



SECRET SHOPPER UNDERCOVER

Having heard the common distributor complaints about their vendors, we put their theories to the test and secret-shopped five industry suppliers. What did we discover? The good, the stellar and the cringe-worthy.

BY MICHELE BELL

Over the course of three weeks, *SGR*'s editorial staffers went undercover – using aliases and a fake distributorship with its own fake ASI number – to test the capabilities and responsiveness of five suppliers in the industry. The suppliers we chose were completely random: A *Counselor* Top 40 apparel company, a small apparel company (under \$10 million in sales), an awards company, a *Counselor* Top 40 hard goods supplier and a mid-size supplier of assorted items like totes, mouse pads, lanyards and tape measurers.

We placed orders for a faux client, Angel's Pet Sitting, with each entity and embarked on an ordering process like

any two-person, home-based distributor – the types of companies that are the bulk of the industry – would. We made initial contact with each company by reaching out to them via their ESP pages, which is the way many distributors do, asking questions through their “info@” or “orders@” e-mail addresses. What we learned immediately is that placing an order can be an arduous, time-consuming process – one that a distributor who's trying to place multiple orders with multiple suppliers for multiple client promotions would find frustrating at the least.

Read on to get our recap on each company's performance, what they did right, what they could improve and the two suppliers who knocked it out of the park.



ANGLE

The Top 40 Apparel Supplier

We e-mailed this company asking for help placing an order for 40 fleece women's jackets – 10 in size small, 10 in medium, 10 in large and 10 in extra large for Angel's Pet Sitting. Most disappointingly, it took this company five days to respond, which they did by e-mail, despite having our phone number.

From there, because we were a "new" distributor who had never done business with this company before, we were required to fill out a Resale Certificate form and provide a copy of our State Resale (or Sales Tax) License and a lengthy credit approval form, despite having an excellent credit rating in ASI's CreditConnect. We asked, due to time constraints, if the order process could begin and were told that that wasn't possible. In short, this supplier would not continue until we provided them with documentation. Moreover, they informed us that as they don't decorate, they could only sell us the blank pieces of apparel. At that point, we ended the process.

What could they have done better? A personal call from a customer service rep within 24 hours of receiving our initial e-mail inquiry would have been welcome, as well as an acknowledgement of our company's excellent credit rating in CreditConnect, which could have waived the need for yet another form – the Credit Approval Form – to be filled out. Lastly, while we understand that this company doesn't decorate, it could have taken the initiative by offering us names of embroiderers in the area to make it easier on us.

The Under \$10 Million Apparel Supplier

This time, we e-mailed asking for help placing an order for 40 women's V-neck T-shirts – 10 in size small, 10 in medium, 10 in large and 10 in extra large – all in blue, with the Angel's Pet Sitting logo embroidered in white, as this company does handle decoration.

Someone from the company e-mailed within 24 hours and asked for our artwork, which we provided, but in a less-than-superior

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fashion. The rep we communicated with (still via e-mail, no phone call) pointed out that our artwork needed to be cleaned up, but that they'd be happy to help. Also, as opposed to the large apparel company, they didn't ask for any forms to be filled out or credit information.

So, after five e-mails back and forth confirming the ship-to address, the in-hands date, the placement of the logo on the shirt and the colors of the shirt and logo, everything seemed like smooth-sailing. Until ... we were informed two days later – again, via e-mail (still no personal call) – that the color we wanted wasn't available in the quantity we asked for in two of the sizes we needed. Meaning, we'd have to find a new item.

This company did many things right; however, if they streamlined their inventory management – perhaps with an online tool on its website to allow distributors to see in-stock items in real time – their level of service and ability to compete with the larger apparel companies would increase exponentially.

The Top 40 Hard Goods Supplier

To put it succinctly, *oy*. We sent this company our initial e-mail inquiry about 40 domed keytags with the Angels' Pet Sitting logo placed in the resin of the dome. First, it took over a week to get a response to our request, despite the note in our e-mail saying that time was an issue.

When we did get a response (only via e-mail at first), we were told that while our artwork was good and that the product was available, there was an "absolute 50-piece minimum" and that there would be a rush fee of \$50 to meet the in-hands date 10 days from then, despite the fact that they neglected to respond to our e-mail in a timely fashion.

Here's a tip: If you want a distributor's business, empower your reps to waive rush fees when it took over a week to answer an e-mail that had as its subject line: "Request to Place an Order."

