

### For Suppliers And Distributors: Michael Woody, Quill Company, Responds To Jerry Speen



Michael Woody

## I Have Met The Enemy And The Enemy Is Us!

by Michael Woody

As a supplier, I agree that Mr. Speen's scenario ("Frontline" column of October *Counselor*) takes place all too often in our industry. However, by bashing customer service representatives, Mr. Speen is criminalizing the victims. Actually, it is top management at supplier firms that have created, promulgated and continue to encourage this situation. The fact is, we have trained distributors to "climb the organizational ladder." How? By placing poorly trained customer service representatives on the front lines of our businesses, alienating them from the production department and giving them little or no power to make informed decisions. Then, when they give customers the "wrong" answer, we countermand their decisions, undermining the customer's respect for them and destroying morale.

Mr. Speen provides an excellent example when he writes that "sometimes, people at the working level are unaware of these relationships." Why would a customer service representative who spends more time talking to a customer than anyone in a supplier organization *not* know if the sales department is targeting an account? If there is a reason that management might want to accommodate a difficult request, why would management *not* disclose that information to front line employees? If top managers are more tuned in to the concept that good customer service builds customer loyalty, then shame on top managers for not communicating that concept throughout the organization. Can we blame the customer service representatives for any of these shortcomings?

Production managers are another innocent victim in this scenario. Given little or no training in our industry, or in the competitive environment, pitted at odds with the customer service representatives who sometimes actually become their adversary, they are asked to make production decisions blindly. Mr. Speen is correct when he writes that top management "has a way of adjusting production schedules

that the production manager hasn't discovered." Top management simply dictates that the job must be done, demoralizing the production manager and deepening the rift with customer service.

What is the solution?

1) **Training** – Train your production managers and customer service staff, not just in the rudiments of their jobs, but in our industry. As a start, make certain they understand the promotional products distribution system, the network of shows, the event-related nature of most of our orders. Let them meet with distributors when they visit, and network with their counterparts in other local firms both within and outside our industry.

2) **Teaming** – Team your customer service and production departments. An open, honest and constructive relationship between these two departments will do more for customer satisfaction than a host of seminars on the subject. Ask them to jointly devise a method for dealing with orders that require shorter-than-normal lead times, that allows the customer service staff to say "yes" to the customer as often as possible. Whether it be through the daily communication of units scheduled to ship, or simply a board in the customer service department filled out by the production manager each day, that spells out opportunities for product that can be shipped on a short lead time, the method must be created by the team to ensure the support of the team. Above all, it must be flexible and give customer service representatives reasonable options for the customer's benefit.

3) **Communicating** – Communicate sales strategies. Ensure that your customer service representatives are briefed at least weekly on the short- and long-term focus of the sales department. If the company is focusing on a particular region or type of customer, they should be the first to know about it. If any promotions are planned, they should be involved from the beginning.

4) **Empowering** – Empowerment is

more than just permission to make a decision; it also requires the knowledge to make the proper decision. When the front line staff has been trained in our industry, has teamed with the production department and is aware of sales strategies, give them the permission to make decisions on short-ship lead times within the production department's necessary parameters. Under these conditions, a customer service representative will relish the opportunity to say "yes" to the customer.

5) **Supporting** – Support the decision every time. After all of the above has been accomplished, top management must support the answer given to the customer *in all cases*. Without that support, suppliers will continue to subtly tell the distributor that the staff is ill-informed, ineffective and incapable of giving an honest answer. As Mr. Speen points out, the supplier must in some instances say "no" to the customer. In those instances, top management must back up that occasional "no" answer. Providing a viable option is an acceptable alternative, even though the informed and empowered customer service representative has already done so, but the initial decision should not be countermanded.

If all of the above is implemented, the customer will receive the best answer, the first time, every time. No more "climbing the organizational ladder" wasting precious time that should be directed toward solving the problem. It only requires that supplier top management treat their internal customers with the same degree of respect as their external customers.

*Michael Woody is vice president of sales and marketing for The Quill Company Inc.*