



Data Dialogue:

Grainger Provides Better Customer Services Through Operational Efficiencies

A Q&A with Grainger's Senior Manager for Credit Administration

What makes Grainger a leading distributor of products used to maintain, repair and operate facilities? "For Grainger, it's all about customer service," says Edwin Bell, the company's Senior Manager for Credit Administration. "It's what made this company and what continues to drive our company."

For Bell, customer services comes down to having the right processes in place with the right data. With more automation and access to accurate hierarchical information, Grainger can ensure efficiencies in their credit and collections processes, and also work with the sales team regarding which prospects to avoid and which to pursue.

"Any way I can improve the process that helps my customer, helps me and helps the company is something worth pursuing," says Bell. And that's exactly what he's been able to accomplish through effective data management.

We sat down with him recently to talk more about how they've done it.

What does Grainger do and what is your role within the company?

Grainger is a Fortune 500 industrial supply company. While we sell a wide variety of products, we are primarily focused on products that keep buildings up and running, like heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) and maintenance, repair and operating (MRO) products. As Senior Manager for Credit Administration my role is to share best practices across the company and across credit and collections, as well as train and develop our credit personnel.

How do the credit and sales teams partner to drive the growth of the company?

Fortunately, our sales partners understand the importance of working with the credit team to help drive their sales. They know they can rely on us to understand which customers to avoid and which ones to really go after.

What are some of the priorities and areas of focus for the coming year?

We're always looking to gain efficiencies, which we're addressing by improving our existing hierarchy process. Without accurate hierarchical information, all sorts of problems arise. The better we can manage our hierarchy on the front end and with our existing customers, the more it will help with efficiencies in our collection efforts.

When it comes to hierarchy, it's important to keep the following in mind: first, making sure you get a new account hooked up at the outset is imperative. Second, when dealing with existing customers, know that nothing stays the same. It's critical that we are made aware when a company change occurs, such as a sell-off or acquisition. We're looking for ways automate not only that function, but also some of the tools and technology we currently have in place.



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How do you keep track of the new data that comes into your system?

While we have team members to perform this function, we need the right tools to help facilitate it. The D-U-N-S number has been extremely useful in helping us maintain corporate linkages and identifying hierarchy.

What would you do if the DUNS number wasn't there?

Without the D-U-N-S number, we'd have to manually investigate each company, which may work in some cases, but not in others. Without the hierarchical information, we'd simply set it up as a single company or entity. If it's later discovered the company should have been linked, that's when we'd do it. It would be an inefficient process, to say the least.

How has your work with Dun & Bradstreet evolved?

One of our more recent shifts is around how we work with D&B to set up linkage on new accounts—we now do it more towards the front end of the process as opposed to the end. We're getting better at learning how to use the tools we have for more efficient processes. Also, we now use D&B to train our credit teams, which has proven a significantly useful in improving overall operational efficiencies.

How does Dun & Bradstreet help you do your job every day?

D&B helps not only with company set-up, but also in determining credit limits. In addition, we've come to rely on D&B's portfolio management tool called Portfolio Risk Manager, which measures, monitors and gives our credit managers notices when certain key events happen that they need to know about.

When you talk about automation, what is your end objective:

It all starts with customer service; it's the foundation our company was built on. Any way I can improve the process will help me, help my company and, ultimately, help the customer. Automation will help us make our processes as efficient as possible, which will make us more customer-friendly overall.

What are some best practices that you're proud of and how has D&B helped?

Because we have such a large customer database, managing the hierarchy has been key. In working with Dun & Bradstreet and DNBi, we have the tools and flexibility to accomplish that task. DNBi can be used in multiple situations with different size companies to whatever degree we need to use it.

In my opinion, Dun & Bradstreet has the largest database, and a product that I think is very helpful, easy to use and easy to teach. What I like about working with D&B is that they're a sort of like us. They are all about customer service, always striving to provide the best product for their customers—just as we do. I don't consider Dun & Bradstreet a vendor; I consider them a partner.

Parting Words

By combining accurate information with improved operational efficiencies, Grainger, according to Bell, is well positioned to meet the company's key objective: providing exceptional customer service. He concludes by saying, "There's always a solution. No matter what the problem, we work with the customer, look at their needs, determine what options we have and deliver a solution from there. It is only through the efficiencies we've found in our processes that we are able to place that kind of emphasis on our customer."



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