



Tom Peters on Excellence

Developing relationships

By TOM PETERS

One of the half dozen or so things that Japanese institutions seem instinctively to do better than their American counterparts is to develop "family relationships" with their suppliers. Unfortunately, American institutions often view the supplier as a necessary evil, to be dealt with mechanically on the basis of price and delivery promises alone. The sole objective of many purchasing officers, in fact, seems to be to twist the screws on the supplier a bit harder.

Some American companies, however, are breaking with this long and unenviable tradition of disrespect for suppliers. People Express Airlines, Inc. cleans its planes from top to bottom before turning them over to United Airlines which, in many locations, is People's subcontractor responsible for overhauls. Why does People do it? Cleaning is certainly unnecessary, since the plane will inevitably grow dirty in the process of the overhaul; the People folks will just have to do it again. A People managing officer explains the reason: "It's simply a mark of respect for the United mechanics. There are no more skilled people around. They're both craftsmen and artists. It's our way of saying, 'We respect and appreciate the job that you're doing for us.'"

Domino's Pizza Distribution Corp. is a fast-growing, \$200 million subsidiary of the exceptionally successful Domino's Pizza, Inc. "Distribution," as it's known, supplies the equipment for franchisers who wish to buy from the company (the law says they can't be forced to do so); it also supplies the dough and other pizza ingredients. A marvelous tradition of Distribution is to hold "vendor appreciation days." A recent appreciation day celebrated a cheese supplier in a small town in Wisconsin. Domino's people arrived from Detroit by the hundreds. They staged a parade, picnics and a day of down home fun. Most significantly, they announced an extension of the cheese producer's contract (on more favorable terms). Through activities like vendor appreciation days, Distribution achieves one of the five goals expressed in its simple but compelling formal business philosophy: "Suppliers excited enough to call us their favorite account."

Milliken & Co., the successful textile giant, has undertaken a massive quality improvement program. But they can do just so much within their own factories; vendors affect in large part the ultimate quality of the product. Thus Milliken has undertaken a top-to-bottom partnership program with its vendors.

Quite simply, vendors have become a commonplace aspect of Milliken's day-to-day life. They are invited to top-level strategy sessions, sales meetings and divisional operations meetings. This "quality circle" concept has extended beyond the bounds of the corporation. Vendors are regular members of joint Milliken-vendor quality circle teams that seek to solve problems or improve the quality and usability of the product.

Milliken also is expanding the vendor-purchaser relationship from top to bottom within the vendors' organizations. Vendors are not limited to contact with Milliken's purchasing departments. Hourly production-line people from vendor operations are invited to visit Milliken factories in order to observe their product in use. In this way, for example, they get a better idea of how the product actually works on a Milliken loom. Likewise, Milliken sends its hourly loom operators out to vendor facilities to watch the vendor's production and participate in vendor activities.

The constant rebuttal I hear upon relating the Milliken story is a typical strawman that stands in the way of American quality improvement in general: "But the vendors will steal your ideas and make the product themselves." I'm sure it has happened. But for every instance of "stealing" — and my canvassing is pretty thorough by this stage of the game — 1,000 beneficial vendor-purchaser relationships develop.

The British company Marks & Spencer, in the tough and low-margin retailing business, has priced itself for decades on the superior quality of relationships with (and goods from) its suppliers. A principal corporate objective of M&S is to make the suppliers in its "family" highly profitable. In return, M&S expects a good deal from its suppliers.

M&S has an internal human relations policy that knows few peers. Because of this policy, its employees are exceptionally well respected and cared for. The company goes so far as to insist that its vendors have similar human relations policies within their own organizations. On many occasions, the company has laid off vendors who have not treated their own employees with the same respect with which Marks & Spencer treat its employees. (This happened once when a vendor couldn't get its employees workrooms up to snuff, after several warnings by constantly visiting M&S executives.)

To what extent are your suppliers "members of the family?" Do you invite them to attend internal meetings and celebrations of all sorts? Are your people and your suppliers' people — at all levels — involved in constant interchange (both social and of a problem-solving nature)?

Anyone can start on this tomorrow. Schedule a half dozen days in the next two months with key suppliers. Have your people notify you when they get especially good service from a supplier. Drop that supplier a note of appreciation, or give him or her a call. Send a small gift, or invite that special supplier to a company function. (Ford has started taking out full page ads in the "Wall Street Journal" listing — celebrating publicly — its top suppliers.) Finally, look for a chance to start a supplier-company problem-solving team within the next 30 days, with first-level people from both organizations involved.

(This column is distributed by Tribune Media Inc.)



Linda White works on a computer inside offices which house Gosh, YES! and Timesavers, a group of local businesses across from the Howard County Courthouse.

Gosh, Yes! Local companies offer a variety of services

GOSH, Yes! is an unusual name for a business, but the logo really represents several businesses located under one roof. Pat Porter, owner of the companies, feels the name reflects the purposes of the businesses.

