

PTDA

Boosts Power Transmission and Motion Control Industries

Jack McGuinn, Senior Editor

Single-vendor sourcing has probably never been more attractive to businesses of all types—especially manufacturing—than it is today. The concept makes perfect sense, especially for companies that buy power transmission and motion control components. Big dollars and perhaps even bigger safety issues ride on the quality, performance and reliability of the components used for any number of applications.

But finding that one supplier—or strategic partner—can be a frustrating, costly, time-consuming quest. And that is exactly where the Chicago-based Power Transmission Distributors Association (PTDA) can help in a meaningful way. With its more than 400 distributor and manufacturer members, the association provides and coordinates valuable networking and information-gathering opportunities for its membership, whether they be established companies or start-up entrepreneurs trying to learn the industry ins and outs. And given the robust industry figures, the importance of those opportunities can't be minimized. Figures released for 2005 show that the North American market for power transmission (PT) and motion control (MC) products was estimated at \$84.2 billion, which includes more than \$50 billion for MRO (maintenance, repair and operations) use and \$34 billion in purchases by OEMs. Typically, according to the PTDA, distributors cater to the MRO and smaller OEM markets, and manufacturers focus on large-volume OEMs.

Education through participation. PTDA president (and owner of Saginaw, MI-based Northern Industrial Supply, Inc.) Jeff Pickleman was once one of those with a lack of industry knowledge but looking to learn. For him, the association was the answer.

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almost no knowledge of the industry, and had no clue what a gear box or a bearing was," he says. "I had very few contacts and found myself among a sea of competitors, many of whom had lifelong careers in industrial distribution. Becoming active in PTDA allowed me the opportunity to learn the industry, build a network of new business partners and professionals, and discover unique ways of doing business. I met other members who showed me the ropes—people I still call on today for support and encouragement." Pickleman adds that in order to best gain all that the PTDA offers, "The first step is to participate."

But before moving on in greater detail, it is perhaps useful to also understand what the association is, and is not. Ann Arnott, the PTDA's director of programs and services, explains the distinction.

"The PTDA is a non-profit, 501 (c) (6) trade association. Our goal is to bring people of like minds together for the purposes of networking, education—all the things that you can get by talking to your colleagues in the industry. We're not a buying consortium; we don't do any transactions, we don't coordinate between our members about who's going to distribute whose products. That's totally at our members' discretion."

"Our goal is to increase awareness of the power transmission and motion control industries, as well as to bring the membership together to do good things for the industry as a whole." In other words, says Arnott, "We bring them together and they make their own matches."

Other goals stated on their website include: winning members' trust as a strategic business partner; aiding in the qualification, training and competency of members' personnel; providing the go-to forum for establishing and maintaining relationships, business opportunities and profit enhancement; and to also promote unions with related supplier, distributor and customer associations that will serve PT and MC interests.

Qualifications for membership are straightforward, and align with the PTDA's hands-off stance regarding its policy of never getting involved with manufacturer/distributor matchmaking. Membership dues are a flat fee based upon a sliding scale percentage of a company's annual sales.

"Any manufacturer or distributor is welcome to apply for membership," says Arnott. "If (a company) distributes motion control and power transmission products, or manufactures products, they can be a member."

Networking a key attraction. The PTDA does not concern itself with determining whether members are, for example, ISO- or QS-certified. That is an issue for each would-be suitor to address. What it does concern itself with is networking, underscoring the adage that, to a great degree, success is often facilitated by simply showing up.

"Our members tell us that—without fail—it is their ability to network with people who have solutions to problems that they have," says Arnott. "A company can contact any

of the other PTDA member companies throughout (North America) that have been in the same situation and learn from their experience—how did it work for them, what do they wish they had known. Without a doubt, they say it's the networking."

Speaking of networking, the association's largest event of the year is their Annual Summit, to be held this October at the Marriott Desert Springs Resort in Palm Desert, CA. Not really a trade show, but rather a well-attended symposium affording members face-to-face opportunities to meet-and-greet and learn of the newest industry trends, developments and innovations. In fact, the theme of this year's event is "Communicate. Collaborate. Innovate."

A major part of the summit is MD-IDEX—or the manufacturing, distribution, and ideas exchange. The event is so valuable to PTDA members that Arnott says some claim it is their primary reason for joining. Arnott stresses that members recognize the PTDA's role in promoting members' value-added services and expertise for their customers.

Choices—and choice opportunities. Of equal importance, the PTDA also offers choices—for buyer and seller alike. To illustrate that point, Arnott uses the neighborhood supermarket as an example of a source for a wide array of products. If, say, you want a Pepsi or Coke, you don't go to PepsiCo or Coca-Cola for it—you go to the nearest store that stocks it. Or, importantly, perhaps dozens of other brands.

Similarly, as Arnott points out, "That's like what our distributors bring you; not only do they offer extensive selections from having different manufacturers, they also can offer you the training, skills and innovation of knowing how to make your product work better using the products of different manufacturers."

The PTDA is also involved in a number of educational products and endeavors, but its most popular learning tool is actually a resource—the *PTDA Power Transmission Handbook*, available for \$39.95 (\$49.95 for non-members). Produced by the PTDA's technical committee, the 17-chapter publication is in fact a "training manual for power transmission/motion control products, technologies and concepts." Each chapter is dedicated to a particular industry-related product type or technology, along with information on how and where it is typically used, and specific maintenance and diagnostic recommendations. The manual is peppered with visual learning aids—charts, diagrams, drawings and photos—to enhance the learning experience. Essentially a primer for newcomers to the industry, the manual is designed for both entry-level employees and unschooled entrepreneurs much like Pickelman and his description of his first years in the business. The book addresses everything from power transmission fundamentals, bearings, belts and drives, to lubrication, adjustable-speed motors and vibration analysis.

Looking to get younger. The association also maintains an educational foundation. Its current big-picture project is Industrial Careers Pathway (ICP), intended to confront the

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common malady facing manufacturing nationwide—securing the industry's future. As with other sectors, the issues are aging workforce and awareness.

"Everybody's getting a little bit older," as Arnott puts it gently, "and the industrial distribution field is one of the hidden industries; no one knows it exists. Everybody knows that things get made, but nobody knows how that stuff got there. It's not something that a whole lot of people talk about, yet I saw a statistic the other day that four trillion dollars worth of business is done through distribution. The ICP goal is to, one—increase awareness of industrial distribution, and two—to get kids thinking about it as a viable, financially rewarding and satisfying career."

Learning institutions are also among PTDA's membership. Member schools and the PTDA nurture a symbiotic relationship in that some schools serve as sites for the ICP program, while others offer certificate programs or associate degrees in industrial distribution that combine business and technology curricula. And, adds Arnott, the schools seek membership for a very practical and useful reason for faculty and students alike.

"They are members of the association just so they can keep up with what's going on in their students' world." 

For more information:

Power Transmission Distributors Association (PTDA)
230 West Monroe / Ste. 1410
Chicago, IL 60606-4703
Phone: (312) 516-2100
Fax: (312) 516-2101
E-mail: ptda@ptda.org
Website: www.ptda.org