

A Psychoanalytical Tour of Finishing Industry Personalities

Dealing with challenging personalities comes with the territory, and handling them appropriately is key to success.

For years, I have been fascinated by people’s personality profiles and the tools used to measure them. We all have our own personalities, which, according to experts, are fairly set in stone by the time we are about 7 years old. Whether we are motivated by winning and competition or content to take what life gives us is part of who we are. Whether one is a social butterfly or a recluse is part of his personality. High sense of urgency or in a hurry to do nothing? Personality. Attention to detail, need to follow rules, frustrated by others when they don’t? Personality.

In my years as a custom coater, this fascination with personality profiles often bled over into trying to understand what made those in our industry tick, and years of working with all different kinds of customers has led to some curious observations and categorizations.

Allow me to share them with the understanding that all personalities appearing in this column are fictitious, any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental, and should anyone with whom I did business in my custom coating days decide to read on they must accept this edition of *Never Finished* in the light-hearted spirit of fun in which it is intended. (Insert here the smiley face we include in a text message when we want the reader to know we’re having fun.)

The customer may not always be right, but he is always the customer and needs to be treated with the corresponding level of value and respect. Dealing with some of the more challenging customer personality traits, however, comes with the territory, and handling them appropriately is key to success.

“Fairest of the Fair.” This customer holds the supplier accountable and calls out unsatisfactory performance when appropriate, but does so in a balanced, fact-based fashion that quickly gets to the core of the problem. Fairest of the Fair customers are willing to pay a reasonable premium for superior performance. They are never too

Every company’s favorite customer is the “Happy-Go-Lucky” personality. HGL never complains about price, never shops and is always satisfied with his supplier’s level of service. While HGLs are the best customers of all, they are few and far between.

After the HGL, the greatest customer is the

busy to return a pertinent phone call or email, which contrasts in an interesting way to the “Busy Bee.”

For reasons real or imagined, the Busy Bee has convinced himself that he simply has no time to do anything. Whether he is actually busy, thinks he’s busy or just manages his time poorly, BB never gets to anything, though he might consume a good 30 minutes of his time and yours explaining how busy he is. If stung by the Busy Bee, your best antidote is to offer to do his work for him, performing analysis or using your own effort to help him solve a problem he might be experiencing.

The “Proportion Blower” acts in such a way that every problem — big or small — is big. Demanding immediate response to even the smallest of speed bumps, PB runs the risk of becoming the little boy who cried wolf. Let PB have his catharsis, listen intently until he is done, ask questions to help him put his issue into perspective, and then get on with the fix.

A close cousin of PB is the “Problem Rider.” This is the fellow who unloads for the sake of unloading and gets his jollies from belittling a supplier, often in the presence of his teammates. The remedy for the Problem Rider is fairly close to that for the Proportion Blower, though the PR may never be satisfied with the outcome. Service him with enthusiasm as you would any other customer, but don’t let his perpetual disappointment get to you.

From time to time, I wonder whether PR’s need to disparage others is the manifestation of some inner lack of self-confidence. I have no doubt that is the affliction of the “Inferiority Complexor” (aka Mr. Important). This individual invests inordinate time and energy in an attempt to convince others that his influence in his own organization is much more significant than it actually is.

My thoughts go back to a prospect who once told me in a meeting, “My business card says *buyer*, but I really function as the *vice president of operations*.” You know the type. Feed the Complexor’s ego, but take his promises to



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advocate for your organization with a grain of salt.

More than a decade of working with customers on lean implementations, continuous improvement projects and waste reductions led me to conclude that, when it comes to such efforts, there are two opposing customer types: “Dream Lean” and “Mean Lean.” Dream Leaners talk a good game. They use all the lean buzz words and share how they want to improve flow and reduce waste, but when the rubber hits the road, the results aren’t there. They then blame factors outside of their control (shopfloor employees, management, workload) for the outcome.

Juxtapose the Dream Leaner and the Mean Leaner. Mean Leaners get lean manufacturing, visualize the future and stay at it until their vision becomes reality. Dream Leaners waste a supplier’s resources and those of their employers. I’ll take the Mean Leaners any day.

My list of customer personalities includes the “Analysis Paralyzer,” the customer who will absolutely, positively make a decision—as soon as he gets one more ounce of data. Until that data is provided and he needs a little more. For this individual, the decision may never come.

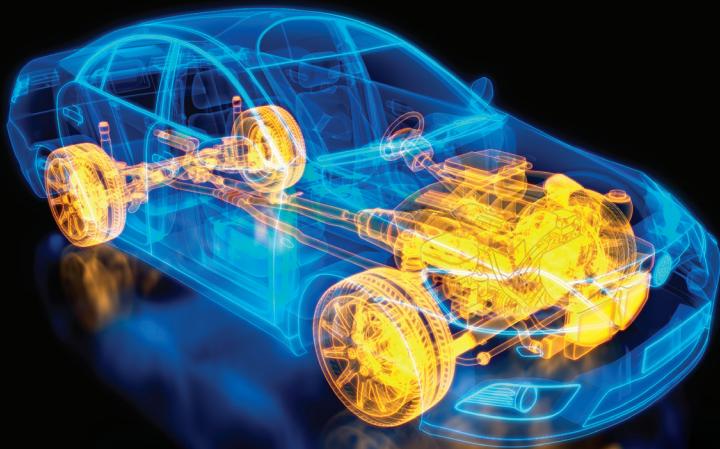
Also included is the “Perennial Shopper,” the customer who insists on seeking proposals for his requirements on a regular basis, and then always chooses the lowest price, regardless of quality, service or delivery. Unless your business model is that of the absolute low-cost provider, let your competitors chase Perennial Shopper to the bottom.

Don’t confuse Perennial Shopper with “Wheeler Dealer,” the customer

who always, always, always asks for a lower price. Over time, his suppliers catch on and just bump the original quote by 10 percent so they have something to give back when Wheeler Dealer demands it.

Thank goodness for customers, without whom our businesses and jobs wouldn’t exist. The customer may not always be right, but he is always the customer and needs to be treated with the corresponding level of value and respect. Dealing with some of the more challenging customer personality traits, however, comes with the territory, and handling them appropriately is key to success. ■■

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