

Service & Support as a Key Factor in the Capital Equipment Buying Process

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Assessing vendor after sale support during the capital equipment buying process is critical to long-term customer satisfaction.

The first day of productive use of a piece of capital equipment can be exhilarating. The decision process may have been a long one, the wait for delivery even longer, and finally the positive impacts can start to be felt. Owners, managers, and employees are all anxious to get started.

Things run smoothly, as promised, for months or (hopefully) years. The newness fades and the equipment is firmly established as a vital part of the company's ability to generate revenue. Then, invariably, a part fails, or specialized skill is needed for a repair. The part or service is needed fast, since the equipment is now vital to cash flow. This is the critical moment when some equipment owners find out, to their dismay, that their equipment supplier considers after sale support a necessary evil instead of a critical part of long-term customer success.



A supplier's after-sale support pays dividends to customers in the following obvious and not-so-obvious ways:

- Decreased Downtime
 - Maximizing throughput while decreasing the length and impact of downtime
- Decreased Capital Expenditure
 - Decreased downtime provides the option of extending useful life of a given piece of equipment by years
- Better Use of Personnel
 - Avoidance of opportunity costs associated with personnel scrambling for a fix or otherwise applied sub-optimally
- Brand Enhancement / Sales Retention
 - Capital equipment users that enjoy excellent and timely support can satisfy their end customers by avoiding missed deliveries

Supplier After Sale Support – Not all Are Created Equal

Given the above, consideration of a capital equipment supplier's post-purchase ability to support ongoing equipment functionality should be a key element of the purchase decision. A company may

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order a new piece of equipment every few years, but parts and service for installed equipment are needed much more frequently. Many suppliers under-invest in the after sale segment of their business, instead placing priority on other, more visible, areas. Customer support becomes a difficult to manage afterthought, and service managers are typically left out of sales and product discussions that impact the maintenance, serviceability, and customer satisfaction of the end products. Worse still, technical resources are absorbed by areas outside of customer support, further weakening the ability to provide customers what they need to succeed long-term.

Key Buying Criteria: Pre-Purchase Evaluation Criteria of Supplier Support

After sales support is one of the more difficult decision criteria to measure while evaluating a potential capital equipment supplier. Promises made by potential vendors are easy to make, and are only proven false when needed the most. A few simple questions can help separate the wheat from the chaff when it comes to a company's support function:



- How long can a customer expect to wait for an initial response and for an actual visit in the event of equipment failure?
- How many field service hours are available each month?
 - The exact number is important, but not as important as the fact that the representative knows it without further consultation – demonstrating a high focus on service.
- What customer service performance metrics are measured?
 - “What Gets Measured Gets Managed” – *Peter Drucker*
- Are Preventive Maintenance Programs offered?
 - Most service-focused companies have formalized maintenance services and offer packaged agreements. Even if not interested in a PM program, this question helps uncover a supplier's focus and capabilities.
- How does the company leverage technology to improve the customer support experience?
 - This demonstrates a willingness to invest in customer support – an investment that the customer will derive benefits from.
- How many dedicated field service people do they have and what are their skill levels? Are they cross-trained between disciplines to maximize capabilities?

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Summary

The list of potential supplier questions is long. The key is for responsible purchasers to recognize the importance of after sale service and support and prioritize it in the initial purchase decision. A few carefully considered questions during the buying process can quickly help clear the aura of mystery surrounding a supplier's ability to deliver consistent and reliable post-sale support, in turn providing the buyer with a positive experience well past the initial honeymoon stage of use.