

Supply Chain

Managing Your Blade Manufacturer Relationship

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How Forging the Right Alliance Can Help Improve Your Shop's Metal Cutting Performance

Effectively managing the relationship with your blade manufacturer is not only critical for improving sawing efficiency, it also can contribute to the overall success of your industrial metal-cutting business. This is especially essential in today's competitive landscape, where customer demands for higher quality and faster service are making it more difficult for high-production metal-cutting organizations to keep up.

Operations managers increasingly find that to be successful they must establish a collaborative vendor relationship that moves far beyond the sale of a product. By leveraging all of the assets their vendors can bring to the table, companies form strategic partnerships that not only help fulfill their customer demands, but that also help optimize other aspects of the business such as cost management and employee training.

After closely examining successful alliances between industrial metal-cutting shops and their blade suppliers, the LENOX Institute of Technology (LIT) offers the following six tips for operations managers who want to get the most out of their vendor relationships. From specialized expertise to hands-on assistance, best-in-class blade manufacturers should offer a lot more than a high-performance blade. Here's how to make sure that happens.

TIP #1: SCHEDULE AN ON-SITE VISIT

Any successful and healthy business relationship grows out of trust and credibility, which can take root only after a blade manufacturer spends significant time proving their value to you up front. In other words, expect your prospective supplier to assume a "partner" role from day one by focusing more on service than on the sale of the product.

To facilitate this relationship, start by asking your prospective supplier to perform an on-site needs assessment. This gives you the opportunity to discuss your business goals in person, as well as providing the vendor with a full overview of your application. To get the most value out of the visit, make sure the following are included in the assessment:

- **Have the blade manufacturer inspect your saw equipment, as well as inventory the material(s) you cut.** Ideally, the company representative should conduct a complimentary, multipoint inspection and tune-up of your saws while working with you on the shop floor. The company representative should be able to demonstrate step-by-step how to run the blade, review any maintenance procedures, and explain sawing parameters.
- **Ask the manufacturer for new approaches to improving ongoing performance and achieving decreased cost per cut.** If the vendor suggests that you try a new blade or change your sawing parameters, request a formal test and a detailed report that includes cost-savings data. You might also want to consider testing the waters by agreeing to a pilot or trial run of any new blades. The understanding is that your shop will get a full refund if the manufacturer fails to show results of performance gains and productivity improvements. This is a good way for managers to quickly determine the value of a new blade and whether or not it will offer a good return on investment.

TIP #2: DO YOUR HOMEWORK TO CONFIRM SUPPLIER CLAIMS

While many companies often promise unmatched service and technical support, there are certain infrastructure elements that allow a blade supplier to actually deliver on its promises. The key is to look for companies that provide resource allocation metrics that support their claims. Here are a few questions managers should ask when looking for best-in-class suppliers:

- **Do they have adequate field coverage?** Choose a blade partner with a sizeable sales force and distributor network that has adequate regional coverage. This ensures that representatives will be available to visit you regularly and nurture a close, face-to-face customer service relationship. It also confirms your supplier's ability to deliver blades to you in a timely manner.
- **Do they have an in-house technical support team?** High-touch customer service requires both in-person and remote support. Select a supplier with a well-staffed phone support team that can answer immediate questions. For instance, if you need help with a new cutting job or you are experiencing technical issues of any kind, on-the-spot trouble shooting assistance can play a critical role in maintaining productivity.
- **What is the tenure and continuity of their support team?** Make sure your blade partner's team has substantial tenure. It says a lot about a company's knowledge base and business practices when team members have an average of at least 10-15 years of service. High turnover, on the other hand, will negatively affect the continuity and quality of support you will get from any supplier.
- **Do they understand your business challenges?** In addition to product claims, be sure to evaluate your supplier's knowledge of metals processing. Blade suppliers should have solid experience in metal-cutting and how metals are machined so that they can offer best practice strategies to support all of your metal-cutting needs. Whether you are using a high-performance circular saw blade or a versatile band saw blade, a strong supply partner should be able to help you optimize your blades, equipment, and processes to improve productivity and lower total operating costs.

