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Defining Quality

Quality has long been a planned topic for the Focused Fire Newsletter. Competitive America is a staunch ally of American manufacturing, and quality is involved in all of our books and training materials. Defining quality, from a functional and pragmatic viewpoint, is not simple. For that reason, we waited for the appropriate examples

Philip B. Crosby, author of "Quality is Free", defines quality as conformance to requirements (not as goodness).

In practice, the definition and context changes with viewpoint. For example, manufacturing may define it as conformance to design and specifications, while a customer measures it by how well it meets expectations and needs. Health care measures quality in terms of patient outcomes. A different measurement is value perception as a product and its associated usefulness. Product is available at all levels of quality and price, consistent with its value and affordability to the customer.

Quality is also situational, sometimes as a tradeoff to value. For example, a bottle of water costs less than one dollar in normal circumstances, and an ounce of gold, greater than \$1200.



If dying of thirst in the desert, a sane person would quickly choose (value) the water over the gold.



From a purely practical perspective, most judge quality by how well the product performs or how positive the experience is with the seller or service provider.

For the last ten years, with the help of two brothers-in-law, our MTD snow blower has done a great job of removing the snow from our central Wisconsin driveway, along with the mess created by the snowplow. We welded on a new bottom, and when the control cables continued to break, homemade, heavier gauge cables solved the problem. The root problem, however, was the slow disintegration of the machine, and replacing it the only logical decision.



I preselected a snow blower, after an extensive internet search, based on two points of bias. First, Affinity Systems has a long association with the New North, an exciting and vibrant economic consortium involving 18 counties in northeastern Wisconsin, and second, a quality Wisconsin manufacturer located in the New North makes the product.

An ad published in the daily newspaper featured the preselected unit and on October 17, I looked at one, rated to handle up to 16" of snow, approximately the same as the MTD. It had several cool attributes the MTD lacks, lights and a feature called Auto-Turn, intended to "optimize maneuverability". Lacking availability, including the floor model, but preferring to buy from local sources, and with plenty of time for delivery, I purchased a unit. After a follow-up telephone call, the dealer delivered on November 13, 2013.



The new machine cleared several fluffy snowfalls in November and December, but proved unable to track in a straight line, requiring extreme force to "dig" into the piles left by the snowplow. When the job was finished, a buildup of snow residue remained next to the road, an unacceptable result. Likewise, there was too much leftover on the entire driveway, a condition potentially resolved by adjusting the shoes. The new machine was benched, and the MTD promptly removed the snow buildup down to the pavement.

With Christmas nearing and the family home for the holidays, the new machine remained parked, while the MTD kept the driveway clear for our guests.

Normalcy returned, and on January 4, 2014, I stopped by the dealer to explain the situation. The sales person said they would fix the problems and called the service department, located in a different building. After a long wait, the service man stated there would be charges for pickup and delivery. After I complained it was a new unit, he relented and set up a pickup for the following Monday. It was extremely cold on that day, with no pick up, and that is understandable, and no call, which is poor customer feedback. Another call on Thursday resulted in a pickup on Friday, January 10.

The first major snowstorm blanketed the area overnight on January 14.

CITY PASSES SOBER SERVER ORDINANCE
LOCAL | 3A



IMPERFECT
Badgers show flaws in loss to Indiana | 1B



WAUSAU DAILY HERALD

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STORM LEAVES CHAOS IN ITS WAKE

The MTD snow blower made short work of the project, removing the nine inches of snow and residual from the snowplow.



Affinity Systems LLC

Resource conservation for a competitive American future



It no longer has a classy appearance, but with the chips down, the MTD made short work of the project, without lights or auto-turn, and that equals quality performance. I was grateful for its availability to complete the job, but wondered how the new machine would have operated.

Several days later, it snowed approximately four inches, a perfect test for the new machine, but while beautiful and sophisticated, it was in the shop, and that equals zero quality and performance by default. After one week, waiting for communication regarding its availability, I called one of the owners at the dealership and the machine arrived the next day.

Used frequently since its return January 21, the machine suffers from the same problems identified earlier, and three of the small plastic components broke when it was cold. These are fixable with the application of experimentation and innovation, but one of the major reasons for the purchase was eliminating excessive maintenance.

I believe manufacturing meticulously complied with every quality specification. The problems have two origins. The Auto-Turn feature is obviously an engineering innovation to make work easier, but the technology introduced imprecision. The plastic pieces and other quality issues probably result from process improvement projects reducing quality instead of increasing value. If not, shame on design engineering.



The new machine will eventually replace the MTD but regardless of its potential, it passed the rule of “conformance to requirements”, but failed the critical tests of quality performance and customer satisfaction. The new machine will probably always be subpar to the MTD, but bought and paid for, it must reside in that awful quality bracket labeled “good enough”.

There are lessons learned and relearned. I need to re-examine the bias towards Wisconsin manufacturers and practice better due diligence. While everyone likes more bells and whistles, it may not translate into better performance. Carefully select quality local retailers who have provided positive customer experiences to friends and relatives.

Our old Toro lawn tractor is in a parallel situation. Like the MTD, it gets the job done well, but is aging and requires increasing amounts of maintenance. When it gets warm in Wisconsin, I will partially disassemble and repair it if possible, and if not, make an evidenced based decision on both a manufacturer and retailer to replace it. The purchase will involve a local supplier, keeping the money circulating in our economy, and providing jobs and services. The product label will be “made in America”, and it must exceed the capabilities of the old.

The decision to exclude the names of the dealer and producer reflect the intent to define quality, not air grievances. There is insufficient data for a broad performance evaluation, given a population of one, but the incident itself is significant, to me, and a great example for this paper on quality.

In the final analysis, quality is in the eyes of the beholder, in terms of esthetics, performance, service, and value. We expect conformance to specifications. Consumers will use their pocket books to cast the final vote on product and service quality.

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