

(RE)INVENT YOUR SALES: BACK TO BASICS

The world moves at an ever-increasing pace. Businesses come along, new inventions are everywhere, communication methods are forever evolving, and the fluid power engineer or salesman is experiencing and making use of this new technology just like everyone else. However, the world is changing at the moment, and not in the way we forecast and certainly not in the way we enjoy. This article is looking in from the outside taking no perception or opinion but just reviewing the sales techniques and methods we have all been taught and employed in years gone past. A periodic review of the sales basics is a good idea and allows us all to reflect on our strategies, plans, and future actions to ensure that we all come out of this current economic mess in at least the same state as we all entered it.

We are in difficult times. Industry is slowing, and in certain areas such as automotive manufacturing and industries that rely on motorcar production, it has virtually ground to a halt. We know this all too well. Most of us know this thanks to the media, who seem to have an air of excitement when projecting their doom and gloom into our living rooms and onto our daily press, coupled with scenarios from so-called experts that are surprised at every new set of publicized data released by governments and agencies on what seems like an hourly schedule as of late.

Unfortunately, most of us know of the downturn because of declining sales numbers. There was a time when you compared the previous month's sales to the same month a year earlier, a common indicator of company performance. If there was a disparity in the wrong direction, it was normally found that the same month a year earlier was a record month or one that was influenced by a particularly large order.

However, it would appear that industrial sales are off to such a degree that a compari-

son is rarely made to the year before because it's deemed irrelevant. It's a simple case of customers not buying product, and the reasons for this are numerous. The old reason of "they are buying from my competitor now" is now not as common. That's a traditional reason for the loss of a sale and one that can be addressed. But if a customer's business is slowing or indeed his production has stopped, he is simply not buying from anyone.

So how does the fluid power salesman improve their sales in such a depressed economy? The first thing they should do is stop using the excuse of "the economy is down and that's why my numbers are off." The way to improve sales is to sell more product. It's that simple, and it's been the only method of improving product sales since the first rock chisel was sold to the second caveman.

There are few benefits to the fluid power engineer in these times except for possibly, one. The customer who is slow or flat has time on his hands. Do you remember the customer you know who has a need but is too busy to look at the way in which you can improve his production? Well, that same customer now has one less excuse to look at what you are offering. This customer may not have the money to spend now, but he has the time to review your proposal and world-changing idea to improve production when he does have the money. If your idea is that good, maybe he'll find the money to make it happen now. When production does start to improve, and based on the media reports, that will be either tomorrow or the year 2050, here comes your order for what is a genuine production improvement, be it technical, commercial, or even a combination of both.

So where do you start? Research is the answer. Knowing your customer goes far beyond knowing what his golf handicap is, where he went on vacation, or the name of his first-born child. That's knowing your contact. How many times have you asked your customer what he needs instead of telling him what he needs? Personal relationships, of course, are key in any sales role. People still buy from people in the majority of cases. So let's examine a particular customer who packages food product. He has numerous vacuum-handling devices and applications



Figure 2

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in the production area. You have been in there before and tried to swap out the one-inch diameter vacuum cup but failed because the customer did not see this exercise as important. He goes through 500 of these cups a month, but they are cheap, and therefore, it is not given much consideration.

But why are they using 500 vacuum cups a month? If you contact your vacuum cup supplier, he will be giddy with excitement at the prospect of selling this amount of cups every month, I am sure. The only reason your customer will change is because you are some 20 or 30% cheaper, and that's great until the next salesman comes along with an even cheaper model. So stand back and ask yourself why they are using 500 cups a month. He is handling cardboard boxes, and the operator switches the cups out as soon as the pick cycle starts to fail. That much we know. However, in the vacuum-handling industry, cardboard and paper are two of the most abrasive materials to handle with vacuum cups.

Most manufacturers supply silicone cups in these applications because they are very flexible and able to deform to the corrugated surface. But silicone has an inherently poor wear resistance. Other manufacturers supply a PVC material in these applications, which is very wear resistant, but work hardens and then fractures. Therefore, your task is to supply a cup material that is both wear-resistant and flexible (low durometer). A good-quality natural rubber cup would offer this feature. But the customer may require FDA compliant material, so if the cup is picking up the actual food product, natural rubber would not be suitable. But if it is only being used on the cardboard packaging, the customer will probably allow their use. Your cup might be more expensive, but your customer will use less of them, and the production machinery will be down for maintenance less, and so on.