Mrs. Porter, Ann Thomas, Linda White and Gail Earls make up GOSH, Yes!, and Timesavers, all located directly across the street from the Howard County Courthouse on Main Street.

GOSH actually stands for Gail Office Supply House. Ann Thomas manages the supply house. She returned to Big Spring four months ago after living in Iran for the last two years.

"We stayed in touch," Mrs. Porter said, and when Mrs. Thomas returned, Mrs. Porter sought her help with GOSH.

Mrs. Thomas is a geologist who works part-time for a Midland firm. But she's found, "I like this a lot better."

Mrs. Porter was busy with YES! Business Services and found little time for the specialty work offered by GOSH.

"I had not pushed it," Mrs. Porter said. "I live 25 miles from town, two daughters in school and a husband who travels. Finally, I had more than I could say grace over."

The names Gail isn't for any member of the staff; it stands for Gail, Texas, where Mrs. Porter and her husband, Pat, owned two of the four businesses in town for several years. The Porters' children attend

school in Gail, and the town has a special significance to the family.

GOSH is a center for information processing supplies and computer supplies, said Mrs. Thomas. The shop has equipment for all brands of computers.

GOSH was begun in 1982. Mrs. Porter moved to larger facilities downtown last August but recently held grand opening to show off the remodeled facilities.

The office at 305 S. Main also houses Timesavers Computer Service. The service, begun in 1979, offers accounting services, Mrs. Porter said. Ms. White joined the company several months ago and was trained to use the company's computer system.

Yes! Business Services was recently expanded. The company offers a number of services such as binding, lettering, engraving, name badges, trophies and awards, lamination, courier service, photo copying, leasing, temporary office help, management aids and locator service.

The business was begun in 1980 by Mrs. Porter and Johnnie Lou Avery. Mrs. Porter said, "We opened this business to meet a need when we got tired of being told 'No! We don't have it.' or 'You'll have to go out of town to get that done and it will take two or three weeks.' or 'We can't do that and don't know who can.'"

GOSH, Yes! is opened from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

John Freeman named president of Fiberflex

John Freeman has been named president and chief operating officer of Fiberflex, according to Charles (Chris) Christopher.

Christopher completed purchase of the fiberglass oil field products plant earlier this month.

GDR, a division of the Christopher Companies, will function as the managing partner in the limited partnership that Christopher formed with J.S. Abercrombie Mineral Co. of Houston to complete the buy out of Fiberflex.

Christopher will assume the title of chief executive officer in the company," he said.

"I feel that John Freeman is an integral part of Fiberflex and am extremely glad that he will remain with the company," Christopher said.

Freeman, 42, helped found the company in 1978. His patent revolutionized the fiberglass rod business, Christopher said.

Fiberflex employees 150 people in Big Spring and has a sales force of 24 additional people, Christopher said.

Christopher said Fiberflex is planning to market several new products, including a couple of new oilfield related products, one in aviation and one that will affect agribusiness.

Freeman, a former Howard College instructor, was vice president under the old corporate structure, Christopher said.

Christopher said the company will maintain its national headquarters in Big Spring.

"Big Spring is well positioned" for the company because of the



JOHN FREEMAN

nearness of several research and development companies and oilfield related industries.

Christopher said he became interested in Fiberflex after a group of dissenting stock holders asked him to help take control of the company because they were dissatisfied with company management.

A battle in federal and state courts continued for more than a year over the company. Company spokesmen said all existing litigation pertaining to stock or the control of the company has been settled.

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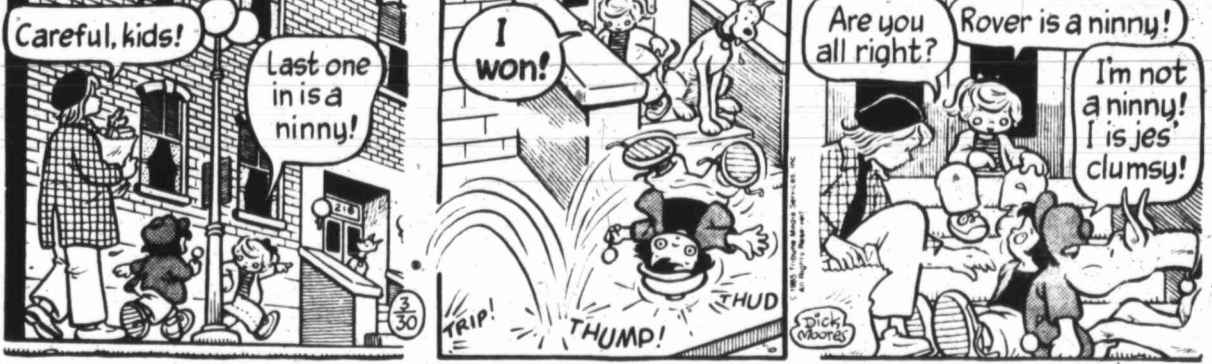
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