

An Information System for Customer Telephone Inquiries*

M. C. ROGERS and S. A. SHELLEY
Information Systems Division, Secretary's Department,
E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Company, Wilmington, Delaware
Received April 22, 1965

A business firm's most valued asset is its customers. Keeping and enlarging the customer area is related directly to the prompt and efficient supplying of accurate product information. This is especially true in today's competitive market when most customers are interested in getting greater service along with the products they buy and may frequently choose their suppliers as much on the basis of service, as on quality and price of the item.

There is an advertising adage which says, "He who has a thing to sell and goes and shouts it down a well will never reap as many dollars as he who climbs a tree and hollers." American industry has done a good job of hollering. Having informed the industrial community of the availability of a product through its advertising media, it follows that a company needs to be able to furnish prompt, reliable product information when inquiries about the products commence to be received.

A company the size of Du Pont, and many others as well, must be constantly alert to the penalties of any cumbersome and inefficient operating procedure. Our corporate structure and wide product diversity give us desirable operating flexibility and entré to the market; but they may also add to the complexity of the organization, making it more difficult for a prospective customer to communicate with the appropriate department, division, or individual when he wishes to obtain product information. Established customers, no less than prospects, are often quite perplexed to know whom to contact for samples, quotations, and information. If their attempts to obtain the desired information are unsuccessful or unnecessarily passed around, the penalty incurred may be lost sales. Improving the quality and speeding the communication of information needed by our customers is the goal of our telephone inquiry handling system.

Our present operation was born of the realization a few years ago that persons calling us about our products were faring rather poorly, in many instances, in having their inquiries answered. This was not due to any lack of desire to help them, but because they were unable to make the proper contact. (We had already investigated the handling of written inquiries and developed a program to improve that phase.) The suspicions aroused at that time were confirmed simply by making a few test calls to ourselves.

It is our firm belief that a caller with a product inquiry is entitled to the answer he seeks on his first call and that we should be able within a minute or two at the

longest, to place him in direct telephone contact with a product specialist who is qualified to discuss his problem and advise him on it. To provide this type of service requires equipment, personnel, and information in a quickly available form. Let me discuss each in turn.

The telephone equipment required is, or was, unique and was especially designed for the job we wanted to do, though it is basically akin to a switchboard. Each of the inquiry expediter's work stations has incoming trunk lines and a matching number of outgoing lines, internal line searching equipment, a circuit key for each pair of lines to permit answering, holding, and merging of calls, a conventional telephone, and audible and visual signal equipment. An inquirer calling the Du Pont Company in Wilmington will usually reach the main company switchboard. If the call is for an individual by name or for an extension by number, it is completed by the operator. If, however, the caller wishes to discuss a product—and it is immaterial to the operator whether he mentions the product or not—the operator tells the caller she is connecting him with the Product Information Center, which is the heart of the system. At this point, an information expediter thoroughly familiar with all of our products and product lines, of which there are about 1,200, and having access to much material on competitive products, talks to the inquirer. The expediter briefly interrogates the caller as to the product in which he is interested, the kind of information he wants, whether it be sales or technical, and, if necessary, the application. This interrogation is held to a minimum, inasmuch as the caller will have to repeat much of it to the product specialist with whom he will be put in contact to obtain the answers to his query. (Further mention of the product specialists will be made later.) The expediter decides the best-qualified individual to handle the call and, by means of the circuit key on his telephone panel, puts the inquirer on a "hold" status. The expediter then calls the product specialist he has selected, explains the inquiry, and determines whether in fact the man is the proper one to handle the call. If he is, the caller is brought back into the circuit and introduced to the Du Pont specialist, at which point the expediter bows out of the conversation. In other words, and *this is most important*, we do not blindly transfer any call. We first ascertain that the man we believe to be best qualified is in, that he is free and can talk, and then we merge the call on his line. If for any reason we are unsuccessful, in two or three attempts, we obtain the information about the caller and his problem and arrange for a prompt callback to him

* Presented before the Division of Chemical Literature, 149th National Meeting of the American Chemical Society, Detroit, Mich., April 7, 1965.

at our expense. Considering that over 2,500 calls a month are handled by our Wilmington Center alone, we have surprisingly few callbacks. They will average fewer than 50.

Completing this first connection between the caller and a product specialist does not necessarily mean our job is finished. If, while talking to the specialist, the customer decides he wants to discuss another product, the specialist signals the information center in the usual manner—by depressing and releasing the cradle switch on his telephone. An expeditor detects the signal, re-enters the conversation, makes a determination as to whom the customer should then talk, and proceeds as previously stated. This procedure can be repeated until the customer terminates the call. In other words, there is no guessing by any specialist, no matter how qualified, about products outside his own field. If the conversation has to be broadened to include other products or specialists, the product expeditor must be brought back into the discussion to reassign the call.

In many instances, especially on inquiries about price and delivery, it is necessary that the customer talk to a sales representative in a district office. This is accomplished through our rather extensive network of telephone tie line circuits, with the customer, of course, paying only for his original call to the information center.

Tie line circuits are telephone circuits leased, usually at a flat monthly rate, from the telephone companies by a subscriber company for its exclusive use. The circuit network may connect company sales offices, plants, and laboratories at widely scattered locations, with the principal office—and with each other. While our tie line network was not established specifically as part of our Product Information System, its existence enables us to do a much more effective job of inquiry handling.

It was first envisioned that product inquiries would be answered in the Product Information Centers, of which there are now five in different cities. This, of course, would necessitate the use of technical personnel of extremely high ability and wide experience. In looking for these people we decided that no small group of persons, however able, could talk with authority about the hundreds of products which we make. Since there already were the product specialists in the Company, we then began to envision the inquiry handling service as a brokerage function, one of making certain that the caller or inquirer was placed in touch with our expert best qualified to answer his questions. Having decided to go this route we felt, and still feel, that nontechnical employees should be assigned to inquiry handling work. With the experience and knowledge they have built up, the expeditors answer many of the inquiries; but, with access to the real experts, they are not tempted to do so. In other words, the members of the expediting group do not give technical answers, even though they may know them.

