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BY JASON DICKSTEIN
AEA GENERAL COUNSEL

Customer Communications Enhance Value

Every AEA member I know provides high-quality work. So, how can you distinguish yourself from your competitors?

One way to distinguish your business is to offer great pricing. There is, however, a limit to how low you can go, and in the current economy, many AEA members already have reached this limit.

Another way to distinguish your services is through continuing product support. I have been speaking to aircraft operators about what they like to see in product support. Their model for product support is based largely on what they experienced from OEM product support, but AEA member repair stations could adopt this same sort of model.

What happens when you have a warranty return or a customer complaint about incorrect performance? For many shops, the process is a simple matter of returning the aircraft or article, troubleshooting and fixing the problem. This simple response, however, misses an opportunity to bring your customer into the process and to show them troubleshooting is not just a black-box process.

In my research with operators, they described the following "ideal" product support process:

• **Step One: Reporting**

Operators need a clear path of reporting events and conditions to the repair station. It is unfortunate, but true, that failures can occur at night and on the weekend. Some facilities have 24-hour hotlines for customer support. If this is not reasonable for your facility, having a mechanism for reporting such events and a commitment to prompt response can go a long way toward demonstrating your commitment to customer satisfaction.

Consider using an answering service to field calls. Ask a local medical practice who they use. Another option is to permit events to be reported online, with a promise of a call-back within a specified timeline.

It is not enough to have a reporting mechanism. Your customers also need to be aware of the reporting mechanism and have confidence in the reporting mechanism. You need to advertise your reporting mechanism. It should be on all of your customer communications and it should be on your website. The existence of this reporting mechanism should be emphasized to your customers. You also need to provide customers with a high level of confidence that their concerns will be addressed in a timely manner. If the customer always gets a live human being, make sure the live human being has the right level of knowledge to speak intelligently with the client about the issue and about scheduling a remedy. If the customer leaves or posts a message, you should commit to a turnaround time

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for providing an initial response, and you should stick to your commitment.

• Step Two: Initial Assessment

The next important step is to gather information. Speak with the operator to gain more information about the event. Find out what happened and what the conditions were when it happened, as well as what contributing factors might have affected the event. Identify other people who also might have more information (such as the flying pilot) and speak to them as necessary.

From this initial assessment, you should consider what type of additional investigation might be necessary to diagnose the root cause of the event or condition. You might even be able to draw some initial hypotheses as to what happened and how it might be remedied.

• Step Three: Classification

You should identify the priority of the event based on your initial assessment. Is it something that must be fixed immediately? Does the aircraft need to be grounded? Are there any time-sensitive concerns that should be considered?

You also might want to consider whether or not your investigation should look into how the issue could have affected other aircraft. For example, if the issue appears to be a product defect in a new article you've installed, you might need to consider whether or not the defect could exist, latent, in other installations.

You also should consider providing your operator with an expected timeline for the remainder of the process. No customer likes to be told his or her aircraft is going to be grounded for troubleshooting, but having a reasonable estimate of the timeline for investigation and for short-term solutions and/or long-term solutions can help provide the customer with greater peace of mind.

One way to present the timeline and expected work plan is through a written Problem Resolution Plan, which explains the expected process associated with moving through the entire event investigation and remediation process. When operators are concerned with the timeline for resolving the problem, the PRP provides them with a written picture of reasonable expectations for the process. This PRP also gives the customer an opportunity to be involved in the early stages of the investigation to help ensure the repair station is moving toward a resolution that will meet the operator's expectations. If the timeline projects a three-day investigation (because of other queued work, for example) and the aircraft needs to be flying in 24 hours, this PRP gives the operator fair notice of your intentions so the operator can communicate with you about the operator's needs. This reduces the chance of uncommunicated expectations and customer disappointment.

• Step Four: Investigation

Most people I know look upon this phase as mere troubleshooting. But investigation is about more than working with a unit on a work bench. Investigation starts with your interaction with the customer.

Communication with the operator can be essential to identify the cause of the event. Sometimes, the operating environment or the peculiarities of the operator have a significant impact on the possible failure modes. All of this is useful information to

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log into your inbound event report and to follow up on in your investigation.

I once had an electric alarm clock that mysteriously changed time. Was it a software glitch? No. It was my 2-year-old daughter who liked to play with the clock while I was at work (part of the problem could be traced to a design feature that allowed the time to be changed with a very light touch). Sometimes the problem is outside the box.

• Step Five: Solutions

You need to develop a solution for your customer; however, in some cases, you really need to provide two solutions. There is the immediate solution: How do you get your customer flying again? And there is the systemic solution, which is designed to ensure the event cannot recur.

So, a short-term solution might include a loaner unit, but the long-term solution might involve significant troubleshooting, as well as additional follow-up to correct systemic issues with the unit, design issues or even internal repair station issues, such as remedies to improper oversight, inadequate inspections and the like.

Repair station issues can be the easiest and most direct to resolve because they fall within the direct control of your business. But sometimes it can prove challenging to identify them and to make such internal changes work properly. Sometimes, the solution is outside the control of the repair station — and these can be the most important to properly document.

I know of an engine parts manufacturer that identified a string of failures from one operator. No other operator had this problem. The operator was certain the failures stemmed from a design flaw. The operator used his aircraft for flight instruction, and the investigation revealed the school regularly permitted the aircraft to be operated in over-temp conditions. Better attention to operating conditions helped get this problem under control. Sometimes, the solution is outside the box.

How should solutions be communicated? Many repair stations provide an 8130-3 or a logbook entry, a hearty handshake and little else. But there is a growing trend in event analysis among large manufacturers to provide operators with a full-scale investigation report.

An investigation report can include written conclusions about the event and the resolution, such as:

- An identification of the identified failure mechanism.
- A description of how the failure mechanism affected operation or lead to the event.
- Inspection and test results.
- Problem simulation reports and a fault tree (or other root-cause analysis chart) to identify root cause(s) of the failure.
- Audit trail for parts identified as contributing factors.
- Hazard identification and risk assessment.
- Discussion of the failure, solution and recommendations for future action.

• Step Six: Validation

The process does not end when the customer leaves. You need to follow up to ascertain whether the solution really worked for the customer.

You might think you've identified the cause of an intermittent failure when the customer doesn't return with any further problems, but are you certain? Maybe the intermittent failure returned but the customer didn't, choosing instead to bring the continuing intermittent failure to your competitor for a second opinion.

Careful follow up can be as simple as a phone call asking, "Is everything OK?" Or it can be a formal survey seeking feedback about the various elements of your work, which also can help a repair station collect data about their performance. And it can help a repair station identify when its solutions did not hit the mark. In addition, it can help show customers you are serious in your concern about their satisfaction.

The real secret to this product support model is communication. The emphasis on communication does more than merely provide an effective product support mechanism; it also provides an infrastructure for collecting data about incidents and events, which can help identify safety and quality trends.

This sort of data collection, data analysis and hazard identification represents the core of a safety management system. The FAA has stated an intent to impose safety management system regulations on repair stations; therefore, proactively building systems to support compliance with the impending regulation makes good business sense.

Everyone knows nothing is perfect, but when you have a sound mechanism for addressing problems, this type of product support shows your customers you are serious about your long-term relationships. ❑