Vacuum is often the weakest part of an OEM machine being built for industry because it is a relatively unknown technology. Fluid power distributors are very familiar with hydraulics and pneumatics because of the pure volume of end-user machine builder requirement, the ever-present marketing, and of course, the amount of manufacturer choices they have. On the other hand, vacuum components are often selected based on their ability to simply work rather than their suitability for the application. For example, a machine builder that makes carton-erecting equipment that erects boxes for a packaging firm will use one cup and a venturi. Need more cups? Add another venturi. Need more of the same machinery? Buy more machines with the same air-consuming small venturi. But it gets to a point where the user may have 20 or 30 air-swallowing venturi in use, and the compressed air consumption warrants a change of vacuum generation method. Find these customers and work out how much air they are using. Could you centralize the whole system with a vacuum pump? Could you put a more efficient venturi on each machine to

replace the numerous smaller venturi? This takes study and analysis, but in most cases, it offers the user tremendous return on investment. Being inventive in your vacuum sales approach will set you apart from the majority of the competition. If you copy the method, you end up selling on price alone, which of course is exactly what the other competitor can do.

Vacuum surveys are rarely conducted in a large user of vacuum equipment. A metal-stamping plant is such a facility with numerous end-of-arm tooling assemblies being used to transfer steel sheet from one press to another. A lot of these tool designs still utilize a point-of-use venturi for each vacuum cup. Extremely effective, for sure, but very compressed air hungry. Large material-handling operations, such as marble slab or wood-panel manufacturing, often hold the work piece on the vacuum tool for long periods of time during the transfer process. Dur-

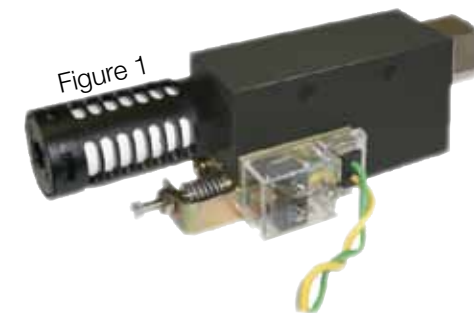


Figure 1

ing this time, the vacuum venturi could be turned off while still holding the work piece, a significant compressed air saving by utilizing a simple vacuum switch and pilot-operated valve on the venturi supply. Fig 1 shows a venturi with an integral vacuum switch to indicate part presence of a safe vacuum level has been reached, which can then turn off the venturi supply via a compressed air supply solenoid valve.

Vacuum pumps are often sized for the machine they are being used on. Makes sense, of course. But in some cases, the actual time during the cycle that the machine needs vacuum is short. Therefore, the pump is running for no reason when attached to a non-porous application. Turn the pump off if the cycle time is long enough to do so by using an electrical vacuum switch and solenoid valve on the vacuum line. (Consideration needs to be made in regards to how often the pump motor contactors make and break. Normally less than six times per hour is advisable but refer to manufacturer rec-

ommendations.) Alternatively, use a much smaller pump but coupled with a vacuum vessel. As soon as the vacuum valve is switched, the vessel offers the machine immediate vacuum and the smaller pump only comes on to "recharge" the vessel. For example, if the application requires 1 gallon of evacuation, and you have a 10-gallon vessel and the vacuum level in the vessel is 27" Hg, when the vacuum valve opens, the complete system equalizes at 24.5" Hg. The pump will then turn on and recharge the vessel automatically, a very simple method of reducing pump size, cycle time, and being very competitive against the other potential supplier. Fig 2 shows a duplex (two pumps) vacuum pump station with vertical vacuum vessel.

Call preparation is key when selling in this economic climate. If you have established that the potential customer is a big vacuum user, find out what they use vacuum for. Find out what problems they experience. Have they got concerns about their vacuum system? Do they feel it does not perform how it should or how they would like it to? By making just a few enquiries, you may be offered some very clear target areas of investigation, but more often than not, the customer is happy with their system as it gives them few problems. But it does not mean it cannot be vastly improved. The previous few examples are basic solutions to very clear problem areas, but they do exist and surprisingly often.

The salesman needs to dig deeper in their role during this slow manufacturing period and to a degree, reinvent their sales approach to one that is more solution-based rather than simply crossing over competitors product.

Training

All manufacturers offer product training, but can your supplier actually offer sales training? That does not mean professional sales training. It means training on how to sell their actual product, referring to distinct advantages they have over the competition, and highlighting success stories with their existing or new technologies. Simply having a lower-cost alternative is one thing, but being able to approach your customer with a lower cost solution is what maintains customer loyalty and ensures that you are called upon for their next project. Times are hard now, but they will get better. When that will be is certainly up for discussion, but by planning, thinking about the application rather than being misled by poorly applied vacuum methods currently used, you will be able to maintain and grow your vacuum customer base.

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