

An Allied Approach

The more I hear about new products and technology designed to give contractors an advantage on the job-site, the more I wonder about what contractors really need. GPS, machine control and guidance systems, virtual reference stations and design-related software certainly have their place, but they all must be backed by cooperation from the technology providers and qualified service bureaus to be worth the investment. Good platforms and systems should have a long support life with minimal service updates. Therefore, it is vital that contractors establish a relationship with a reputable supporting dealer that has the necessary tools and resources to transmit the best possible solution from the manufacturer to the end user.

For successful implementation of new tools, contractors must understand their job and product needs, and then seek a dependable vendor who can meet their technology and service requirements. Perhaps just as important is the vital cooperation needed between the vendor and the user.

What Contractors Need to Know

When evaluating the purchase of new technology, contractors should carefully weigh their sources. In this global economy, personal service and attention is rapidly disappearing, but it can still be found in the right locations. Dependable dealers will treat their customers the way they deserve to be treated—with honesty, dignity and respect—and provide them with the appropriate tools they need to succeed.

Being open-minded about technology isn't limited only to embracing new products.

Contractors should also be open-minded when researching dealers. A certain dealer may not have the specific brand gizmo a contractor desires but may offer superior support on another brand. As contractors determine what they need, they may find many dealers who offer site preparation equipment that is very similar and/or competitive in their area. A contractor's freedom to select products is important, of course, but the decision to purchase equipment should not be made without regard to the credibility of the dealer who will provide it.

Contractors should ask their prospective dealers the following questions: Is the business properly staffed? Does it have a way to get parts, and provide service or support outside normal business hours? Does it answer questions appropriately and in time?

From my experience, the saving grace for those in the support business is the cooperation between manufacturers and their dealers/distribution networks. Many manufacturers offer classes for their dealers on a weekly basis at training facilities and through Internet seminars; contractors should be sure to ask their local dealers if their employees are up-to-date on new product offerings and how often they receive new training. End users can protect themselves by ensuring that technicians and support personnel receive frequent training.

Even after asking all these questions and choosing the dealer that best meets their needs, contractors still need to have a backup plan in case they have problems getting parts or services. Many companies that buy their products and goods from out-of-state or out-of-country dealers/distributors can prevent a halt to their operations by having backup gear in case something goes down. This may seem like an expensive way to operate,



by **Todd Newsom**

but the initial upfront cost for the second set of products will pay for itself many times over if it eliminates unexpected downtime that can cost thousands of dollars per hour.

Building Relationships of Trust
One of the greatest problems faced by many dealers and contractors is their mutual lack of trust.

Contractors are often leery of the internal workings of a dealer, which are complex to say the least, considering employee turnover, changing franchise territories and evolving manufacturers. Despite the clutter and chaos the contractor may see at the dealer level, any communication he can maintain is invaluable to making informed decisions regarding site preparation technologies. Clear, consistent communication will hopefully transcend the chaos and allow the dealer to better inform the contractor about pertinent issues, and about present and future technologies. Communication is the key to maintaining trust between dealers and contractors so that they can learn to partner with each other.

Contractors

To facilitate communication, contractors looking to buy any type of site preparation product must first do their research. This includes the study of the specifications of the item(s) considered for purchase prior to talking with a salesperson. At the very least, contractors will be able to see if their sales representatives know their own products. This approach will also shorten the time required to get the best solution for the contractor's needs. A good salesperson will welcome any previous studying a potential or current customer does because it will make her job easier in explaining and later training the contractor in the use of that item.

For instance, if a contractor knows he needs a new total station, he must ask what kind of data collection software will run with it. Will the new total station run with the software he's currently running? And rather than trusting a simple "yes" from the salesperson, the contractor should be challenging and ask if anyone else has had success running the software in the same circumstance.

Know Your Source



Contractors should carefully consider Internet purchases of electronic gadgets that require calibration. There is no need to be concerned about Internet purchases for commodities like sledgehammers, machetes and plumb bobs (that do not require calibration). But tools such as laser levels, optical theodolites, surveying total stations, etc.—where calibration can make or break an instrument's use—should be sourced locally if possible from a valued source. Such tools and software are not "commodities"! Local dealers/distributors are easily frustrated when contractors buy such products from obscure sources, and then hope the local dealers can make them work. That logic, however attractive it may be in terms of upfront cost, cannot make up the difference for the personal guidance and representation provided by an authorized dealer/distributor. With the known source of an authorized dealer, difficult support issues will most often be covered under legitimate warranty service providers and support networks. Cadillac dealers service Cadillacs... you get what you pay for.