TIP #3: INCLUDE TRAINING IN YOUR PURCHASE AGREEMENT

A blade supplier should also be willing to provide some level of value-add training as part of the purchase agreement. While this should be customized to each company's particular needs and application, most training programs should cover the following:

- **Blade Choice & Sawing Parameters:** Have your partner teach you what blades to use for each particular application, as well as demonstrate sawing parameters and ways to maximize your blade life. This can be especially helpful if you need to get newer or less-experienced operators up to speed.
- **Preventative Maintenance:** Your blade manufacturer should also be able to assist in developing some form of preventative maintenance program for operators to follow. By following a short list of maintenance checkpoints before cutting, operators can ensure that machines are running at optimal levels and proactively identify mechanical issues that could affect quality.

TIP #4: EXPECT THOUGHT LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING TOOLS

Industry-leading blade partners should be able to support your business by providing informational and educational materials, as well as practical tools and services. You can and should rely on your blade manufacturer to be an industry thought leader that provides a steady stream of valuable industry trends data, operational strategies, and technical product information. This could include some of the following resources:

- **e-Technical Center:** The ideal blade partner should have an extensive, web-based technical center with reference guides and data sheets.
- **e-Learning Modules:** To supplement on-site training, some blade manufacturers provide free e-learning modules covering a wide variety of topics, from saw blade basics to machine basics. These virtual libraries of information can help both operators and shop managers gain a better understanding

of sawing and the benefits of different types of blades. This can increase your operation's knowledge base as well as your performance capabilities.

- **Industry Research and Trends:** Leading edge supply partners should also be closely following industry trends and sharing that information with you as a value-added service. This may include white papers, research studies, newsletters, or blog posts.

TIP #5: CHOOSE A PARTNER THAT PERFORMS MACHINE SERVICE AND REPAIR

Machine downtime can cause a major strain on productivity, service rates, and cost. Often, scheduling "immediate" service from a machine manufacturer can still take days or weeks and is expensive as typical costs include transportation, lodging, regular labor rate (including while in transit) for the technician, and any machine parts.

Having a blade partner that intimately understands your metal-cutting equipment and has a vested interest in the continuous operations of the cutting operation can save business. This value-added service from a blade partner not only ensures that your machine is up and running quickly, but it bakes in another opportunity to analyze the blade performance and cutting efficiency. This type of service is especially beneficial for companies that do not have an internal maintenance department, and it also provides an additional layer of support for companies with existing maintenance personnel. Here are some key factors to keep in mind when evaluating a blade vendor for service:

- **Make sure your blade partner has a dedicated service team** in order to ensure a timely service call. A good service technician will be on call even during non-business hours for emergency situations.
- **Ensure that service technicians have the skill and experience** needed to effectively troubleshoot the cause of machine breakdown and recommend next steps. If parts are on hand, service technicians should be able to perform most repairs on a machine.

TIP #6: HAVE YOUR PARTNER HELP YOU MEASURE PERFORMANCE

Most managers have heard the mantra, "You can't improve what you can't measure." However, most metal-cutting shops don't possess all of the knowledge, resources, or infrastructure necessary to collect efficiency data, let alone analyze it. This is where a blade manufacturer can help. By working closely with your supplier, you should be able to gather some quantifiable, useable data. The following are a few suggestions to get you started:

- **Work with your blade partner to establish benchmarks** so you can verify areas in which you can improve efficiencies or increase productivity in the future.
- **Have the blade manufacturer teach you how to properly measure** the number of square inches you should get per blade, and then build those metrics into your processes. This will help operators and managers quickly identify when there's an issue with a blade and enable them to take immediate action to rectify the issue. Suppliers may also be able to help you measure cost per cut, which can provide an even better metric for the business.
- **Ask your blade partner to demonstrate how performance measurement can help you manage costs.** For instance, if you want to reduce your blade costs by 10%, your partner may be able to analyze performance data and help you achieve that savings. In some cases, this might include investing in a blade that costs twice as much up front, but through increased productivity and longer blade life, your total cost can actually be reduced. Ultimately, the right supply partner should have both the desire and the resources to help you achieve your business goals. While this requires careful selection of vendors, it also requires managers to take proactive measures to ensure they are taking advantage of all the benefits their suppliers can offer. By following these simple tips, managers can cultivate a trusted supplier relationship built upon reliable transactions, premium service, and, most importantly, a strategic partnership aimed at taking your operation to the next performance level.

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