

Today's Service Department, Part Two

Why It's Needed and What It Needs

by John Purswell

Part one of this article highlighted some of the challenges facing distributor service departments. In this part, we will look at some aspects of running a good service department. The most obvious requirement is personnel with technical skills to properly and safely repair the equipment. Another necessity is an adequate parts inventory to meet the needs of your customers. And if a service department is going to be around for the long term, business skills to make it profitable are essential.

Why a Service Department is Needed

Why should a distributor even bother with a service department? They take an enormous investment in time, money, and training, and require the arbitration skills of Solomon. I could answer by telling you I once read an article that quoted a manufacturer who was addressing a group of distributors. The message was blunt and to the point about justifying your place in the food chain. If manufacturers did not need local service, distributors would disappear! Therefore, I urge each of you to support manufacturers who support you as distributors.

The service department is responsible for checking out equipment before delivery, making adjustments that are required due to local conditions, performing warranty functions, and offering quality repairs on aging, abused, neglected, and worn out machines and components.

Equipment Prep—We may receive one out of four pieces of equipment in a condition ready to operate properly right out of the box. Manufacturers are to be commended because that ratio is down from a few years ago—about 30-to-1. Pressure washers, automatic parts washers, and water reclaim equipment are now being better engineered, quality is more closely controlled, and factory checkout is better than at any time in the 33 years I have been in this business. However, there are still a few slip-ups here and there.

Oil burners are particularly sensitive to altitude and local fuel. The farther south you travel, the heavier the fuel oil becomes. There are no signs, and you do not request

anything different when you purchase fuel, but the warmer climate allows the oil companies to supply a heavier fuel. I won't go further on this except to say that a machine with an oil burner must be adjusted differently in Texas, Colorado, California, and New England. A machine that works fine in Ohio will soot the coils in Texas within a few weeks if not adjusted properly.

Proper test equipment and training are required to correctly adjust the burner. It cannot be done correctly and consistently without a combustion analyzer. The unskilled and poorly equipped may get it to burn and even get hot, but it may either suffer impingement (unburned fuel left in the burner chamber, with resulting smoking) or sooting (carbon deposits on the coils that eventually restrict airflow, requiring disassembly and soot removal).

This article is not about how to properly adjust a burner; the intent is to point out a few of the things a properly trained and qualified service department does before the customer ever receives the equipment.

Warranty Service—Warranty repairs are another task most service departments handle. The best equipment will have an occasional defect in materials or workmanship. Of course, the replacement of parts due to defects in materials or workmanship is just part of the job and is to be expected of anything made by man. Other warranty claims that a distributor's service department sees routinely may result from a misapplied piece of equipment, a machine that has been abused or neglected, and sometimes, outright fraud.

As distributors, we may get caught between a customer who wants warranty that is not due and the manufacturer we represent. Yes, we have an obligation to our customer, but we must jealously guard the trust our manufacturer has placed in us. In this case, you must decide—it's an integrity issue either you have it or you don't. It is our policy that we will not lie to the customer or for them. When the problem is not a defect in materials or workmanship, and the customer insists that we talk to the manufacturer, we tell the manufacturer's warranty department exactly what we see and let them decide if they feel benevolence is in order. In most cases, the manufacturer will willingly go the extra mile to demonstrate goodwill to an end user, but we let them make that decision.

Why talk about all of that in an article about your service department? It's where the buck stops in most warranty issues. The sales department says, "Give them a new machine once a quarter to keep them happy, if that is what it takes—as long as you don't deduct it from my commission."

What a Service Department Needs

Training—Repairing equipment is at the heart of a service department. Any distributor who is surviving in today's business environment has a full line of equipment. In most cases, that means training your technicians on the inner workings of at least a hundred models of pressure washers and, in some cases, several times that. Many distributors also carry a line of automatic parts washers, or wash water reclaim equipment, or waste oil heaters, or air compressors, or floor care equipment. Very few distribute only pressure washers. If you combine the power and heat choices (voltage, engine type, LP, natural gas, or fuel oil) with the peripheral lines of equipment, the amount

of variations can get mind boggling. Then throw options (auto start-stop, time delay stop, thermal shut down, and remote control stations) into the mix, and the number of products that you must train your technicians to repair keeps climbing. That is an ongoing challenge all distributors face.

To sum up, a good repair technician in today's business world needs to be an electrician, a pump technician, have a good understanding of hydraulics, be a small engine mechanic, and have at least a limited understanding of control instruments. Add to that a good driving record, and a good dose of diplomacy and sales ability.

A well-trained service department with an adequate parts inventory and appropriate test equipment benefits both distributor and customer.

Parts—Another essential aspect of your service department is that you must keep parts for each machine. A question we frequently hear is, "Don't you carry all the parts needed to repair the machine you sold me on the service truck?" Whatever your financial and managerial capabilities, there are physical limits to the size truck one can drive. Even if you are willing to only hire repair technicians who carry a commercial driver's license and are air brake certified, these days of high fuel prices have many rethinking the wisdom of a rolling warehouse.

Our policy is that we try to only keep in stock parts that turn every 90 days or less. Then we carry what we can on our service trucks. If we are making a service call that is more than 30 miles one way, we may pull some extra parts for the specific model of equipment the customer owns. If we don't use them, they are returned to stock once we return.

It is not only a practical impossibility to carry parts for every single situation, it is just plain bad business to try. We tell the customer that if the machine is critical to their operations, they should stock extra parts that are not common. Any other policy will tie up your working capital in orphaned and outdated parts when the machine is scrapped.

A well-trained service department with an adequate parts inventory and appropriate test equipment benefits both distributor and customer. Train your staff to sell your service department!

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