

Customer Service to Meet the Changing Needs of the Packaging Industry By Mark W. Anderson, President and CEO, Pro Mach, Inc.

Shifts in buying practices brought about by the recession are forcing consumer goods companies to explore new ways to enhance the productivity and agility of their packaging operations. A key part of that strategy is to establish closer relationships with key packaging equipment suppliers to ensure machines and systems continue running at peak efficiency through exceptional aftermarket service and support programs.

Michael Ballard, Director of Packaging Engineering, General Mills, Inc., says “Manufacturers that will win in the future will be those that establish strong relationships with key suppliers and ensure that aftermarket service and support is closely aligned with their own strategic growth objectives.”

Ballard continues, “This partnership starts with an element of trust and shared objectives usually based around growth, higher innovation, and flexibility. It is important to recognize that in a tough economy more than simply lean operations are necessary. Ensuring capacity is also essential. Manufacturers require assets to run as efficiently as possible, reducing the number of stops and increasing throughput and productivity.”

Changing trends

In the past decade, packaging machines have evolved from primarily electromechanical units to computer controlled devices. Advanced controls include programmable controllers (PLCs), servo motors, variable frequency drives, and human machine interface (HMI) devices that offer advanced

diagnostics. These machines are now integrated with plant floor data acquisition and communication networks, feeding information to management information systems (MIS). Literally, every machine on the packaging line is a unique and complex computer controlled device. In-plant maintenance personnel have transformed themselves from essentially mechanics to computer savvy technicians.

Not only that, but leaner operations have reduced headcount and there are fewer technicians maintaining these devices. Those who are on the job have an increasingly difficult time staying current with the technology. Onboard diagnostics help, but more is needed to achieve packaging line peak efficiency 24/7. Interestingly, many of today's machines are so well made and controlled that operations personnel may have a false sense of security. They will find that without the correct intervals of preventive maintenance machines that have performed well for years may begin to experience throughput declines.

Creating service best practices among 11 divisions

Pro Mach is unique in the packaging industry for its breadth of solutions. Pro Mach provides integrated packaging products and systems for many industries, including the food, beverage, household goods, and pharmaceutical industries. The company has three business units — Primary Packaging, End of Line Packaging, and Identification and Tracking — comprised of 11 divisions. Because of the synergies offered, Pro Mach often supplies customers with an integrated solution featuring machines from multiple Pro Mach divisions.

Pro Mach has experienced first hand the changing trends in service both within its own operations and through its customers. This has been especially true on the customer side for large and complex integrated solutions where aftermarket service, including ongoing training, access to key parts, and fast response, is essential.

“What General Mills relies on is not simply our equipment manufacturers, but all suppliers, materials as well as our operations team, to come together and resolve issues as a unified group — there can’t be any finger pointing,” says Michael Ballard. “In terms of the equipment suppliers, we need proactive customer service.”

Introducing ProCustomer

Beginning in mid-2008, workgroups from each of Pro Mach’s 11 divisions were formed to identify the criteria they believed were most important in aftermarket service to customers — service standards geared to ensure peak productivity. The workgroup concept was patterned after other Pro Mach multi-division operational improvement initiatives aimed at achieving excellence for the company and for its customers through best practices in lean manufacturing, product development, product delivery, purchasing, and sales and marketing. One of the hallmarks of these efforts is the clear understanding throughout the organization that across the board adoption of best practices will be supported by all levels of management. There will be no lip service commitments, but instead actions and accountability.

The service workgroups classified three broad categories of aftermarket support activities that directly contribute to a customer's productivity. The first broad category involved response to a customer's request for service — Pro Mach's overall reaction from ease of being reached, to quick action after being contacted, to the overall quality of the response. The second broad category involved face-to-face interactions, which included effective knowledge transfer, ongoing service assessments, and training. The third category was how effectively service personnel anticipated customer needs, issues, and problems — how proactively Pro Mach employees spotted problems and issues before they occurred and consequently how well the company offered innovative solutions following consultation with customers.

