The Need for Technical Service

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Food processors are finding it increasingly difficult to cope with modern day technological advances from the standpoint of additive use for reasons of functionality, nutrition, and economics. It is not only a question of whether an additive should be used, but what type will give the processor the greatest benefit.

Food processors are confronted with regulatory restrictions that are becoming increasingly complex, both in use of ingredients and in labeling products. It is no longer a case of complying with regulations of one agency, but with a number of agencies. Sometimes these agencies even have conflicting regulations. If we include international sales, the problems become even more complex.

The ingredient supplier not only has these same problems, he has additional ones. No longer can he compete on the basis of performance and price, because the food processor expects much more.

For many ingredient suppliers, these problems become opportunities in that the needs may be filled through the use of a technical service group which must be an intergal part of the marketing department.

In the past an ingredient salesman often called on the owner-operator in making sales calls. That one person made all the decisions and as a result, if convinced, a sale was made.

Over the years this situation has changed. Today, even the smallest of processors has learned the value of having technical controls within the organization. As a result, most food processors now have some type of technical department that has a great deal of control. More often than not, the technical department plays a major role in approving the use of ingredients.

On an international scale, a number of countries have governmental buying agencies and/or other controlling agencies that must be approached first. These organizations, for the most part, are highly sophisticated and need to be convinced of the merits of an ingredient from many aspects, including technical reasons. Obviously, the selling job does not stop here; it must continue at the processing plant as well.

In the case of a large organization, there are many people who must be convinced of the merits of an ingredient before it is permitted to be used: the purchasing agent, quality control, research and development, the plant manager, and even the sales manager. The sales manager will object to use of an additive if he believes its use will hurt sales in any way. Thus, it can be seen the ingredient salesman must be sort of a superman to be able to handle all departments. He needs technical help. In most situations the first person seen by the salesman is the purchasing agent. When that person is convinced of the merits of an ingredient, the second stage is to sell the technical department. It is true that a technical salesman can answer most technical questions when asked, but his answers are looked upon with suspicion by the processor's technical department. It is felt that the salesman cannot be as objective as he should be. A technical man feels more comfortable working with another technologist who is not involved directly in the sales.

After convincing the purchasing agent and the technical department, the next sales step is often a product demonstration. This is a very important step that must be handled properly. It is here where the supplier's claims are tested. Does the product function as claimed? In checking costs and yields, is there an economical benefit? Is shelf stability affected? The processor is even concerned about the ingredient's declarations on the label. Will this affect sales?

In the past, great reliance was placed on leaving a sample to be used in a trial. In many cases the sample was accepted as a means of dismissing the salesman. In others, the processor's intentions were good, but in the day to day activities the sample was forgotten. This is not to say that samples are never tested; they often are. More often than not, their trials result in failures because they were used improperly. Once this happens, it is extremely difficult to request another trial. Trials are costly. Another unfortunate result of such trials is that often the processor will conclude that all such generic products will give the same results. This is unfortunate because competive products do not usually function exactly alike in every way.

In some cases the sequence in adding the additive in the processing steps is important. In others, the ingredient may take special handling. Unless these facts are firmly entrenched, the processor may not take them into consideration, or he may simply feel that these precautions are unnecessary.

It is for these reasons that a product should be tested in the presence of the supplier's technical representative if the greatest amount of benefit is to be realized by the processor.

Similar problems develop in the use of published papers and sales literature. In my international travels, I found that most of the technologists are quite familiar with the literature. They are well read and have a good understanding of the product's use. What they do not understand are the subtleties of the product's use. This may have come about because of an oversight on their part, or some key point may have been left out of the literature, because it is felt that the inclusions of the subtleties could lead to confusion.

Why should there be sublte differences between similar products? The answer seems to be because of processing differences and in the procedures used.

Thus far, we have been considering the introduction of products; what about the processor who has been a steady customer over a period of time? Is technical service needed here? It certainly is needed. Human error, both in using an ingredient and in its production, may produce problems of varying degrees. When such problems arise, it is to the supplier's advantage to have a competent technical service staff that can quickly analyze the problem and come up with a solution. It is common practice of many food processors, particularly small companies, to call a supplier for help. These calls may be made in different ways. One may be a simple request for assistance. Another might be an accusation saying that the supplier's product is causing the problem. In the latter case, the burden is on the supplier to

prove that his product is not responsible. Obviously, we should not overlook the fact that the product may be responsible. If it is, then the technical service representatives must take steps that will cause the least problem for both the supplier and the processor. Obviously, the goal is to keep a satisfactory customer.

