Ken Bannister, Contributing Editor "ABC Corporation of Smalltown, USA, today announced a manufacturing sales order worth over $100 million…"

Such announcements are commonplace in today's business press, leaving little doubt that the sales and marketing department are still revered as corporate heroes when a large sales order is closed. Getting that order to the customer, however, as ordered, on time and with first-time quality requires the effort of many unsung heroes within the plant.

From the post-war 1950s to the 1980s, North American corporate philosophy surrounding the sales process often was "close the sale and we'll worry about design, quality and delivery later." Since many sales were closed in a wine-anddine forum, and in a somewhat indiscriminate consumer culture of the time that tended to be accepting of poor design, quality and delivery, countless corporations were successful in spite of themselves.

That all changed when the Japanese singlehandedly raised the bar, having been attributed largely with the responsibility for raising consumer awareness and expectations surrounding quality and service throughout the 1970s and 1980s. This state of affairs finally forced the North American industrial giants into compete mode by the 1990s. New heightened consumer awareness resulted in an intelligent customer who was unafraid to demand quality products at reasonable prices, delivered on time. Competing in this new world order forced many corporations to rethink their sales strategies.

A renewed sales approach

To be considered a viable contender in today's marketplace, a corporation must attain quality assurance certification. Many customers demand ISO 9000 or TS 16949 certification (quality

assurance through audited documentation and procedural control to a defined international standard) as a contract bidding prerequisite.

With ISO/QS 9000 certification, the customer is assured that a qualified maintenance program is in effect and also that manufacturing equipment is being maintained to a specified level of reliability. Through this link, the maintenance department is now established integrally with the sales department.

Building on this newly established integration, the modern-day sales approach utilizes a corporate team effort to put together a winning sales proposal. This sales process calls for the salesperson to listen and document the customer's requirements exactly, so that these requirements can then be reviewed by a multi-faceted manufacturing and sales team comprising members of the finance, engineering, production, purchasing and maintenance departments. Because many sales contracts contain penalty clauses for poor quality and poor delivery, the sales team must ensure corporate capability to attain and maintain a sustained level of production throughput for the duration of the sales contract. This only can be assured by the maintenance department.

Further links between maintenance and the sales force recently have been established through the implementation of Lean Manufacturing initiatives, in which the sales department is no longer called upon to fire-sell surplus "made for inventory" product. Instead, sales is made intimately aware of current long-term/short-term surplus manufacturing equipment capability that can be tapped into and sold competitively with high profit margins and low manufacturing cost in a pull manufacturing environment.

Maintenance facilitating the sales process
Although maintenance rarely involves itself in the sales process, it can assist in the sales effort through the provision of reliable equipment performance information, such as:

Throughput capability report—Covering the manufacturing equipment or line intended to produce the new parts, this is essential information in determining the ability to deliver the requested product volumes. Through the process of analyzing the specified equipment maintenance history, a detailed downtime record is used to compare against the machine's design throughput figure, so that a true throughput measure can be predicted. If throughput requirement is more than capability for the plant in question, alternate manufacturing requirements will be needed to provide quality and delivery.

Maintenance cost report—Once again, knowing what equipment will be used to manufacture the product helps the maintenance department establish past maintenance costs for the equipment in question. These cost figures are then averaged out and a projected maintenance cost can be established for the proposed production contract term. Such projections allow the sales department to accurately calculate operation and manufacturing costs. In turn, controlled costs allow corporations to lower profit margins and be more competitive.

Maintenance health reports—Standard maintenance health reports, such as Availability, Reliability, PM completion, Overall Equipment Effectiveness, etc., are all excellent reports for the sales department to have in its possession. Providing these reports are favorable; they can be used within a sales presentation to bolster confidence in the corporation's ability to deliver the required goods and services being bid on to potential and actual customers.

In the course of the sales process, maintenance also may be called upon to directly interface with potential customers and provide them with a tour of the maintenance facilities, as well as present an overview of the maintenance process.

The benefits

Establishing a partnership with the sales department allows the maintenance department to once again be recognized as an entity within the corporation. Being aware of pending contracts lets maintenance better plan any equipment maintenance and overhaul requirement so as to be ready for the production contract in the event the sales department is successful. Involvement in the front end of the sales process also allows maintenance to keep in check the possibility of ‘overselling' the plant design capacity. Inattention to this element can accelerate maintenance demands quickly, increasing equipment downtime and, ultimately, leading to corporate losses.

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