

QUALITY

Our Most Important Challenge

by Bob Bloom • INK & TONER USA

If you don't like the food at one restaurant, you probably won't go back, but it will not stop you from eating out. If you are disappointed by the quality of your car, your next one will likely come from a different automobile company. And if you are dissatisfied with a printer that you purchased, you'll likely buy a different brand next time. But if a consumer, business or individual, is dissatisfied with the quality of a remanufactured ink or toner cartridge, they may never buy another — from anyone.

Quality, or the lack of it, whether real or perceived, is the Achilles' heel of our industry. It is the most important issue that we face every day. We all know that a customer's one bad experience may be the last time they

buy an aftermarket product. And worse, the fear of having a bad product and the harm that it "might" do to their equipment is often on their minds.

We've seen that the quality of products offered in our industry ranges from outstanding to poor. There are great companies whose focus on quality is real, and there are those to whom quality is primarily a necessary marketing term. While some deliver consistently high-quality products, others fall short.

Even "drill and fill" still exists. A few years ago, we had one local individual who has been rebuilding cartridges for years offer to remanufacture them for us. When I inquired as to how we would coordinate the logistics — would we ship empty

cartridges to him or would he pick them up — he said that none of that was necessary and that he would "remanufacture" them in the back of our store. All he needed, he said, was a trash can, and that he would just open the cartridge, dump the waste toner, refill it, and be done.

One retail store located near us outsourced its ink remanufacturing. They sent empties to a remanufacturer, who filled what they could and returned the ones that would not work properly. The retailer then sent the defective batch to another remanufacturer to "try again." The result was that the quality of the products they sold was poor. Fortunately for our industry — and not surprisingly — this store is no longer in business. But unfortunately, we know that

some of those unhappy customers will never try again.

When some of the big box office stores and drugstore chains announced that they were going to start offering ink cartridge refilling services, the question that I constantly heard was “Are you concerned about the competition hurting your business?” My response surprised almost everyone who asked. I welcomed the publicity and credibility that established businesses with well-known names would lend to the ink cartridge refilling business. Clearly, many people who would have never considered having a cartridge filled would now likely try it.

However, I always added that while I was not concerned about the competition, I feared that the quality of the product delivered by these stores would disappoint customers — and I was extremely concerned that their initial experience, if a bad one, would cause them to never have a cartridge refilled again. Unfortunately, my fears were well-founded.

Perceived quality is just as difficult a problem. There is a general distrust of aftermarket products among some people, and this is propagated by comments from a variety of sources, including OEM tech support groups, authorized printer repair centers, and much more. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard “They told me never to use those products,” where “they” is a neighbor or friend. Then there are those who purchased a refill kit, tried it once, made a mess, and now proclaim “I tried refilling cartridges; it doesn’t work.”

Prior to entering the ink and toner business, I spent quite a few years in the computer software industry.

When our customers had a problem, their first reaction was to blame the software, not the machine (computer). In the ink and toner business, when customers have a problem, they immediately blame the cartridge, not the machine (printer).

We have a rather good customer who called me recently to pick up two defective cartridges and a defective drum for a color laser printer. They were getting bad prints, but instead of calling us, they called the OEM. A technician came out to look at the machine, and immediately told them that the problem was caused by using our remanufactured toners. He replaced a broken mechanism inside the printer and sold them OEM toners and drum. We’ve seen the same failure in this machine model multiple times, and it has nothing to do with cartridges — remanufactured or OEM. We took the cartridges and drum back and tested them in an old printer that we had. They worked perfectly.

And, of course, the technician told my customer that by not using OEM cartridges, the warranty on their machine had been voided. Even though this practice violates many U.S. laws, it is something that all of us have heard and have to combat on a regular basis.

Superior quality is our most important focus when it comes to the products that we provide — whether they are ink refills that we do right in our store or remanufactured or compatible ink and toner cartridges that we outsource. Very simply, consumers expect products to work. When products disappoint, they affect the buyer’s business or personal work. We continually strive to improve our quality, and we know

that we’ve lost customers because of defective products.

So how do you deliver quality? We believe that it’s in your processes. What level of quality do you demand of yourself? Do you have documented processes? How carefully does everyone follow them? What constitutes a cartridge that passes or fails your quality testing? Are you continually pushing hard to improve your quality?

ISO 9001 certification is highly promoted by those who have invested — and it is a big investment — to go through the process of becoming certified. While many ISO 9001 companies produce excellent products, having that certification does not guarantee quality. ISO certification assures that the manufacturing and quality processes are documented and consistently practiced, but there are ISO certified companies in all industries that produce consistently deficient products.

Quality is the most significant issue that our industry faces on a daily basis. Delivering quality is the responsibility of everyone — components providers, remanufacturers, distributors, dealers, and retailers. The quality of products that each of us sells affects not only the success of our own companies, but it also impacts the short and long-term growth of our entire industry. **R**

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