Moreover, despite sending a thorough initial e-mail with all pertinent order information – attached artwork, an in-hands date, the ship-to address, a PO and payment info, we received an e-mail back asking for us to re-send our e-mail to three different departments within the company: the art department, the accounting department and the order handling department. Well, why not? Because everyone has the spare time these days to do something *that* redundant.

What did this company do right? When we failed to respond to follow-up e-mails, they dispatched a customer service rep to place repeated calls to us to suss out the problem.

The Awards Supplier

This company was so stellar, it deserves to be known: St. Paul, MN-based Crystal D (*asi/47759*). Everything they did – and we do mean everything – was easy, friendly and designed to cause the distributor as little hassle as possible.

Much like with the other faux orders we placed, we started the process over e-mail to a generic "sales@crystal-d.com" e-mail address on ESP. We received an e-mail immediately, in response to our request to have a specific award, the Carved Iceberg Vertical 7", engraved and shipped in less than 10 business days.

Lessons Learned

Based on our experiences secret-shopping five industry suppliers, here are some tips to make your distributors' lives easier as they're doing business with your company:

- ✓ **Have inventory information readily available** and automatically updated on your website so clients know immediately if an item they want is out of stock.
- ✓ **Impose a 24-hour rule** that dictates all customer requests get a response within a day. We live in a fast-moving, ever-changing world. The suppliers who respond quickly will get the orders.
- ✓ **Pick up the phone.** The amount of time we spent responding to e-mails from the supplier reps was astounding, annoying and jaw-droppingly excessive. Technology is a wonderful thing, but too much reliance on it is detrimental to relationship-building. Oftentimes, the best thing to do is to call the client – not only does it give you a touch-point to build a relationship, but it's an effective way to get answers and convey information quickly.
- ✓ **Empower your customer service reps** to make decisions on the spot to help clients. For example, if the supplier who didn't respond to our request for over a week had waived the subsequent rush charge on the order, it would have gone a long way to quell the sting.
- ✓ **Accessibility and flexibility are critical traits to have for a business.** The fact that the owner of Lewtan has his cell phone number and e-mail address appear at the bottom of every e-mail says something to his employees about being there for clients; the fact that one of his reps was willing to adjust her work schedule to accommodate ours while traveling overseas is phenomenal.

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“This is very doable,” Josh Fredrickson, the Crystal D account rep replied, pointing out that while there would be a rush charge (understandable, given the time frame), he’d be more than happy to set up an account for me and we’d be good to go. Soon after, I received an e-mail image of what the award would look like with the Angel’s Pet Sitting logo engraved on it and the words “Terri Cappizzi, Pet Sitter of the Year.”

Further, when we didn’t respond right away, Fredrickson called and sent e-mails, nudging us to approve the image so we wouldn’t miss our ship date. The order process was quick, painless and easy, and their assurance that the delicate award would arrive accurately engraved and in one piece gave us one less thing to worry about – something distributors crave.

The Mid-Size Hard Goods Supplier

Ladies and gentlemen, meet Hartford, CT-based Lewtan Industries (*asi/67230*), hands-down the sharpest and most on-the-ball supplier we dealt with.

Within *minutes* of sending an e-mail to its generic “*sales@lewtan*” account asking to place an order for 40 3.5” sublimated coasters with the Angel’s Pet Sitting logo, we received a call – from a real live person – offering to help me with my order. She noted that I was asking for the items, which she had *already* confirmed were in stock, in less than 10 days and walked me through the specific steps of what we’d need to do

together to get the order where it needed to be.

And while there was a standard setup charge for the artwork and a rush fee, the order process was never placed on hold or halted to wait for forms to arrive, credit to be checked, etc. What was most impressive was the constant and attentive personal service we received from the Lewtan reps during the order process, keeping us apprised of the status of the order with our looming due date in mind.

It also bears noting that during our communications, we were in Europe, six hours ahead of the East Coast, where Lewtan is located. The customer service rep offered to stay late or come in early to accommodate my schedule. Very impressive, and very, very refreshing.

We also liked that at the bottom of every e-mail, the name of the owner, his cell phone number and e-mail address appeared, further driving home the point that this company is uber-accessible to its clients.

So, here’s the moral of the story: No suppliers we dealt with were rude, arrogant, incompetent or some of the other more colorful adjectives we’ve heard from distributors. The breakdown happens, as they tend to do, in the areas easiest to fix: communication, responsiveness and just using common sense to offer clients options for a more streamlined, hassle-free experience. 🌐

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