Delivering the right mix of performance, lead time, quality and price, among other benefits, is a delicate balance for suppliers to the rotating-equipment industry.

Traditionally, customers have been required to trade one benefit in exchange for another; as an example, accepting longer lead times for Six Sigma quality.

In recent years, however, particularly in high-value process industries, end-users have demanded an increasing level of product performance, quality and responsiveness. That's not always an easy solution to provide—*especially with the world growing "smaller" and more competitive by the day.*

During the 2009 economic downturn, many companies in our industry worked through most, if not all, of their inventory. Entering 2010, the prevailing theme of cautious optimism dictates a conservative approach toward committing valuable cash to inventory, as many fear unstable or unfavorable market conditions. In order to remain flexible and service customer needs, there is increasing pressure throughout the supply chain to provide the right technology, increase responsiveness and reduce lead times. To be a viable participant in our industry and a valued supplier to our customers, we must find ways to respond to this pressure with the right structure and execution. Inpro/Seal Company, a recent acquisition of Waukesha Bearings, exemplifies this type of viable participant.

The culture and structure of Inpro/Seal have been built around the idea that customers should not choose between benefits or sacrifice one for another. The company's value proposition is rooted in providing customers with customized high-performing products and same-day shipments.

On the surface, it is clear how same-day shipment capability would benefit a process plant's reliability engineer. For an original equipment manufacturer (OEM) that has a planning function and a longer lead-time requirement, traditional views would indicate that a same-day shipment has less value. Today, though, more OEMs are pushing for reduced lead times in order to improve flexibility for their customers and reduce the need to keep a wide array of inventory on

hand. Customization and environment are among a number of application variables contributing to the need for last-minute specification changes that can influence product configuration. These challenges, combined with the goal of reducing inventory, are easier to meet with a supply chain that can deliver custom product in 24 hours.

So how do we do it? The three-legged stool! First, people make the difference. A corporate culture centered on customer service and a "yes we can" attitude is prevalent throughout the organization. Second, each and every process, from order entry to engineering and design, all the way through manufacturing operations, has been continuously refined to deliver quality and remove waste—*significant benefits to speed and responsiveness*. And finally, considerable benefits have been realized through the use of higher-technology tools, 3-D design tools, parametric modeling and high-performing multi-axis machine tools.

Unfortunately, the application of the three-legged stool is simpler to outline than implement. While the ingredients for doing this are often available—*or accessible*—to organizations, their combination into a strategy and successful execution is a different matter altogether. Regardless of where you are on the execution curve, one thing is certain: Higher demands from paying customers (and some non-paying!) are ever-increasing.
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