

# The best of the best

In an age of answering machines, voice mail, minimal staffing, and increased attention to the bottom line, MACHINE DESIGN has again asked its readers to cite companies that treat customers like ... well ... customers.

**Patrick Mahoney**  
Associate Editor

A panel of judges made up of MD readers whittled the 16 companies nominated by their customers for exceptional customer service down to two. This year's winners of MACHINE DESIGN's customer service awards are **RAF Automation** in Solon, Ohio (first place) and **MicroMo Electronics Inc.**, Clearwater, Fla., (a close second). These companies haven't forgotten why they're in business.

The fundamentals of good customer service are constant from industry to industry. Whether a company produces standard (off-the-shelf) or custom (made-to-order) goods and services, customers want the same kind of attention to their needs, explains Bradford Goldense, CEO of **Goldense Group Inc.**, a business consulting and education firm.

For custom products, however, "Customer service begins much earlier and includes such things as customer in-

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## THE CUSTOMER SERVICE HONOR ROLL

**MACHINE DESIGN** readers nominated the following companies for their outstanding customer service.

COMPANY	LOCATION
Branson Ultrasonics Corp.	Buffalo Grove, Ill.
Colder Products Comp.	St. Paul, Minn.
Electro-Sensors Inc.	Minnetonka, Minn.
Fanuc Robotics America	Detroit, Mich and Chicago, Ill.
Faulhaber-MicroMo Electronics Inc.	Clearwater, Fla.
Hewlett-Packard	Palo Alto, Calif.
Industrial Gas Springs Inc.	West Chester, Pa.
McMaster-Carr Supply Co.	Santa Fe Springs, Calif.
National Instruments	Austin, Tex.
Parker Hannifin Corp.	Columbus, Ohio
Polhemus-Miller Co. Inc.	Forest Park, Ill.
Quality Circle Assembly Inc.	San Jose, Calif.
RAF Automotive	Solon, Ohio
SMC Corp. of America	Portsmouth, N.H.
Springfield Spring Corp.	East Longmeadow, Mass.
Wavestream Corp.	San Dimas, Calif.

volvement during definition, design, and early alpha/beta build phases; annual/semiannual visits to the customer; clear means of customer contact; and access to the vendor's internal systems," says Goldense.

What is also clear from our survey is that customers measure service in human terms. It's the human touch, that is, the service rep who is available 24/7, the customer-service person who searches for alternatives, or the large corporation that has people, not machines, answering the phones that keep customers coming back.

Dave Korpi of **Micro Measurements Inc.**, Salinas, Calif., writes: "There's no company like **National Instruments Corp.**, Austin. You can call their toll-free number and a person will answer, no STUPID automated attendant telling you the prompts have changed, so please listen carefully."

Another customer sings the praises of Joe Belanger, a sales rep for **Branson Ultrasonic Welder**, Buffalo Grove, Ill: "Joe severely injured his back, sidelining him for several days. Despite his injury, he kept up with e-mails and made phone calls checking on our progress. Talking to Joe on the phone, you could hear the pain coming through. A week later, he drove two and a half hours, bad back and all, to resolve a problem. He showed up in a bit of pain but got us back on our feet."

The best companies earn their stripes when there's a problem, as evidenced by RAF Automation. The problem (or opportunity) arose when an automatic testing machine that included two of RAF's X-Y Cartesian robots went on the fritz. RAF hadn't built the machine and was responsible only for the robots. Regardless, a call to the company brought out the RAF representative the next day, a Saturday.

"It was a long day but RAF proved itself a start-to-finish distributor. They analyzed the problem, figured the I/O we needed, trained us on programming and operation, and made sure we were on track until the end of the build," writes the customer. "We're a small company, but RAF treats us like we're number one. I certainly don't expect our vendors to service the machines we put together. Those guys are awesome."

Product Manager Dwayne A. Pinnell, one of the judges, observed, "The distributor [RAF] obviously wanted to help the customer solve the problem with the end account. I expect this kind of action when I'm the customer, but in today's business climate it's usually the exception rather than the norm."

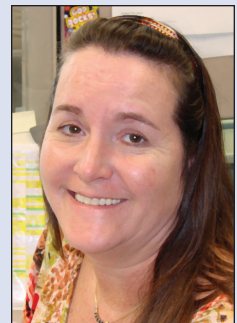
Another judge, **PeopleMax** founder Larry Cole, noted that "RAF exceeded

## The Winners



**Todd Hoffman, application engineer, Brian Hoffman, application engineer, and Tim Cape, territory manager for RAF Automation, Solon, Ohio, exemplify the kind of customer service that keeps customers coming back for more.**

**Carol Ervin, customer service rep. at MicroMO Electronics, delivered first-rate customer service and knocked weeks off the customer's project.**



## The panel of judges



**Brad Goldense is CEO and founder of Goldense Group Inc. [GGI], a consulting and education firm concentrating in advanced business and technology management practices. Mr. Goldense is a member of the faculty at the Gordon Institute of Tufts University in Medford, Mass. He holds a BS in**

**Civil Engineering from Brown University and an MBA in Cost Accounting and Operations from Cornell University. Brad is a certified New Product Development Professional [NPDP] by the Product Development and Management Association, a Certified Manufacturing Engineer [CMfgE] by the SME, a Certified Computer Professional [CCP] by the ICCP, and is Certified in Production and Inventory Management [CPIM] by the APICS.**



**John R. Brandt is CEO and founder of the MPI Group. He has spent more than two decades studying leadership in effective, purpose-driven organizations. Brandt advises companies on adapting to customer expectations and new markets.**



**Dwayne A. Pinnell, former vice president of the International Customer Service Association, serves as ISO-9000 internal auditor for the Cook Composites and Polymers Co. Mr. Pinnell is also a former advisor of the CCP Leadership Council and Corporate Quality Management Teams.**



**Larry Cole has a Ph.D. in psychology and is the founder of PeopleMax Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in maximizing people's potential. He is cofounder of PeopleSystems Software Inc., which provides software to maximize working relationships and leadership.**

expectations by servicing a machine put together by one of its clients, by working on the weekend, and by making a small company feel as important as a large account.”

The second-place award resulted from one employee's effort to help a customer out of a tight spot. An applications engineer from MicroMo Electronics had configured a gearmotor for a customer application. When the customer placed the order, MicroMo's customer service representative, Carol Ervin, explained that the gearmotor would have to be manufactured overseas — a delay that would knock the project off schedule.

The customer, understandably disappointed, was prepared to accept the delay. Ervin, however, was not satisfied and offered to search MicroMo's inventory of off-the-shelf motors and geartrains for a possible substitute.

After scouring the database, she came up with several alternatives, “one of which was sufficient to carry us until the optimal gearmotors could be delivered,” the customer writes. The project continued on schedule. When the new gearmotors arrived, the company replaced the temporary assemblies and continued the project without delay. Ervin's initiative kept the project from falling weeks behind.

“Great customer service means creating great value, helping customers in ways that go beyond the obvious,” observed management consultant John Brandt, one of the judges.

And judging by their customers' comments, all of the nominated companies would agree. **MD**