



Powder Coating Commentary

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A Message to Suppliers: Let's Not Oversell Powder!

Those of us who have lived and breathed powder since the 1970s certainly have witnessed both the tremendous growth in the use of powder, and the strides made in the equipment used to make the process viable. An honest reflection of the powder segment, however, results in the observation that powder coating advantages often have been oversold. (Oh, I can see the letters, faxes and e-mail now! What a way to start my first column!)

From my colleagues in the powder manufacturing business, I'll hear about their tremendous growth, their ability to produce thinner film powders in response to customer and market demands, and how they have improved performance levels in durability, weatherability, etc.

Yet, someone isn't listening, according to a recent survey conducted by the Advanced Technology & Marketing Group (ATMG). A clear message was heard from the management of many companies using powder that too many hidden costs and operational issues weren't conveyed by their powder manufacturer during the decision-making process or courting phase.

From my colleagues in the application and recovery portion of the business, I'll hear that the '70s and '80s script of equipment simplicity, reliability and flexibility doesn't fly anymore. Why? Because in the '90s, management lives in a world of two- and three-shift production, ISO certification, rising labor rates and material costs, and global competitiveness.

In the 1970s, a plant using powder might not have had competition in the same state. In the 1980s, in the same city. Today it is not uncommon to find competition in the same town—and several within a 50-mile radius.

What's the implied message in the ATMG survey for suppliers? Application and recovery equipment suppliers have to control costs better. When recommending to the regular or

potential customer some "bells and whistles" that will drive the capital costs up, they should be prepared to demonstrate the actual cost savings ... if any.

As one respondent stated in the ATMG survey: "One vendor wanted us to spend more than \$50,000 in additional controls for the fan rpm and air volume, but couldn't demonstrate the benefits in his lab. Another gave a great presentation on what affects transfer efficiency, but offered no controls or features that optimized the variables." The respondent went on to say that the vendors spoke volumes about theory, but offered little text on facts.

Unfortunately, we must have some compassion for the "system integrators." They do not run the paint/powder facilities—they just design and supply, or design and build them. When it comes to integrating all the components (washers, ovens, controls, etc.), an integrator's basic philosophy is usually this: "We'll sell you our in-house components." The idea is that you can buy conveyor and powder systems direct, and save the double mark-up.

The between-the-lines translation from the integrator's perspective is: "We're not really an integrator, and don't want to be responsible for the conveyor and application and recovery equipment in terms of service, support and future upgrades. If we take responsibility for all those things, pretty soon, as a customer, you'll be expecting things like service and support. Why, you may even want us to sell you another vendor's washer or oven because it fits your unique application best! If we do these things for you, what is our shop going to build? What's more, you'll probably want details on the oven emissions and PM 10 regulations and impact to oversprayed powder (particulate)! There will be no end to what you want!"

As one powder coater recently lamented, "Are we going to see landfill issues on the horizon—with spent cartridges containing 30–50 lb of

powder? I've got to document everything else."

Ask Some Hard Questions; Get the Facts

Okay, owners and decision-makers. It's up to you to be well-armed with powder coating information so you don't venture where you shouldn't go (if your shop is not already applying powder) or spend money unnecessarily on new bells and whistles. If powder is right for you and your specific application, the facts will bear that out. Start with a few questions, such as (but not limited to):

- Do I really need this line speed, around which to design my system, or can lower speeds, better racking (line densification) and two or three shifts of production accomplish the same thing—just as economically?
- Am I designing this line to handle all my production or am I better off developing paint cells, where the components and the system are optimally designed?
- There is a loss of production time and a waste of material during color changes. How much are color changes really costing me? What lab or line trials conducted verified the data?

You get the picture. Just fire off the questions—to yourself or to your supplier—and let momentum take you the rest of the way. Remember, if you want the suppliers to stop overselling, don't be oversold! **P&SF**

Editor's Note: This new monthly editorial column, written by David O'Ryan, a well-known consultant to the industry, will discuss a variety of issues relating to powder coating technology and philosophies. O'Ryan has a BS from Bowling Green and an MBA from Baldwin-Wallace College. He holds several patents on powder coating equipment. A frequently published author, he is a member of the Powder Coating Institute and the Society of Manufacturing Engineers.