Within the three categories, which came to be called Reactive, Interactive, and Proactive, the workgroups identified nearly 50 criteria that contribute to one or more of the categories. They then went through the list looking for:

- Points of commonality between divisions
- Must have service attributes versus nice to have

From this effort came a list of 13 attributes the groups believed were essential to world-class standards of service, were achievable by each division, and were measurable. These 13 became the foundation for a best practices program that Pro Mach calls ProCustomer. ProCustomer includes:

- **Reactive:**
 - Toll-free support line
 - On demand support – day or night
 - Same day shipping on in-stock parts ordered by 2:00 p.m.
 - Critical wear parts are in-stock

- Support personnel accessible during normal business hours for technical, engineering, or mechanical issues
- Customers receive details of issue and planned response within 24 hours
- Service techs always meet with in-plant point-of-contact on site to provide verbal summary and next steps
- Service techs provide a follow-up written report summary about visit and planned response
- **Interactive:**
 - Training on operating and maintaining equipment by PMMI Certified technicians are available for all end-users upon request
 - Training classes available for all end-users on demand
- **Proactive:**
 - Spare parts plans/kits are available to all customers upon request
 - Retrofit and upgrade programs available to enhance the customer's machines to current standards, when applicable
 - Educational white papers available on critical topics

Interestingly, the effort to achieve these standards across 11 divisions required an extraordinary dedication of time and resources because of the inherent variation between the divisions, not the level of service offered by each one. This drove home the point that service depends in large measure on the history and development of the particular company. There is no universal standard, no text book, or cheat sheet pointing the way to help customers achieve optimum productivity and profitability through aftermarket service and support. Following the development of criteria, the workgroups felt that a universal baseline of standards had been identified.

The workgroups also realized that to be effective ProCustomer activities had to be consultative and carried out in partnership with customers. One size would not fit all. Most importantly, ProCustomer had to be flexible with individual goals suited to the needs of each customer large or small. For example, some

customers may emphasize preventive maintenance, while others place a premium on PMMI certified training.

Furthermore, service personnel had to embrace the concept that the reputation of Pro Mach and its divisions depends not only on new products, but also on how those products perform for 5, 10, 15, even 30 years into the future. They had to believe how essential it was to help the customer keep the machines running at peak efficiency through maintenance, training, and retrofits, using new and innovative technology. The vital role field service plays called for new skills and greater awareness of Pro Mach's positive impact on the customer's operations, including productivity and greater flexibility.

The need for better service is echoed by General Mills Michael Ballard. He says, "We expect more aftermarket sales and service from the strategic and established suppliers, and we collaborate with them on developing the best service support model based on the equipment."

In mid-2009, Pro Mach implemented the ProCustomer program and publicly announced the initiative. Internally, the Pro Mach IT team created a company-wide dashboard, where service engagements are logged and tallied against the 13 criteria, and a discussion board. Audits will take place several times a year. Audit results will be fed back into the system for continuous improvement.

One of the outcomes of the aftermarket service standards effort is that Pro Mach has launched ProCustomer.com, a website dedicated to service and a place where the organization hopes to build a community of people, both inside

and outside Pro Mach, willing to share best practices across all industries. The website includes blog posts from each of the 11 divisions, responses from community members, industry news, white papers, and more. There will be new information added to ProCustomer.com on a nearly weekly basis.

ProCustomer in 2012 or 2015 will look much different than ProCustomer in 2009. The needs of customers for world-class productivity and highest overall equipment efficiency (OEE) will only become more stringent because of the changing demographics in North America, a shift due to the recession in consumer buying behavior, mandated carbon footprint reductions and water restrictions, and the tough competitive environment within the global economy. This will require the program to continually improve and broaden.

By starting now to address best practices and the development of measurable standards, Pro Mach, utilizing ProCustomer, will be able to deliver the level of service required of customers to maintain peak productivity. To stay current on developments, please bookmark ProCustomer.com and visit often. ProCustomer is the latest in a series of customer focused strategic initiatives Pro Mach is committed to making long-term investments in. These initiatives include operations excellence, product excellence, customer service excellence, and distribution excellence.

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Pro Mach is a leading provider of integrated packaging products and solutions for food, beverage, household goods, pharmaceutical, and other diverse consumer and industrial companies. Through three business units and related divisions, Pro Mach provides equipment, training, installation, and parts in primary packaging, end-of-line packaging, and identification and tracking.

Pro Mach's divisions include Allpax, Axon Styrotech, Fowler Products, Ossid and Roberts PolyPro in primary packaging; Brenton, Orion Packaging, Rennco and Wexxar/Bel in end-of-line packaging; and ID Technology and Labeling Systems (LSI) in identification and tracking.

Pro Mach has a diverse customer base, from Fortune 200 companies to smaller, privately-held businesses worldwide, which depend on reliable, flexible, technologically advanced packaging equipment and integrated solution sets. Pro Mach is headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio with manufacturing facilities and offices throughout the United States and Canada.

For more information about Pro Mach visit our website at www.ProMachInc.com.

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