

Open for Business

Bearings Manufacturers Support Essential Manufacturing by Staying Open through the COVID-19 Pandemic

Randy Stott, Publisher & Editor-in-Chief

Most manufacturing enterprises are considered essential businesses and therefore have remained open during the pandemic-related stay-at-home orders. Despite difficult economic conditions, most of those we talked to have indicated that they remain positive, busy and committed to helping wherever they can.

"We have not missed a beat," says Chris Napoleon, president of Napoleon Engineering Services. "As a manufacturer of bearings in direct support of U.S. National Defense we are committed to delivering as expected regardless of the circumstances. We are producing today the same as yesterday, last month and last year and we hope the future holds the same."

Michael Stofferahn, senior vice president, Industrial Business Americas for NSK Americas, Inc., echoes those thoughts: "To date, the pandemic has had little to no impact on NSK's ability to deliver bearings. We addressed some initial component replenishment issues in our

supply chain some weeks ago, but they had no real effect with regard to supplying customers.

"Our planning horizons for production and delivery are notably far-sighted," Stofferahn says, "We carry significant inventories in local NSK warehouses and the warehouses of our authorized distributor network throughout North America. That said, we are in a position to quickly modify the production requirements placed on our manufacturing facilities, including our principal global-supplying plants, as they contend with impacts of the pandemic."

Peer Bearing is also definitely still open for business. "It has not affected our ability to deliver bearings," says Steve Tomlinson, business development manager. "We are open and continue to ship product to all our OEM and Distributor customers who continue producing."

In a public statement, Timken President and CEO Richard G. Kyle said, "We continue to operate our business around the globe, leveraging our manufacturing footprint and staying responsive to demand. We are coordinating

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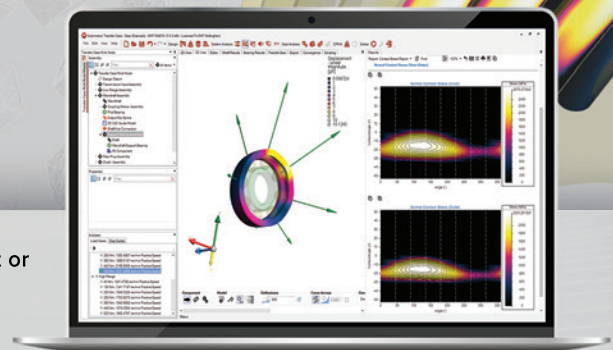
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closely with customers, suppliers and logistic partners to uphold a reliable supply of product and expertise.”

So the bearing manufacturers are all open for business, all committed to providing the product their customers need. But the questions remain: How has the pandemic affected demand for their business?

At Napoleon Engineering Services, which has a strong customer base in aerospace and defense, the picture remains positive. “We believe that government (defense) sales will remain strong as the warfighter does not sleep,” Napoleon says. “The commercial space market will also continue to thrive as the push for better communications and internet service intensifies. Particularly as everyone is more reliant on its use for interaction between people. Satellite system development will not decline nor will the need for launch services for deployment.”

At NSK, the answer seems to be: so far, so good. “From our perspective there is no clear trend specific to any industry canceling or delaying orders,” Stofferahn says. “We have the benefit of having highly fluid and responsive relationships with our aftermarket partners (distributors) and OEM customers. We’re not wearing blinders though. If there is a deceleration, NSK is committed to managing it effectively, and in a manner that puts us in a strong position to seize opportunity when we’ve all turned the corner on COVID-19.”

Others are seeing some softening of demand, especially in industries that are heavily impacted by the pandemic.

“Demand is down month over month as some customers have suspended manufacturing operations,” says Tomlinson at Peer Bearing, adding that some of the harder hit areas among their customer base include agriculture, off-highway and power sports.

But it’s not all bad news. In other areas, demand is solid, especially bearings for material handling conveyors and industrial gearboxes, Tomlinson says.

All of the bearings suppliers we talked to are confident that they’ll be able to continue serving their customers during the crisis, but several

acknowledged that there could still be hiccups in the supply chain, especially in industries like medical where demand has suddenly ramped up.

During a crisis is no time to get lax with suppliers, they say. If you’re thinking of switching suppliers, or if you need to, be careful.

“I don’t think there will be a supply issue,” Napoleon says. “But if there is, the actions taken have not changed unless you are willing to accept risk of product failure. Bearing qualification programs are necessary when changing suppliers; always. Bearings are not a commodity in the global supply chain. Inspection and testing is just as important and necessary as it always has been. The advice is simply, remain calm and ensure you have open and honest communications with your approved bearing supplier.”