Our Wilmington Product Information Center is staffed with men. In the other four principal centers in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco we have women. These people are intelligent, friendly, extroverted, diplomatic, inquisitive, imaginative, patient, thick-skinned, calm, and possess a sense of humor.

What of the information resources? Essentially there are two kinds of information required: information about

people—the product specialists to whom we can refer inquiries—and information about our products—past, present, and future. For the personnel information we rely on a group of individuals referred to as key contacts representing each of our twelve industrial departments. These are our liaison men with the departments and it is their responsibility to furnish us with the names, company locations, and telephone numbers of the product specialists for each of the department's products. They notify us of changes, transfers, alternates, etc. Backing them up are the specialists themselves who will let us know if they are being moved or assigned to other product areas. Company organization charts also indicate personnel changes and we verify them with the department concerned. From these sources we maintain current registers of the specialists designated by each department to answer product inquiries.

The principal product information source employed by the expeditors is an up-to-the-minute card index of the Company's products. This index includes the products by trademark, generic, chemical, and trivial names. The cards also show code number of letter designations, end uses in many cases, and, of course, the name of the department which manufactures it. The card file contains only the information necessary to guide the expeditor to the qualified product specialist. There is usually no technical information such as formulas, chemical and physical properties, manufacturing process, etc., included. We rarely need such information since our primary responsibility is to expedite the call to a product specialist. Such an index supports the use of nontechnical personnel to perform the expediting service.

In addition to cards for each of our presently available commercial items, the index includes cards for discontinued products and new products in development. It is important that these items be included since there is still a responsibility to answer inquiries about them. The caller may not be aware of the product's status.

The card index is contained in an elevator-type card file which is easily accessible to the expeditors.

As a desk top directory, the expeditor has a copy of the Du Pont Products Book. This book is a convenient source of information on the properties, uses, trademarks, and other data for the products we manufacture and sell.

Information to maintain the product index comes to us from the manufacturing departments by means of finished product code lists, development reports, new product releases, sales bulletins, and letters. These are circulated among the inquiry expeditors to familiarize them with the product changes in addition to serving as the basis for index entries.

Since a great deal of product and industry information is published in the popular technical magazines and trade journals such as *Chemical and Engineering News*, subscriptions to several of these are provided for the use of the expeditors. It is an important part of their job to read these publications, alert for any reference to a Du Pont product especially, but primarily to keep themselves well informed.

You may wonder what we do when the inquiry concerns a product made by one of our competitors. We do receive a considerable number of such inquiries. Resorting to such reference materials as "Thomas' Register of American

Manufacturers," "Chem Sources," "Chemical Week Buyer's Guide," "Oil, Paint & Drug Reporter Green Book," or "Condensed Chemical Dictionary," as well as our own "Du Pont Products Book," we endeavor to relate the mentioned product to one of ours. If we have a competitive product that we believe will satisfy his requirements, we feel that we should take the opportunity to acquaint the caller with it and offer it in place of the requested product. The expeditor tells the inquirer that our product specialist, mentioning his name, will talk with him about his problem. When we have no product to offer, we try to furnish sources of supply when possible—again using the registries previously mentioned. We do not get that particular sale, but we may win a good one later as a result of the goodwill. We have likely done our competitor a service—but then, he may be our customer, too.

I have alluded to the information centers in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco which are full-time operations. At the present time, the two West Coast centers operate somewhat differently because they are restricted in their ability to make direct telephone inquiry referrals owing to the lack of tie line service and the fact that the majority of the product specialists are in the eastern area of the country. The New York Center is capable of the same service as Wilmington. It differs only in size of the staff. Chicago is on the tie line network and can refer the knottier problems to Wilmington. Source materials are furnished to all the centers from Wilmington and they are kept up-to-date on changes. The cities of Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington are served by direct telephone line to the Wilmington Center, enabling people in these places to get their information by placing a local call.

In addition to the five centers staffed by full-time expeditors, we offer a limited information service in seventeen other cities in which the Du Pont Company is represented by sales offices of two or more manufacturing departments. Operation of these information facilities

differs in that the information service is a secondary function with these people, though they do accept the responsibility for transmittal of the inquiry to the proper person for handling. As sales people, they have considerable information available and close contact with our Wilmington operation helps them to handle even difficult inquiries.

Customers will find the telephone numbers to be called for product information in the White Page listings of local telephone directories, in the Yellow Page corporate advertisements, and in the Supplier Directories in various trade publications.

The Wilmington center provides an additional service. The expeditors there are on call after hours to handle inquiries if an urgent situation arises. There are not many calls of this nature, but the expeditors have been known to interrupt a director of sales in his Saturday golf game or rouse a plant manager from his bed in the early morning hours.

A few statistics may be of interest and illustrative of the program's growth:

In 1958, which was the first full year of the Wilmington Center's operation, a total of 6,000 telephone inquiries were handled. By the end of 1961 the volume had more than doubled. In the year 1964 at the Wilmington Center only, the number of calls received exceeded 30,000. For this year the calls taken at all five major centers amounted to 83,000.

What is the value of the product information program? To the customer, it means more accurate product information more quickly with a reduction in his time and money spent on telephone calls. It is solid evidence of our interest in his problems and our desire to be of service.

To Du Pont, the program means improved customer relations, an enlarged customer area, and increased sales opportunities. Product Information Centers are particularly useful to a company producing a wide range of products and materials. The payoff is measured in more than dollars.