Tech Q & A once again highlight of ERA Show

Part III

(Editor's note: Moderators Alan Melton, Larry Hagemeister and Bob Thomas were joined by 60 rebuilders at this spring's roundtable discussion at the Electrical Rebuilder's Association (ERA) Trade Show in Kansas City. This open microphone forum has come to be the high point of the show weekend for many rebuilders. Following is a transcript of the discussion.)

Bob Thomas: I was just going to say that Scott's form is really important. And if you just throw something back at them and say that doesn't work probably nothing's ever going to be done about it because it's a dollar and cents thing for these guys. I mean, that's what it comes down to. Yes, they want to have a good reputation but if it's cheaper for them to just give you another one or give you a refund or appease you in some way, then that's what they're going to do.

But what I've found is that some suppliers are more concerned about this when you tell them you've got a problem and you explain to them and you take the time and it takes time, Scott, it takes time to fill out that form and you know it. And if you take the time to figure out what the deal is and what's really happening and you take the time to explain it to them and you take the time to send the part back to them and you send them a little bit of documentation, most of them are going to be concerned about that and they're going to address it.

And for me, the ones that don't seem too interested I don't buy anything from them. Not that I don't buy that part from them, I don't buy any parts from them. Because that's going to be their attitude on anything you buy. So I don't deal with all the suppliers we have. I deal with half a dozen that I know if I have a problem and I explain it to them that they're going to address it.

Ronnie Charnes: Gentlemen, we're on a subject that we've got to be careful of. We as an association don't have all the answers. We're not going to have all the answers. Let's don't create a lot of animosity. Let's understand that, yes, we're all here to solve problems, OK? And there's a right way and a wrong way to do it. And I've been around this thing a long time. It's not changing. It's the same today as it was 30 years ago, 40, to a certain extent. We have legitimate suppliers who listen to us. We have legitimate suppliers that don't listen to us.

So all I'm saying here is that I think we need to put a little more thought into actually pointing fingers on a Web site or something of this nature. We're all businessmen. We know how to address things in the proper way so I'm just, that's all I'm trying to do is share a little information here that I think we need to be a little careful of.

Jim Thomas: One of the things that I want to comment on that same vein is obviously it is a touchy subject but I do believe that what Mike said was a good point if we can act as a little bit of a clearing house and point out the issues that are common amongst us and not necessarily be in a position of bashing a supplier. That's one of the things that we've tried very hard not to do over the years and we're not recommending that we get into that position as an association.

We all need our suppliers. We know that. They know that they need us but it's a working relationship that we've got to work with and in some respects just the fact that we're doing something a little bit different by accumulating some information from our members in a form like Scott has suggested and allowing that information to be posted on the Web site without being in a situation of bashing the suppliers by name. I think we can accomplish the type of thing that we want to and we can work in the background without actually getting out into that position like we've just been talking about here of naming names.

So I think we can accomplish what we need to do, I think we can utilize the strength of the association, the strength of the Web site to point out that we have these issues and they are issues that are common amongst the membership as a result of this form that's coming into the association that can be reasonably dealt with. And I think we have some ways that we can work with that.

Vensel: That's good information. All everything we've talked about is good information. I think what we really need to do is come up with some way to funnel this all down to results. And I think we can put a little bit of pressure on our supplier as rebuilders and call up and say, who's your quality control person? And they should delegate somebody for that quality control spot and say OK this is what my issues are. And then they check into it and get back to you. And get this information out there, get it channeled down into a way we can get some results. That's our big frustration here. Not only are we checking everything that comes in but once we find the problem it's not getting fixed. That's the bad part.

Larry Hagemeister: This gets back to the point that I was making or trying to make with respect to not talking about the part as being bad as much as having a spec that we're wanting to see met to make that product or part acceptable.

An example of this I'm looking at that Briggs starter that we have sitting on the table here. I'm just going to ask the question, how many of you have ever seen an OE gear split or broken on this starter? Like I have seen gears, OE coming in, and the top has literally been burned off that gear but that gear is not split. And we get them coming back in terms of the—I'm going to call it the copy product—and that gear is split and broken. It's shot, it's gone. I'm looking at this in my head and saying there's a quality product problem here with regards to the material that that gear is being built from. So I don't know how to define that. I just know that I'm doing it by observation's sake.

So now what have I done? I've gone to Briggs every starter that I get I change that gear on. Do I have a phobia on this thing or something? I don't even know if Briggs has changed their supplier. Maybe

they've gone to the same supplier now but I'm buying that gear from Briggs and putting it on that starter every time I see this sort of situation. But there is an example for myself and it touches on something else that I've really had to look inward on on myself and that is when I find what I think is a problem, when do I release it from myself as saying it has been solved. Like when has that bearing actually been improved upon to say I can use that bearing again? As opposed to keeping it in my memory for 10 years and saying that I'm never going to get that bearing or use that bearing from these people again.