Contractors should also remember to ask their salespeople (and service personnel if possible) the details of warranties, ensuring that nothing is misunderstood. After the sale, the contractor should make sure the salesperson knows how best to reach her client when he's in the area. And the contractor should let the salesperson know he wants to continue communication with her. This regular connection will ensure that any service/training issues can be readily and effectively remedied.

Dealers

On the other side of the coin, dealers need to do their best to help contractors make technology decisions. Dealers have to like what they offer and believe in it, and be willing to give a list of successful instances of their customers who have overcome difficulties by using products they have sold. Dealers should be prepared to compare and contrast their products and services with what the competition offers, and be informed about the latest tools and techniques on the horizon and how they will affect the present offerings. And most of all, dealers should know their products inside and out.

In addition, dealers must sell service. Long-term service contracts are the easiest things to sell but the hardest to fulfill. Dealers will fare well to explain preventative maintenance, scheduled calibrations, firmware updates/downloads, technology level upgrades, etc. Processes should be demon-

Advice for contractors and dealers on improving their relationships.

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strated on a unit in for service so that the contractor knows exactly what will happen should he need something serviced in the future.

Dealers should also consider periodically holding classes or roundtable discussion groups to discuss subjects like RTK surveying and machine control, OSHA certification and heavy equipment operation. These events help contractors interact with each other and with their dealers. And a free lunch in a comfortable room can go a long way with people who have been working outside all day in the heat or cold.

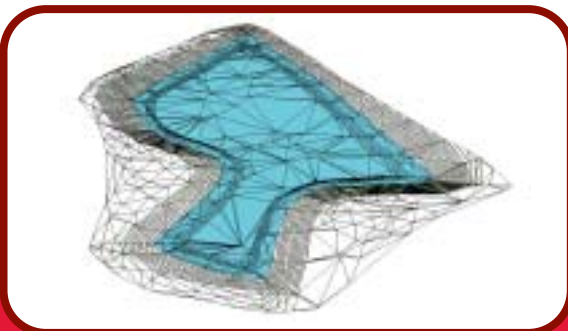
Working Together

Contractors and dealers both need to recognize that improving their communication and business relationships will help everyone in the industry succeed. Each side should consider what they can do to build their level of trust with the other. Just as contractors join forces with common partners on the

While contractors need to do their research before attempting to purchase new equipment, dealers should be willing to give a list of successful instances of their customers who have overcome difficulties by using products they have sold.

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Dealers as One-Stop Shops

jobsite, they must also forge bonds with their dealer(s).

The construction industry is habit-oriented, and the existing habits of dealers and contractors can be hard to change. However, as technology and methods change, the habits of operating need to change as well. From a business perspective, being content with the same old ways of doing things can mean certain death as the competition is changing to meet and exceed what is necessary to get the job done. Skepticism, resistance to change and the fear of failure can be offset by the dynamic results achieved when advances are made between dealers and contractors. In the end, learning to cooperate is the key to long-term success of both dealer and contractor. **SP**

Todd Newsom has been a multi-trade technician for more than 20 years. He has been involved in industrial maintenance, construction instrument service, machine control systems installation and personnel training. He is currently the technical manager for Moba Corporation in Fayetteville, Georgia.

As more dealers become "one-stop shops" for every area of site preparation, smart contractors will fare well to question their feasibility. With the continued growth and complexity in the technology arena, many dealers find it hard to keep up with everything a manufacturer expects of them. Dealers need to honestly analyze whether they can do one thing successfully while being mediocre in many things, or do well on all levels. Some dealers who represent multiple manufacturers seem to lose their identities and become a "jack of all trades but master of none." However, numerous customers prefer the multi-manufacturer approach; they see the dealers as not being biased toward any particular manufacturer. And several national dealers have reputable service centers; they have found a niche to serve those in remote locations who welcome a "one-stop shop" because franchised dealers don't exist in their area.

As technical as the products in this industry become, some dealers believe they should obtain a deeper grasp on the most technical, complex workings of a specific line of products rather than invest in multiple manufacturers. They believe they become a better service center for that product line when they are dedicated to one manufacturer and/or partnership. This differs by geographical location. The economic influences of a geographical area, such as agriculture, urban development, etc., often drive what sells and therefore what is available to contractors. In those instances, the contractor in need of something not available locally should research his best sources for his needs. There is no substitute for thorough research and product knowledge.

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