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# MPO

MEDICAL PRODUCT OUTSOURCING

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## Avoiding Finger Pointing in Manufacturing Relationships

A strong business relationship thrives on open communication. For the relationship between a supplier and a medical device customer to have a chance at long-term success, the supplier must communicate openly and honestly with the device manufacturer from the moment they hand over the proverbial napkin sketch. A direct, person-to-person approach establishes a foundation of trust and sets the tone that makes an ongoing partnership possible. It also lays the groundwork for navigating the inevitable changes that occur when accelerating medical device development. Ultimately, the measure of this approach's effectiveness will show up where it counts—on both partners' bottom lines.

How does a supplier foster this type of relationship? Since the design and development stage can take from three to six months, how a supplier interacts with the OEM during that time can make or break the deal. Obviously, it's not always as simple as it sounds.

From the supplier's standpoint, successful commercial relations start on the inside. In other words, a good intra-company relationship between the sales, design, regulatory affairs/quality assurance (RA/QA) and manufacturing teams is essential. All departments need to be well-integrated to become an extension of the customer's business and reflect the level of communication the client requires. It is exhausting and ineffective if the business development department has to "sell" the customer and then return to headquarters and have to do the same with its own design, RA/QA, and manufacturing teams. Collaborative internal communications help because it allows the supplier to quickly adjust to the customer's requirements.

Continual, open and personal contact is a key element to starting out on the right path toward a long-term commitment with a customer. Great lines of communication are the fountain from which everything else flows.

There are a number of ways to avoid what some might call "finger pointing" in any relationship.

The following are some key tips to avoid some common partnership pitfalls.

### Tip One

Upon first meeting a potential new customer, encourage face-to-face meetings as early as possible. Human connection is the best way to develop a meaningful relationship and establish rapport. Of course, face-to-face meetings are not always possible; if there's a choice between using the telephone and sending an e-mail, always use the phone. Even if the supplier is working on a new project with an existing customer, it's important to maintain their desired level of communication. This approach leaves no ideas unexpressed and no unresolved expectations on either side.

### Tip Two

Understand each customer's working expectations. For example, one client may expect a call back in two hours, another in eight and another within two business days. Make sure the sales and product management teams check with customers on a continual basis to determine that expectations haven't changed. If there is a tendency to pull in an order, for instance, the supplier may anticipate accelerated delivery times or create a system to ensure that their lead times are flexible and can meet the customer's new deadline. Constantly calibrating customer needs ensures that their expectations continue to be met.

### Tip Three

Offer a single point of contact. This allows the customer to simplify the process and be as involved as it chooses about the desired information. Once good communication is established, be a champion to the customer. Some clients are highly structured and prefer regular weekly meetings with minutes dis-

tributed after the meeting. If the supplier is not perceptive and does not adapt, the customer loses confidence in its abilities. Other clients may have a looser approach. Learn to read a client's corporate culture in order to work as a part of their organization.

### Tip Four

Make sure that all product specifications are clear and quantifiable and that all parties have signed off on them. This practice ensures that everyone is in agreement about how the device will operate.

### Tip Five

Use a product specification worksheet or some kind of form to collect data. Start simply. Continue to gather as much information as possible as the project develops. It's easy to fall into a trap of not clearly defining the project at the beginning. But it's incredibly expensive if it's defined too late in the process. Inquire about projected

annual volume, price targets and performance characteristics to ensure that appropriate design and production methods are being considered.

### Tip Six

Make an effort to fully understand the scope and business context of the project. This often is best achieved by having the sales team bring project engineers with them to the initial customer meeting. This helps all parties understand the scope from the onset of the project.

### Tip Seven

Establish trust and respect by encouraging transparent communications that foster an atmosphere in which people are comfortable having conversations where the parties get to know and understand each other.

### Tip Eight

Encourage open conversations around the

table. Invite a cross-section of departments to the meeting—RA/QA, executives, engineers and sales. This approach puts the customer at ease and establishes a foundation for open communication down the line.

Using these tips can establish a solid foundation for open and honest communication and help foster a healthy, ongoing relationship with a medical device customer. As the basis for a person-to-person approach to customer relations, it gives both suppliers and customers the opportunity to thrive in an industry that requires flexibility, innovation, and manufacturing might in order to be successful. ♦

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Jim McKenney