Some manufacturers may be inclined to try to save money and make buying decisions they normally wouldn’t consider, but this is not the time to change suppliers, NSK’s Stofferahn says. “In fact, it may be the very worst time. Be absolutely certain: counterfeit bearings remain an ongoing, onerous threat – less to legitimate bearing manufacturers like NSK, but far more to manufacturers and end-users. A single bearing failure, due to cheap materials and construction, can result in catastrophic and even injurious outcomes. That will likely cost far more than any short-term savings through questionable bearing sourcing. Our advice is to continue buying from reputable manufacturers – and their authorized distributors – to ensure full value and performance.”

Of course, while all the bearings suppliers are committed to continue serving their customers, they’re doing so with a mind toward the safety and well-being of their employees, customers and contacts.

“We have an incredible responsibility to maintain our health and wellbeing and are taking extraordinary steps to prolong the length of time before we are impacted by the virus,” Napoleon says. “To that end, we have changed a lot of standard protocols for cleaning, interacting with others and we are spreading our workforce out across multiple shifts and working from home when possible.”

NSK has a similar attitude. “Safety has always been a key focus for NSK and, as a manufacturer of precision products, our operations have been engineered with stringent quality, safety and sanitation protocols,” says Stofferahn. “However, with new state and local guidelines related to the COVID-19 outbreak, we’ve recently modified daily activities to further ensure the health and safety of our plant and warehouse staff. This encompasses screening for all people entering NSK facilities, additional cleaning and sterilization measures, widespread distribution of sanitation products, and mandatory social distancing across all facilities, including production and rest areas.”

“In addition to our strong internal standards for safety, health and business conduct, we are implementing rules and guidance from government and health authorities everywhere we operate, said Timken’s Kyle. “We have taken



In response to the COVID-19 crisis, Napoleon Engineering Service is offering expedited bearing failure analysis. Instead of normal lead times of up to four weeks, NES is hoping to get answers to customers in as little as 3-5 days. According to NES President and Chief Engineer Chris Napoleon, “We want to go the extra mile to keep things running smoothly. We test and fail bearings every day. We’re putting that knowledge and our resources to good use to reduce the lead time on typical failure analysis. If someone’s production line stops it could be devastating to them and to the general public, even more so now than it usually would be.”

preventative measures outlined by the WHO and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that include social-distancing practices and remote working across all our locations, suspending non-essential business travel and visitor access, and ensuring frequent and deep cleaning at our facilities to maintain a healthy environment.”

As a group, bearings manufacturers have definitely answered the call. They remain open for business, working through the difficulties associated with social distancing and stay-at-home orders, and most importantly, willing to help to ensure that vital industries have the components they need. Nearly all the suppliers we talked to are either involved directly in supplying components to support the ramp-up of manufacturing of ventilators, personal protective equipment or other vital medical supplies.

“Many of the manufacturers redirecting their facilities and resources to medical equipment will rely on NSK for high-precision bearings and linear motion components,” Stofferahn says. “The very best thing we can do is to make sure those companies are continually supplied with the highest quality products. We’ve reached out to some and have a standing offer to any medical equipment manufacturer, as well as those manufacturers turning their production capabilities towards essential and critical medical supplies, to help in any way we can.”

“For our medical device customer base, we continue to meet their bearing demand with inventory,” says Peer Bearing’s Tomlinson.

It’s hard to predict how long the COVID-19 crisis will last. But one thing is for sure: manufacturers are doing their part to keep the economy moving, to support first responders and to ensure that economic recovery will not only be possible, but swift. Bearings manufacturers are a big part of that.

“I’m frankly encouraged by the collective response of industry to the current crisis,” Stofferahn says. “I’m profoundly impressed and proud of our employees, our customers, and our industry. I see a universal spirit to do whatever needs to be done to overcome this pandemic, and I have no doubt that we’ll continue to meet that challenge and make a positive difference.” **PTE**

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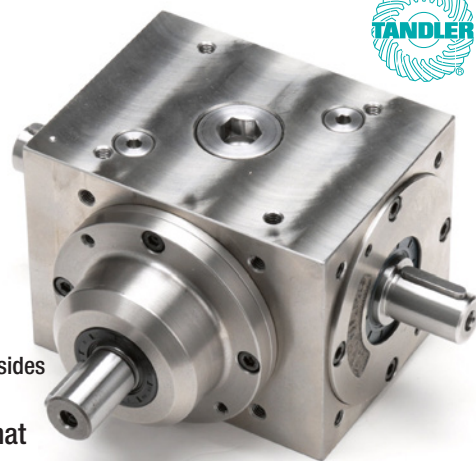


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