Written by Rick Carter, Executive Editor
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Of the many items maintenance professionals use in their work, those handled most often are likely in the category of MRO: **maintenance repair and overhaul.** While some define this category broadly— *roping in everything that is or could be used in industrial maintenance processes*— the commonly accepted view is that MRO refers to daily-use tools and consumables that constitute a **$400+ billion annual market in the U.S.** MRO items include hand and power tools, tool accessories, chemicals for cleaning and degreasing, remediation products and anything else likely to be used (and used up) regularly in the course of maintaining facilities and industrial equipment.*

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The consumable nature of MRO products puts a greater **emphasis on price and distribution** in this category than in others. While design advances are important, especially in the areas of eco-friendly cleaner formulations and ergonomic tools, they can be overshadowed by the cost of these high-turnover products and the tactics chosen for their reliable restocking. This has led makers of MRO products and industrial distributors to initiate various streamlining activities that make it as **easy as possible for MRO supplies to reach end-users.**

These **streamlined methods** include on-site vending machines, kanban resupply strategies and, importantly, partnerships that allow distributors to essentially assume the “buying” of MRO supplies for their customers by setting long-term prices via contract in exchange for add-on services. These services often include **automatic restocking**, a process by which the distributor restocks a customer’s storeroom or workstation when a shared electronic database indicates supplies are low.
**Partnerships work in the best interest of distributor and customer**
by leveraging service into the mix and removing the need for customers to continually renegotiate or search for the lowest price on goods that need regular replenishment. Many of the same advantages can be gained on a smaller scale through purchasing agreements that allow authorized users on the shop floor to access
**online catalogs**
and procure MRO supplies via the Internet as needed.

For their part, **makers of MRO products work hard to differentiate them** and dissuade users from viewing their offerings as interchangeable. One, for example, claims that its 1200-sku line of chemical cleaners, degreasers, corrosion inhibitors and sealants is the only one that features a Material Safety Data Sheet on the back of each product label. Its line also includes a wide selection of environmentally friendly products formulated without ozone-depleting chemicals, carcinogens or VOCs. Furthermore, this company has created its own
**partnership program that provides on-site help**
for manufacturers looking to create a comprehensive MRO-chemicals program tailored to their needs—
*all sensible moves in this highly competitive marketplace.*

***Rick Carter, Executive Editor***

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