**If You Choose Wisely, Distributors Provide More than Just Products**

Having a good relationship with an HVACR distributor is often priceless for contracting business owners. A distributor can provide a number of value-added services, including special pricing, product research, technical support and training, and much more. There are a number of different reasons contractors choose who they partner with on the distribution side.

According to Rodney Koop, founder and CEO of The New Flat Rate, and a former contractor, it’s all about the relationship with the sales representative.

“A sales rep who goes to bat for you and really wants to work for your success is usually the No. 1 reason I chose one distributor over another,” Koop said. “The No. 2 reason is typically the program that the distributor brings to the table, which really means does the distributor want my success as much as the sales rep wants my success? Contractors leave distributors for the same reasons that employees leave contractors. When you feel that your distributor doesn’t care about you, it’s time to hit the road.”

Donald Baker, project manager, estimator, and technician, Custom Vac Ltd., Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, said it comes down to a combination of service and product availability.

“Naturally, we will select based on who carries the product we are seeking, but once we know who carries it, the wholesaler/distributor that gets the sale is the one that can meet our needs the quickest and in the most courteous manner,” Baker said. “But on the days when quick cannot happen, courtesy always wins.”

Rich Biava, vice president, GAC Services, Gaithersburg, Maryland, agreed, saying the choice depends on who carries the product line you want.

“If I want to sell Carrier/Bryant equipment, the only choice in this area for me is CE Mid-Atlantic,” he said. “We need to have a good relationship with the distributor. It comes down to four things: the location of the stores and warehouses; the logistics and how they manage the logistics to ensure delivery is on time and consistent, so you don’t have job delays; training; and technical support. It’s all about how we can work together. If you get involved with a distributor, and you don’t like how they’re doing the work or handling the account — well, maybe you don’t sell that product line anymore.”

## ADDING VALUE

Many distributors agree that providing value-added services to their contractor clients is what helps them distinguish themselves in their respective markets.

“Contractors choose our company because we are 100 percent employee owned and are laser-focused on our mission to deliver success to our customers,” said Lauren Roberts, executive vice president, cfm Distributors Inc., Kansas City, Missouri. “Our employee owners are empowered to truly serve our customers by doing whatever it takes to make them successful and encouraged to figure out a way to say, ‘yes,’ to customers. They don’t have to ask permission of anyone to do something to fix a customer’s issue.

“We differentiate ourselves from our competition in a number of ways, but we deliver a ton of value added information, tools, and support that is unmatched by our competition,” she continued. “We have a family-oriented environment and don’t have tons of corporate hurdles for employees to jump through to serve customers. We are agile and create custom value-added solutions depending on each individual customer’s needs.”

Dale Norton, vice president and director of sales, Meier Supply Co., Conklin, New York, said his company focuses on customer satisfaction.

“Anybody can deliver a box,” Norton said. “The difference stands out when a customer understands all of the additional risks that are associated with their everyday business. For us, the sale isn’t complete until our customers’ customer is completely satisfied with the install. Plus it’s important for us to understand our customers’ business needs and pains, so we can determine how to make them more profitable, which solidifies the relationship. Meier Supply provides engineering, system design, technical training, local technical product support, sales support, and solutions through the complete sales process — product delivery is just one of the functions.”

Norcross, Georgia-based Mingledorff’s Inc. focuses on providing training to its contractor customers, according to its president, David Kesterton.

“First of all, our mission is to help make our customers successful,” he said. “And we feel like if we do that with the programs we offer, then the purchases of our products will come. We develop that relationship and help them understand that we’re in business to help them succeed, so, from a perspective of value-added services, we do a tremendous amount of training. And it’s not just technical training, though that’s a big part of our package — we offer business training, sales training, succession planning, human resources, and legal training. We are always in pursuit of programs that can help our customers be successful. We have a proposal program for our customers that automates the process from pricing all the way to the proposal at the kitchen table. Then, if they close the sale, it sends the order right through our e-commerce site. What we offer our customers goes beyond just products.”

According to Troy Meachum, president, ACR Supply Co., Durham, North Carolina, the reason contractors choose a distributor is really quite simple.

“They choose us because they like us,” Meachum said. “My dad always told me that people buy from people they like. And I know that sounds crazy in today’s world, but honestly, we have deep, committed relationships with our customer base. We serve our customers and try to spoil them on a daily basis — we deliver customer service on a level that would make it painful for them to leave us.

“You can add all the other things you would normally think of — we try to make sure we keep our transactional error number down, make deliveries on time, keep inventory in stock when we need it, and ensure our people are technically competent,” he continued. “We’ve got to make sure our people can help our customers when they come in, so they can really help them figure out what it is they need — maybe not always what they want, but what they actually do need for the job.”

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