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.

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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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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, sideling 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...
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