Bob Thomas: I just wanted to make a comment on the whole form idea. I think it's a great idea. One thing that I think will help keep any animosity out of the Forums with fingerpointing is if you're going to be using a handwritten form and sending it in we need to have a standardized form in that complaint section of the Forums that we use so that people aren't going to get on there and accidentally blast somebody or offend anybody if vendors are seeing it. If we use the same form in both spots it's going to keep it nice, logical, standard and nobody's feelings are going to get hurt. We can even leave an additional comment section but it's just the pertinent information so you're not going overboard.

Alan Melton: This probably needs to go to a board meeting or two and be discussed and polished up before it becomes used for everybody. But it sounds like something that we should pursue and as Ronnie said, make it right and make sure that we're not doing this in a bad way, but make it a positive win-win for both sides. And yesterday, myself, changing the subject momentarily, I sat through the three hours of seminars yesterday and the one thing that I took out of there that really hit me was, "Learn how the stuff works." And when Scott said that, and like he puts down what he feels was wrong. But you've got to know how the stuff works so that you can put down what it is wrong, you just can't put down—what did you say Bob, it doesn't work. It doesn't work, doesn't help anyone. You've got to have more information in that form that you're making so that "it doesn't work" is the standard answer. We've got to be able to provide more information to the suppliers more than "it doesn't work."

Rebuilder: In regards to the quality concern tab on your Web site is there a place on there, I know you said you talked to your vendors, and back and forth about that, do they have the opportunity to answer these complaints on the Web site?

Bob Thomas: Yes they do. They do and what we've found is very few of them will get up the nerve to address it on the Forum. But I know for a fact that they all look at this. They see it. I know a couple that the top people in the company and some of them are here and these are pretty big companies, the top guy in the company looks at that every day. And if he sees something in there, the first thing he does if he sees something new that's complained about is check his inventory. Or have it checked. So it is looked at.

Dan Bell: What if the companies that are providing the parts are part of the procedure. In other words, involve them at the onset before and go up in management of the company to see what kind of involvement they'd like to have. And I think if you approach them with the problem they can come up with the solutions and they can use the Forum to post their solutions because we're all in the same boat. We want the solution. In other words, we don't want to keep buying the problem. But I think if they have an input into it and are part of the solution and you know you get enough people involved in the company they're going to look at this as a very good positive. Look, we do respond as a company and this is what we found and this is our corrective action and this is what we believe to be the solution to the problem. And they become the hero.

Hank Henke: I can tell you from personal experience I had a problem with Bosch 417 series solenoids. And relays. I was buying aftermarket ones, putting them in, and the starter would come back short-lived. About three of them. So I bought an OE Bosch, checked them all out, checked what I had in the stock, calling my vendor and said you've got a problem. Here is the problem and here's what they've got to look at. And the vendor did call me back and said you're right and we called our manufacturer and they've got a problem. And we've taken them all off the shelf. So it does work.

Hagemeister: And that's what I'm talking about. Some system to funnel this all down to some kind of results and back to your issue about the nylon gear and different things like that, we're talking about the quality of that particular part but some things are just able to be seen with your naked eye with the spring length. I mean that isn't a big issue so some parts you know there is a simple "look at it and you can tell" and other parts—bearings, quality control, that type of thing, is a little bit beyond what we would do as far as the material make-up of that item.

Melton: Certifications? Anybody heard of ISO, ISO 9000, 9001, etc. etc. How many of our vendors are ISO-certified? How many of their vendors are ISO-certified? Because if they have these types of problems as part of being ISO-certified, they have processes and procedures that are already written down that we may be able to borrow from them and use. When they have problem they have a process and a procedure that they have to follow. Hopefully they do.

Charnes: You know guys, the vendors that I've dealt with on the particular problems that I've brought up, they've been willing to get the problem corrected. There are some suppliers though in our midst that, believe it or not, were told about a particular problem, pulled some of the product back off of their, what should I say, customer shelves, and those particular items are on a sale flyer. So somebody else is going to buy them and they're going to put them on their shelf.

This is what we're really talking about, the thing that is aggravating in the industry. And I'm not saying names and I'm not pointing any fingers, but we've got to get this stuff stopped.

And there are suppliers out there that we all deal with that will take note of the problem and will get it fixed. They do have quality control people in place. And I'm going to go one step further, talk about warranty. You know there are a number of suppliers that don't want to warranty products after a certain time period regardless of when you sold it or not. Well, this one vendor that I deal with quite often says what kind of a warranty do you want? He said, if you feel as a rebuilder that that part failed prematurely we'll take care of it. And I think that's the kind of people we need to deal with.

Vensel: How many suppliers are here? I'd like to thank you.

Paul Rupp: I'd like to share something real quick, a method that I use at my auto repair shop to address warranty issues and so forth, and I got this idea from a business consultant. Talk about a water pump, for example. We install a water pump, it goes bad. Let's say it's a four hour job to do. If I return the water pump they'll gladly give me another water pump at no charge but the four hours labor I pay my technician I don't collect anything from the customer and I end up losing out.

So what I do is I write an invoice to the supplier for four hours of labor in my management system—in their name, I send it to them with an explanation for everything that's happened, what we found and so forth. And I had no intention of getting any money back, I just wanted to see what would happen.

