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What do you really know about what your customers do with your products?

By Paperitalo Staff

Last week's column and this week's column could probably be interchanged, they are both so important. I struggled in determining in which order they should appear.

It is very important that everyone on your site know what the customers (including any intermediary, as well as final customers) do with your product. As I wander around mills, I find it amazing how little many employees know about what happens to the products they make--who the customers are and what they do with the products.

It shocks me when I hear from people that claim to know nothing and have no interest in learning anything about the products made in the mills in which they work. They might at least want to know enough to ascertain whether they are in a long term prosperous business or whether it is time to seek opportunities elsewhere. If anyone questions the need to know even this tiny bit of information, I can send them to some ex-newsprint producers that will be glad to tell them the importance. This is important on so many levels. If I come on to your site and walk up to the person that mows the grass, I expect them to have at least a rudimentary knowledge of what is made in your plant and where it goes. It is part of the efforts of keeping them from being comatose on the job (just like safety training). I expect maintenance people to know something about the products made in the mill.

For everyone else, the reason you are there is to make a product that someone buys (at a profit for your mill). If you are directly involved in production, and that means receiving pulpwood and/or recycled fiber through to securing the shipment (e.g., nailing it to the truck bed) in the common carriers' transport system, you better know a great deal about the customers' uses of your products.

Papermachine people of nearly all levels should be regularly sent to the purchasers' plants to hear their peers tell them about the good things and bad things about the performance of your products on their equipment. Your operators can gain a tremendous competitive edge by visiting your customers' plants and developing an intimate knowledge of what goes on there.

It is not possible, cost wise, of course, to send everyone to the customer plants, however, it is possible to study the customers' own operating manuals. You should be able to obtain at least generic versions of these and spend time with all your team members learning how the customers' converting or printing equipment operates. If confidentiality concerns preclude you from getting these directly from your customers, you should be able to at least get general operating manuals from the manufacturers of your customers' equipment. They may also have videos you can obtain.

Walking through mills, one often sees operators staring blankly into space, waiting for something to happen. If you have your housekeeping in order and everything ship shape, why are they not spending their idle time reading up on your customers' equipment and your equipment?

Think you are too busy, or too high up the ladder to get involved in these kinds of details personally? Every real owner (meaning they personally own the assets) that I know walks their facilities daily, often starting at dawn or earlier. Every excellent hired manager I have ever known (a very small group indeed) does the same thing. If you think you don't have time to get involved in the nitty-gritty of your business, you might want to reconsider in light of what these real owners do.

All of this fits closely with what our European Editor, Dr. Jorge A. Vasconcellos, has been saying over on PaperMoney®. Tie Jorge's comments, this column, and last week's column together, and you have the beginnings of a plan to take your mill out of the current economic mess. Don't worry about your competition doing these things, worry about executing them yourself. If the past holds true, only a few exceptional managers will have the determination to execute all the way through to success.

There is so much to do, I can't imagine anyone having an idle minute. But, if you are satisfied with all conditions in your mill or your department, you can always have your people studying safety procedures and literature!

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##