

Electronic Service and Support

Electronic media enables manufacturers to provide improved support for equipment fleets.

By Becky Schultz

When an equipment manufacturer introduced a machine 15 to 20 years ago, there was no guarantee a parts book would be immediately available. "Back then, the only documentation we could produce were hard copy parts books," says Bud Beal, vice president - sales, GGS Information Services, York, PA. "It might be three to four months before a book was available because everything was produced manually."

This has changed dramatically thanks to today's technology. It's now possible to automate the process of gathering, updating and managing parts information. As a result, GGS has evolved from a typesetting firm for textbooks and manuals to a specialist in handling parts data and technical information for the heavy equipment, trucking and aerospace industries. In turn, the company enables manufacturers to provide improved aftermarket service and support to both its distributors and individual equipment owners.

Gathering parts data

The transition into technical information management was a gradual one for GGS. After generating various complex textbooks for

more than a decade, the company narrowed its focus in the 1980s. "We decided to concentrate on technical information and began creating databases to manage that information for our customers," says Beal. "Parts databases that could either be model- or serial number-based were our primary target."

According to Beal, GGS now has an automated system that incorporates the bills of materials, engineering data and other pertinent parts information. "Today, we generate accurate parts books as quickly as the equipment can be manufactured by an OEM," he states. "We can receive parts information on a daily basis, update the parts database and produce a serial number-based parts catalog the day before a piece of equipment ships. Our parts catalogs have the most current parts information in them when the equipment leaves the plant."

The serial number-based system keeps track of all the parts on each specific unit. "When customers call looking for information, the aftermarket parts department will know exactly what part is on the customer's equipment," Beal states. "Subsequently, they are able to ship the correct part immediately. This

greatly reduces the number of part returns."

Parts data is now available on CD-ROM, making it even easier for dealers and large equipment fleets to find parts information. Beal cites GGS's relationship with a leading truck equipment manufacturer as an example. For the past eight years, each dealer has received a set of CD-ROMs for every truck built over the last 30 years per serial number. A trucker stationed in Maryland can pull into a dealership in Oregon and still get the exact part he needs.

Another advantage of an electronic parts database is the ability to track "supersession information." "Say you bought a crane in 1984. In 1988 there was an engineering change that retrofit certain parts. We keep track of that information in the database," Beal explains. "It helps the dealers and end users turn over their parts inventory faster because it gives a complete history of all the parts that pertain to that particular unit."

Ordering via the 'Net

Of course, the Internet has brought about a new phase in parts information management,

enabling manufacturers to provide the most current data to dealers and equipment owners. "The difference in the Internet compared to a CD-ROM system is you can change the database daily if you want," says Beal. "Most CDs are published only three or four times a year."

While some manufacturers allow only dealers/distributors to access parts data via the web, others provide direct access to end users. "If you're a construction company and you have a particular machine, you could log on, key in your serial number to access your equipment, find out what you need and place an order, which will automatically be fulfilled," Beal states. "It eliminates a phone call and allows the end users to get that information themselves, decide what to order, place the order and know that it's been taken care of."

In addition to parts data, manufacturer sites often include technical information such as service, maintenance and operator manuals. "The beauty of that is if a service technician needs to look at how to take something apart, he can go to the service manual on the Internet. Then, if he needs to get the part numbers, he can easily go right into the parts database and choose the exact parts he needs," says Beal.

Service as a selling point

A manufacturer's ability to provide electronic part and service data is emerging as a selling point for equipment buyers.

"When they go to buy equipment, the larger construction companies and rental centers are looking to see who can best service them," says Beal. "It doesn't do any good if the local dealer has to tell his customer, 'Yes, the parts came in but they were the wrong ones. The correct parts won't be here for a week.' If you have an expensive piece of equipment sitting idle because it's waiting for a \$10 part, then you have a very upset customer on your hands."

Contractors need to be able to easily and quickly obtain the correct parts required to properly service the equipment, says Beal. "Every time their equipment goes in the shop and it's delayed because they can't fix it, it's costing them money," he continues. "The companies that best service their equipment are the ones they're going to do business with." ■