even mean? Put in a good word. Shucks, that Fred is a nice fellow, we should do more business with him.

Perhaps unfortunately for the likes of Fred, it takes a lot more than just being a nice guy to succeed as a supplier in today's finishing industry. Now and in the future, surface finishers will purchase products and services from the suppliers that add the most overall value to the finisher's business.

How can a supplier add value? Read on.

- Stop in regularly whether your customers ask you to or not.
- Respond like a paramedic when your customer calls with a process control emergency.
- Make sure you've done 100% of your homework and you're absolutely sure of your conclusion before you even think of blaming non-conforming parts on the customer's substrate or your competitor's chemistry.
- A finisher's needs don't come to an abrupt halt at 5 p.m. on weekdays or at the close of business on Friday. Are you willing to give your customers your cell phone number so they can get the help they need whenever they need it?
- The more extensive your lab capabilities the better. When a finisher has a process control problem, timely analytical results are crucial.
- Even more important is the supplier's ability to translate lab results into effective problem solving on the shop floor. World class suppliers understand that a problem not solved means an order not shipped.
- Finishers are running lean. Help out by providing on-site analysis and troubleshooting when the finisher's technical team is on vacation.
- Quick delivery is a given. The closer your distribution point to your customer's point of use, the better.
- A finisher's quality, appearance and functional expectations vary significantly from customer to customer. Work with the finisher to meet their customers' unique expectations.
- Finishers are often presented with new business opportunities for processes that they do not presently run. Can you respond within hours to answer questions about the capabilities of your products? Can you provide prototype samples within a matter of days?
- Understand your customer's growth plans. Who are their customers? What industries do they serve? What new projects are they quoting? What equipment are they considering? Where could they be saving money? Know the answers to these questions and you'll have an edge.
- Understand the expectations that the finisher's customers have of the finisher. Are they required to submit Control Plans, PFMEA's, and Process Flow Diagrams? How does your product fit in to these? When your customer receives a corrective action request can you assist in completing it?
- Familiarize yourself with your customers' continual improvement programs. As an example, many finishers are implementing variations of lean manufacturing. Do you have a working understanding of lean? How does your product relate? How can you help?
- Many finishers rely on their supply base to be their "eyes and ears" when it comes to new coating and equipment technologies. Are you up to speed on the latest innovations? Are they included in your product line?
- There is no substitute for experience. When your customer has a need or a problem, a supplier who knows what has worked and hasn't worked in the past is invaluable.
- Know exactly how your customer's use of your product pertains to or will be affected by local, state, federal and global regulatory changes.

- Just about every finisher would love to grow their business. Some of the most valuable suppliers are the ones who provide qualified sales leads that fit the finisher's growth plans and target customer profile.
- Does your company have relationships with Original Equipment Manufacturers? Do you have a program that actively encourages OEM's to specify your products? Do you offer assistance to your customers in winning OEM qualifications and approvals for their finishing processes?
- Especially to those finishers that service automotive customers, 30-day payment terms are a thing of the distant past. Are you flexible enough to work with your customers on their payment terms to you?
- Don't oversell your product just to win the order. Your customer will know soon enough that you did and that may be the last order you get.
- To many finishers, vendor managed inventory is attractive. Can you monitor re-order points and refill automatically? Even better, will you consign inventory and allow your customer to take ownership at the time of use?
- Much of what I have learned and many of the industry contacts I have made have been through my involvement in the AESF and NASF. Actively support our industry trade organizations by participating in trade shows and governmental relations programs, attending branch meetings and supporting trade organization fundraising activities.
- Integrity and environmental stewardship are critical attributes of a world class supplier. So is confidentiality as it relates to the finisher's classified customer and process information.

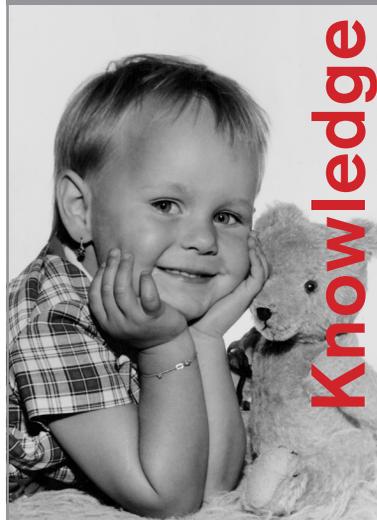
Finishers, how does your supply base stack up on the above? Suppliers, do these criteria describe your business? Assuming they do, that's the good word. 

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