

## BUILDING TRUST BETWEEN OPERATOR & DISTRIBUTOR

*Laying the groundwork for a mutually beneficial partnership*



Kathryn Rowen

Choosing the right distributor to partner with is an important factor in the success of your business.

A good distributor will provide extensive industry knowledge, durable equipment and reliable service; a *great* distributor, however, is a trusted partner who goes above and beyond to build and maintain a lasting personal and professional relationship.

Taking the time to thoroughly evaluate a distributor and ensure they meet your requirements will save you from the disappointments that can come with working with a less-than-exceptional distributor.

You shouldn't—and don't have to—settle for less. Great distributors are out there—here's how to identify them and ensure they are willing and able to foster a mutually beneficial partnership for years to come.

### COVERING THE BASICS

At the very least, a good distributor will have numerous years of experience at a brick-and-mortar location, which allows them to understand the area they serve, provides a storefront where customers can find them, and a home base that all staff can work out of together.

They will also have a wealth of industry and equipment knowledge, giving them the expertise to advise customers on viable store locations; Laundromat layout and design; demographic information and financing options.

However, a solid customer-distributor relationship is built on much more than the basics.

When separating a “good-enough” distributor from a great distributor, it comes down to their ability and desire to go above and beyond the standards.

A great distributor will also offer original equipment manufacturer (OEM) parts, several service technicians, a showroom of equipment and the ability to perform installations.

According to Karl Hinrichs, president of HK Laundry Equipment, Armonk, N.Y., a great distributor will have at least 10 years of experience, a proven track record of industry success and a portfolio of references and testimonials from satisfied customers.

When it comes to key personality traits, a great distributor is honest, technologically and industry-savvy,

organized, and can multitask efficiently.

Great distributors can also provide performance and revenue estimates, evaluate sites and locations, respond with CAD drawings and demographic studies, as well as walk customers through an acquisition process.

### FULL-SERVICE CAPABILITIES

A full-service distributor with plenty of staff is what you should look for if you desire a true business partner.

Independent distributors may be good distributors, but many of them work alone, without the support of the right team members.

“If a one-person independent distributor goes on vacation, there's no one to cover for them,” says Hinrichs.

“They have very limited capabilities by not being able to handle multiple customers at once. Choosing a full-service distributor is important when it comes to choosing a partner that can provide everything you need for your Laundromat—beyond just equipment.”

### EXTENSIVE KNOWLEDGE

Industry knowledge is another key distinction between a good distributor and a great distributor. When choosing a distributor, think of it as partnering with a laundry business consultant, rather than a salesperson.

Your distributor should be a strong and reliable source for industry knowledge and act as a resource at your disposal, able to provide advice and help you make intelligent decisions for your individualized business.

According to Marc Katzman, president of Metropolitan Laundry Machinery, South Richmond Hill, N.Y., experience is knowledge, and great distributors have plenty of it.

Great distributors also stay up-to-date on the latest equipment and technology by attending trade shows, visiting Laundromats and reading industry publications to maintain their expert status.

Hinrichs agrees, adding that distributors should have extensive knowledge surrounding the following areas:

- Selecting a location or building a store, including insight on nearby competition and vend pricing
- Designing the layout of a Laundromat

- Orchestrating all details that go into opening a Laundromat
- Technical specifications of a Laundromat
- Marketing insight based on laundry industry trends
- Operational knowledge on how a Laundromat runs
- Equipment, maintenance, ancillary services and store policies
- Other services available to the customer that come from having a strong relationship with the equipment manufacturer, including financing options and access to OEM parts

#### AROUND-THE-CLOCK ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility and responsiveness are crucial in separating a good distributor from a great one.

A less-than-great distributor will set a customer up with equipment, but may disappear after the sale closes. A great distributor continues to support the customer well after the purchase, making themselves available to their customers 24/7.

Arthur Wechsler, coin and OPL specialist at Ed Brown Distributors, Dallas, takes the time to regularly check up on his customers to ensure they're satisfied. He even visits operators who have purchased from a competitor to find out why.

According to Hinrichs, customers should feel comfortable calling

their distributor for advice or help, even if it's outside of normal business hours. The great distributor will communicate with customers however they're most comfortable—whether by phone call, e-mail or text message—and always responds in a timely manner.

"If a customer has a problem, a good distributor will tell them where to go to fix it, but a great distributor will hold their hand and show them how to fix it, together," says Hinrichs.

Katzman agrees that the customer comes first.

"If at any point a customer starts to rethink something or needs an expert opinion, we take the time to talk them through the process and make sure they understand every aspect," he says. "Anything they need from us, we're there for them."

#### INTEGRITY AND LOYALTY ARE PRICELESS

A great distributor always has the customer's best interest in mind and shares their vision for success.


"It's not just about selling equipment and making money; it's about doing the right thing for the customer to achieve success and profitability," says Katzman.

A great distributor is honest and feels a responsibility to answer their customers' questions truthfully, giving genuine advice and ▶



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recommendations about equipment and store locations.

Additionally, loyalty to both customer and brand are important. According to Katzman, great distributors focus on select brands—instead of having many products that compete against each other—and are loyal to these brands.

They align themselves to the best products available, which strengthens the distributor's relationship with the manufacturer, allowing the distributor to take advantage of all the services and expertise the manufacturer can offer.

## A MEANINGFUL, LASTING RELATIONSHIP

Finding the right distributor to partner with will lend itself to building and maintaining a strong, mutually beneficial relationship.

According to Hinrichs, a great distributor builds and maintains loyal relationships by keeping promises, over-delivering, being respectful of customers and honoring commitments.

"All good relationships—professional or otherwise—are built on a foundation of trust," Wechsler says. "I answer all my customers' questions truthfully, even if it doesn't end up benefiting me. If you lie to a customer for any reason, you lose all credibility."

Similarly, Katzman's philosophy in building successful relationships with customers focuses on the golden rule—treating people how you'd want to be treated.

According to Wechsler, it's not up to the customer to support the relationship. A great distributor will offer a strong foundation on which to build a relationship, nurture the relationship with trust and integrity, and make it last by continuing to be accessible to the customer whenever necessary.

But there are several things a customer can do to make the relationship stronger, says Hinrichs, including asking comprehensive questions.

"The most educated store owner is the best customer," he says.

At the end of the day, it's in the hands of the store owner to evaluate distributors to find the right one that meets their requirements, and it's the distributor that is responsible for following through on its promises. **ACO**

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