

What Wastewater Utilities Should Expect From An Equipment Supplier

A business relationship, like any other, is built on the idea that one party can trust the other. For a wastewater utility, this means putting faith in an equipment supplier to understand their needs and provide the services to meet them.

But many utilities won't know if they're getting the right service until they have a better sense of what level of attention can be expected. To let utilities know if they're receiving what they deserve from their equipment suppliers, Water Online spoke with Henk-Jan van Ettehoven, president of [Huber Technology](#). He discussed the pre-occupations of many wastewater utilities, the telltale signs that an equipment supplier is really considering their needs, and what recourse to take when expectations are not being met.

How can a business in the wastewater industry balance its own needs while ensuring that it develops trust with customers in the space?

My first thought is that I insist that my people operate with the core guiding principle of "doing the right thing." What do I mean by that? It is easy for companies to say such things, it's quite another for them to actually live it. We need to earn our customers' trust. In our case, the company has been family-owned for five generations. This gives us a perspective for the long term. From the very beginning we have focused on creating value through quality of manufacture, knowledge-based

solutions, and serving our customers from the very early planning stages of the process through the entire design life of the technology.

We know that our current and future customers are looking for partners to provide them with a solution that genuinely solves their challenge. The key is to really listen carefully. Because we have invested heavily in research and development and amassed tremendous empirical experience from thousands of installations, we know we can provide what is essential for successful outcomes on challenging projects.

The selection of a manufacturing partner is a critical choice that can make the difference. At the end of the day it's not what we say but what our customer experiences. By doing the right thing, clients and engineers will recognize our actions are coming from the right place and they will trust our expertise. We are betting the success of our company on the ongoing success of our customers.

What are the greatest challenges to maintaining a trusted relationship with a wastewater industry customer?

Because the technology we design and build is intended for decades of use, we have found that consistent, reliable support is everything. Relationships are the building blocks for a mutually successful strategy and there are no shortcuts. Our

focus is to be involved and committed to supporting our customers in the field for the lifetime of the equipment. This is accomplished by being consistent and remembering that with every job we need to mindfully build that relationship to earn that trust. We have seen many situations in the field where prospective clients have been abandoned by manufacturers who, either for financial reasons or short-sighted planning, did not have the wherewithal or finances to go the distance with the customer.

What do you see as the key concerns for wastewater utilities and/or industrial wastewater processing operations?

The basic premise of what I have been discussing thus far, a success strategy rooted in knowledge-based solutions and long-term support, has come under significant strain in these last couple of years. The "Great Recession" placed significant stresses on our industry. Many districts and municipalities were forced into circumstances that prevented true-cost-of-ownership considerations and were forced into low capital dollar concessions. This was further exacerbated by the pressure on engineering firms to consider cutting staff, lower non-billable hours for learning new solutions, and incorporate boiler-plate designs as a way to create a lean organization.

We began to see construction companies

take greater risks to get work. In some instances, due to downturns in other sectors, some contractors crossed over from other sectors with little or no knowledge of the wastewater industry and settled for low dollar technology providers. The trade-off was future pain for the plant operators who were crippled by the shortfalls due to the resultant cutback on technical support and service

It is understandable to see how these forces have shaped decision-making in recent times. However, as we are emerging from these challenges, reports I have seen forecast a moderate, steady growth in this industry. We need to return to a place that is not governed by the immediate crisis and look to sensibly invest our infrastructure dollars into what will produce lasting value for the full operational life of the treatment plant and customers they serve.

What are some concerns a utility might not usually have, but should?

When I look around the industry I am continually impressed by the high level of competency demonstrated every day by plant operators and their staff. It is important that a utility draw from that expertise in the wastewater service decision-making process. That being said, because there have been experiences of inadequate technology implemented followed by poor support, it is more important than ever to overcome those bad experiences and seek out trusted and reliable partnerships early on in the process.

Are there things that wastewater operators are missing when they consider their equipment supplier options?

On an operational level, something else to consider is keeping an open mind. Sometimes an operator may get very comfortable with a process and resist exploring advancements or alternatives that actually may increase performance and/or reliability. Something that we try to do with our customers is work with them to develop maintenance strategies to prevent catastrophic failures. Sometimes financial pressures have resulted in reduced staffing for the plant

and the desire of plant personnel to minimize workload can compromise front-end maintenance work. We have developed a solution by offering annual maintenance contracts for plants that are experiencing this stress. Sometimes it is not fully understood how investment in front-end service is a fraction of the cost of catastrophic failure that could have been prevented.

One other point to consider: It is very important to develop a contractually describable value to these considerations so it translates into a means by which the operator can actually get what they need. Sometimes procurement policies work against creating the proper descriptions that allow for the effective planning and preparation as it relates to what it actually costs to own and operate the system over its entire lifetime.