And it really floored me, some suppliers just completely blow you off and say we're sorry we don't take care of warranty issues. Some of them would send you half the money, I was really surprised I got more money back than I thought. And then in a couple of cases I found out it was a brake parts manufacturer—they had a specific department that dealt exactly with these kinds of issues and some woman called me and spent time on the phone, they paid me every dime that I needed so it totally influences who I decide to buy from and who to do business with. You could try that.

Rebuilder: Hey, Alan, what on an average is everybody charging on labor? Labor rate?

Melton: Anybody want to answer that? I can tell you we charge $105.

Vensel: To add to that I think one thing that should be addressed is that I've heard of rates anywhere from $75 to $105 but what also happens is there's different levels of labor now. You go to some of the agencies and dealerships and electrical work is usually higher for labor rate than brake repair. Uh, brake repair is $80 an hour and electrical is $120. So there's different levels of labor rates. For example, in our shops building starters is one rate but diagnosing electrical problem is a different rate. So keep that in mind with your shop rates because of the complexity of the problem you're trying to solve.

Rebuilder: If I charge somebody labor it's $85 an hour and if I have to go someplace it's from the time I leave my shop till the time I get back.

Joe Bradish: Well I didn't raise my hand but I'll change things up a little bit. I've probably seen 25 or 30, 39MT starters so far, all OE, and any and all that were made either in Mexico or Korea have 24 volt stamped on the brushes. I'm wondering if anybody has an explanation for what's going on there?

Vensel: Good question. I haven't seen that yet. Back to the quality control.

Melton: Back to Joe's original comment—there is a standard for the copper in a brush. There is a standard for the spring, there's a standard for the steel, there's a standard for all this stuff whether the people are following the standards is unknown. Most of you know I make a parts store tester and it's computerized and the computer looks at starter draw and we got into a fight with a Chinese starter that was a Denso small automotive starter that should have drawn 65 to 70 amps and we give it 80 just to be safe and it was drawing 100. I get on the phone with the engineer who is in another country and we get to the final bottom—he's talking Newton meters and I'm having to go what's a Newton meter? But I figured that out.

But the bottom line was we don't have good steel so he puts more copper in to compensate for his lack of good-quality steel. Well, when he puts the more copper in he's drawing more current. Now in the car the cables were made to draw a certain amount of current. The car's old, the wiring is weak, and now we have a starter that draws twice as much as it was supposed to so it can create the proper Newton meters of torque to start the engine because they didn't have good enough steel. That's exactly what Harald was talking about but there are standards for this stuff. It's not a secret. We probably don't know those standards because you've got to go down to pretty deep levels to find it. Google it. While we were sitting here I've used Google twice to answer some of your questions.

Bell: Joe, on your doing the brushes, and what I've found because we're starting to see them in our shop but I checked with three different suppliers and they all rated their 12 and 24 starters having the same brush—that was a 12/24 brush. Yep. And three different suppliers—I thought I better have 12 and 24 brushes but they all told me it's the same brush for the 12 or 24.

Bradish: What kind of brought this question up for me was years back we had a problem with 42MT brushes where it seemed like they would arc on the com when we used aftermarket brushes. So we sent some OE brushes, this was 12 volt, we sent some OE brushes and some aftermarket brushes to a facility to have the materials analyzed and the comparison of the type and composition of material hardness, those sorts of things that came back said to me that the aftermarket brush was the cause of my problem. So we decided to switch to 24 volt brushes

and 12 volt starters and give it a try. This is probably five to six years ago now. We have not seen one problem in that regard and I'm wondering if Delco has seen the problem also and that's why they're making a brush that's a softer composition and have therefore overcome this problem and they're only supplying what they'd call a 24 volt brush in these heavy duty applications at this point.

Rebuilder: Are you testing that starter with a ripple test?

Bradish: Just a 'scope.

Charnes: OK. We experienced exactly the same problem. And we switched to a 24 volt brush in that 42 application and it solved the problem. And we did it based on Newton meters and on ripple tests to prove it. But it was dramatic the problem that we were having with the 12 volt, 42MT brush. But I suspect on that 39MT that what they're doing as a manufacturer is that they've realized that that brush that they're putting in that starter is giving them the results of Newton meter and of ripple. And I don't know how many guys can actually ripple test but let me tell you we learned a tremendous amount when we went ripple testing on our 42s and our larger starters. And I suspect that everyone in here is having the same problems that you're just discussing but don't know it and it's absolutely incredible the amount of ripple current that we see—I mean you'll get anywhere from 19, 20, 21 amps of ripple current which is acceptable up to 150 on using the aftermarket 12 volt, 42MT brush. So it points out exactly what you're talking about.

Vensel: One thing that you've got to remember, you can say all you want about what comes from China—but you guys are what made the vendors go to China. How many of you know that there is the standard that they build their starters to—it's not U.S. standard. It's an Asian standard. So what they're building and I'm not standing up for China, but what they're building, according to them is good. Including the steel like Alan just talked about. Most of the armatures that come in from China are 20 percent less defective than what's made with U.S. steel. The steel in China goes to the military. If they want to buy steel to make laminations they're going to use anything—refrigerator steel. So they're building it to their standards, not to ours.

See Part IV in the October issue.

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