It would be good to point out that there are processors who will automatically turn to a supplier for help, if through past experience he has received good advice and/or service. I have seen cases where an equivalent product was priced far below a competitor's product, yet the processor would not buy. The reason given was that in paying more he obtained services that far exceeded the price differential.

We said that there are companies that will automatically accuse a supplier's product as causing a problem in an effort to get technical help. We need to recognize the fact that there are others who may believe that an ingredient is the cause of a problem, right or wrong, and will stop using the ingredient. If these same processors were to have ongoing contact with the supplier's technical service group, this would be less likely to happen.

An area of concern in recent years has been regulatory affairs. Activity in this area has been on the increase as a result of the consumer advocate movement. Regulatory affairs affect all phases of the food business. In some companies, a full-time staff is often used to cope with governmental agencies, both in advising and guiding the company in conforming with the law. This staff is used to rectify conditions when the company inadvertently breaks the law. It is used also to advise and guide the company's customers.

When technical service advises a processor in the use of a product, excellent knowledge in regulatory affairs is needed. Hence, the recommendations that are made must be legal. In cases of onsite government inspection, permission usually must be obtained from the inspector before an experimental run can be carried out. Much time and effort can be saved if the technician is familiar with the regulations.

If the trial run is successful and the processor wishes to produce and market the product, he will often seek help from the supplier as to the proper labeling of the new product. The supplier must be prepared to supply the needed information.

A final point worth bringing up in our considerations is that a technical service staff can aid the marketing department in training salesmen.

Many companies hire salesmen who have no technical background, yet have a great deal of experience in sales. These persons must be given sufficient technical information to allow them to properly sell their products. Having information is not enough; these persons must have an understanding to allow them to make judgments and recommendations. This of necessity requires some type of training program which can be provided by a technical service staff.

There are other reasons why a food ingredient supplier should have a technical service department, but the areas brought out here are the most important.

In the functioning of a technical service department there are many questions to be considered such as the following. Should the group be a part of the marketing department or a part of some other technical group? What will the procedure be in scheduling a service man? What degree of expertness is needed? Education? Experience? How much time should be spent on a particular customer? How does one handle frequent nuisance calls? Should the technical service group have its own laboratory or test kitchen? A shared laboratory or a shared test kitchen?

Many more questions could be brought out, but we feel these are sufficient to stimulate a discussion on our part.

The Trials of a Traveling Technician

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I could talk at great length about the trials a traveling technician faces when he has to spend long periods of time away from home, living out of a suitcase and fighting airline schedules. I have done these things for a number of years as has every other member of this panel. These are not the trials I want to discuss. I want to talk to you about the trials that should be taking place in your labs and plants and the type and quality of assistance that is available to you in conducting these trials. I want to point out some of the many advantages you can derive by using the technicians available to you from the various suppliers of ingredients. More specifically, I want to talk about ways a good technician working with soy proteins can save you time, material, and money, and insure the success of your trials.

I read recently that the sum total of knowledge in the world had doubled from prehistoric to the industrial revolution, had doubled again around 1900, again by 1940, again by 1955, again by 1960, and so on until at the present time, the sum total of knowledge is doubling every six months with the interval still decreasing. Knowledge in the food industry is no exception, and if you think about it, this is staggering.

As advancements are made in all the many areas from ingredients to equipment, research and development people are under ever-increasing pressure just to keep up with developments in their specific area of interest, yet they are expected to know the interaction of all the many different ingredients and how they may be used in their specific product. They are expected to keep up with all the new equipment advances and make recommendations for adapting these advances to their production lines. There are ever-increasing pressures to cut costs and maintain quality, develop new products, do market research, keep up with ever-changing government regulations, and be the resident expert in all areas from energy to sanitation.

Let me give you an example to illustrate what I'm talking about. I am basically concerned with soy proteins, more specifically, soy proteins in meat products. We have available for use, in this limited area, four different PDI grits in five different piece sizes, five different soy flours, about 300 different sizes and flavors of textured vegetable protein, plus functional and nonfunctional soy protein concentrates. In addition, there is a variety of isolated soy proteins that are used in meat systems that we don't manufacture. These represent only one ingredient in a formulation, yet determining which one or combinations to use and using it correctly can mean the difference in success and failure.

All manufacturers of soy products have qualified people available to show you how to use their ingredients in just about any food item you can imagine. Utilizing this service will insure that you are using the correct ingredient,