What should wastewater industry customers expect from a manufacturer? Do you think their expectations are usually high enough? Too high?

It is quite common to come across the news that a particular company has acquired another company, or maybe that an offshore supplier of the technology will change who will take their equipment to the North American market. What is not so obvious is that all of the knowledge, experience, and capabilities do not always transfer in the transaction.

As a baseline, wastewater industry customers should expect to work with an original source manufacturer that has established engineering and design skillsets, precise and repeatable manufacturing, as well as a well-placed service network. I get concerned when I see companies appear on tender documents that are lacking in many of these qualities placed by side-by-side with manufacturers who are fully qualified. It is not always clear why this is allowed to happen but the effect can be ultimately very costly.

What level of service should customers expect to get from their wastewater equipment? What do you recommend they do if the equipment is not living up to their expectations?

So much of what we have been discussing is rooted in determining what the entire cost is to own and operate wastewater treatment equipment from start to finish. If all the aspects of due diligence I have outlined so far are applied, then we can cross a threshold and describe what is reasonable for the operations staff to expect. Because the proper type of technology was employed and the performance parameters were discussed and agreed upon between the operator and the manufacturer, then it is reasonable for the operations group to assume the integrity of the machine itself should be reliable. In essence the machine should handle the loadings, be able to withstand the environment it is operating in, and meet the performance goals it was designed for.

That being said, I have always maintained that given the right extraneous circumstances I can break any machine. It's true. Machines are not infallible. The true test of installed technology once all the design parameters are met is what happens when the unexpected occurs. By the time anyone typically faces this scenario, the design engineer and the construction contractor are long gone. It's just you and the manufacturer of the equipment. At this point it is definitely reasonable to expect parts, service, and expert advice readily available to you in a reasonable timeframe from the manufacturer.

What key considerations should inform a wastewater utility and/or industrial wastewater processing operation buying decision?

By now it is hopefully clear that when a wastewater utility is considering a technology solution it is critical to understand total cost of ownership. That would be capital cost and life-cycle cost. Beyond cost, the key question to answer is: How organized and equipped is the manufacturer behind the technology itself?

Core competencies should include expertise and proven experience; competent support for sizing, design, and project management; precision, high-capacity fabrication of corrosion-resistant equipment, like stainless steel; and the ability to competently service and support installed

technology, with reliable access to parts.

When making a purchasing decision for a piece of wastewater equipment, are post-install issues such as life-cycle costs, replacement parts, and performance guarantees worth keeping in mind?

It cannot be stressed enough that total cost of ownership is essential to proper stewardship. What good is purchasing a technology at a bargain price only to discover that the cost to operate and maintain the technology dwarfs the supposed cost savings paid at the initial purchase?

If a competent vendor for the technology works closely with the utility and their design engineer in the design phase to develop a mutually acceptable performance goal, then it can properly be documented in the tender specifications. We have seen this approach to be very effective when a technology provider participates in the design early enough to work through the detail. However, this only works if all the considerations of life-cycle cost and core competencies are staunchly defended and upheld through the tender phase.

How important are post-install services like troubleshooting, training, and customer service for maintaining trust between a wastewater solutions provider and a customer?

Much like the front-end work leading up to the purchase of the technology, where core competency of the manufacturer should be an essential criterion, under-

standing what is available at the back end of the buyer's journey after the technology is installed and functioning can radically affect the operations and maintenance cost in time and money. The differences among poor, good, and great service are in how the client sets the expectations. For some, good service is defined as simply showing up when you are supposed to, having the right parts, fixing the equipment quickly, and leaving the client with equipment that is functioning.

Great service starts by satisfying all the needs of good service to get the machine up and operational as a minimum, but goes further. I stated at the very beginning of this discussion that relationship was essential to both our customers' and our own success. Therefore doing the right thing involves stepping into the shoes of our customer in tangible ways.

Companies that do the right thing for

their customers observe how they use their equipment, and what impact it has when a system goes down; know how to manage different types of customers with different types of needs and respect each of them for who they are, what they want, and what it will take to make them happy; understand how they use the equipment in their day-to-day operations, and exactly what happens when the equipment fails; know what it will take to make and keep them happy; always listen to the customers' input and feedback relating to the way in which they want to be supported, and respond accordingly; educate them with respect to their ongoing customer service and support; and provide them with honest answers to the best of their ability.

Fully meet the customers' expectations. Nothing satisfies customers better than knowing that all of their problems will be resolved completely, quickly, and seamlessly. ■



Henk-Jan van Ettehoven has been with Huber Technology for nine years. He is currently serving as the President and Chief Executive Officer of Huntersville NC-based HUBER Technology, Inc., a leading provider of state-of-the-art equipment for the municipal and industrial water and wastewater treatment. A member of the German owned HUBER Group which is successfully operating in the environmental engineering sector.