

# Bearing Associations Help Demystify Bearings Buys

*The ABMA, BSA and PTDA help keep things rolling*

By Jack McGuinn, Senior Editor

**Bearings are everywhere—from toy dolls to barstools to robots performing brain surgery.**

You name it, and somewhere upstream or downstream bearings will be in play. But much like their gear counterparts, bearings usually go unnoticed in everyday life—until they fail. Or until, perhaps, you are the person charged with specifying and/or purchasing them for your company. And, there are bearings—and then there are *bearings*. The distinction being that while commodity-type bearings are prevalent in the marketplace, that's not much help to you if you are looking for, say, special dimension or custom bearings.

Indeed, commodity-application bearings are a big portion of what in the U.S. alone is approximately an \$11 billion industry, which includes ball, roller and plain bearings (*Source: Freedonia Group report*). That's a lot of bearings to keep track of. So it is little wonder that U.S. bearing associations have formed and evolved over the years to become major players in the industry for their selling and buying members—whether they are sellers or buyers.

That said, the breadth of knowledge of today's bearing groups goes way beyond commodity bearings. They are fully capable of working with their members to identify the most complex bearings used in the most complex applications. Indeed, working in tandem, the associations do just about everything for their members—from publishing industry statistics to providing invaluable training in the often very complex world of bearings. In the United States the bearings associations work with members to provide training and education opportunities, standards updates (where they exist), lobbying and public policy initiatives, as well as regularly held business forecast functions and seminars, trade shows, and other networking opportunities.

Aside from the above activities, however, bearings associations are, in essence, accomplished matchmakers; they exist to facilitate hooking up bearings buyers with bearings sellers, and to everyone's mutual satisfaction and benefit. There are three such bearings organizations in the U.S.—the American Bearing Manufacturers Association (ABMA), the Bearing Specialists Association (BSA) and the

Power Transmission Distribution Association (PTDA), with the latter involved in not only bearings but other power transmission components as well.

Add to that mix the commercial bearing distributorships, both here and around the world, and you have a robust mix of bearing-specific effort and expertise. Is there a distinction between associations and distributorships? You bet.

"When your company belongs to a trade association, you're amongst those who not only understand your business but can help you resolve some of your toughest challenges—because they've been there too."



**ANN ARNOTT, PTDA**

"A not-for-profit trade association is not a distributorship," says Jeri Church, executive secretary of the Glen Ellyn, Illinois-based BSA. "It is totally different; BSA does not sell bearings or related products as do our distributor members."

Or, as Ann Arnott, PTDA executive vice president/CEO explains, "While PTDA is a distributor organization, manufacturers have been members of the association since its inception," explains Ann Arnott, PTDA executive vice president/CEO. "Our founders believed bringing together distributors and their supplier partners was essential in helping distributors do a better job of serving *their* customers. PTDA covers more than 15 product categories—from bearings to belt and chain drives" to motors to motion control. What we've found is that many of our distributor members are selling products from across most of those categories, so they value the involvement of manufacturers from all of those categories."

But although distributorships, like associations, indeed offer some value-



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added icing on the cake in the form of education, inventory and supply chain management, for example, their primary reason for being is to make money. In fact, every major bearing manufacturer in the world—the Timkens, SKFs, Schaeffler Groups, etc.—has direct ties with distributor sales entities.

So think of the ABS and PTDA as resources for the information needed in order to find and obtain exactly the type of bearings you need.

We called on representatives from the three groups mentioned here with the goal of determining what's new with them and their industry, as well as to gain a complete understanding of how they can help end-users and buyers, as well as their members.

The PTDA's Arnott paints a mental picture for us.

"Imagine a community where you don't have to pause (and sigh) before you answer the question, 'So what do you do?' When your company belongs to a trade association, you're amongst those who not only understand your business but can help you resolve some of your toughest challenges—because they've been there too. For PTDA, we focus on creating opportunities for industry executives to discuss business issues and to network. (We offer) market and industry information to make better decisions for your company and resources to build the skills of your em-

"The more we look for, the more (counterfeits) we find. This continues to be the single-most important issue facing the global bearing industry."



SCOTT LYNCH, ABMA

ployees—all within the umbrella of the power transmission/motion control distribution industry."

Adding to that list is Scott Lynch, president of the D.C.-based ABMA.

"ABMA serves its members in a variety of ways. First and foremost, we are the voice for the U.S. bearing industry, which includes our engagement with the bearing supply chain, U.S. Federal Agencies, as well as our global activ-



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ity with the World Bearing Association. We also offer various benefits to members, including industry statistics, influence over industry standards, and education curriculum focused on educating engineers that work with bearings. Finally, our efforts to fight counterfeit bearings domestically and abroad have had positive impacts throughout the supply chain."

Knowledge is power, and, to a great extent, bearing associations are in the knowledge business. As Church explains, "BSA members are all authorized distributors of bearings and bearing-related products from various manufacturers. These companies provide the technical expertise needed to purchase bearings. BSA has published 27 *Bearing Briefs*, single-topic installation and/or maintenance technical resources for the distributor and end-user, as well as five *Industry Briefs*, which discuss bearing usage for various industries. Both *Bearing Briefs* and *Industry Briefs* are developed by industry experts and are available as free, downloadable PDF documents from the BSA website. BSA has also launched an online knowledge center featuring how-to videos on bearing installation and maintenance, bearing service and care, and bearing characteristics, all produced by a number of participating BSA manufacturers on the association website."

And the ABMA has bearing manufacturers and material suppliers. While they do not have a distributorship dynamic—the association works with the BSA and PTDA in support of its mission.

"ABMA does not have distributors as members of the association, but we work closely with the BSA and the PTDA. A majority of the bearings are sold through distribution, so they are an important segment in our industry. Authorized distributors know the products they sell and work to ensure that only genuine products are sourced in the supply chain."

Obviously, the buy/sell dynamic is the bottom line for all of these groups. But just to be clear, why *buy* from a distributor?

"The short answer is because your distributor knows what you need *before* you need it, and can get it for you

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quickly to minimize your downtime and improve your bottom line," says Arnott.

And then there is the know-what-you're-buying and who-you're-buying-it-from equation to think of. Remember—there is still a lot counterfeiting going on out there.

"Buying bearings from any source other than an authorized distributor is risky," Church cautions. "Distributors can be relied upon to determine that the product has been manufactured, stored, transported and handled properly. Using a bearing from some source other than an authorized distributor could raise questions about its functionality and safety. A Certified Bearing Specialist from an authorized distributor is the best resource for proper bearing selection. (Ed's Note: go to [www.bsa.com](http://www.bsa.com) to read "The Top 10 Reasons to Buy from an Authorized Distributor" and for information regarding the BSA Certified Bearing Specialist program.)

And why *sell* through distribution?

"Again, the short answer is because distributors can reach customers more effectively and in a more cost-effective manner than many manufacturers," says Arnott. "Distribution focuses on application and support for the customer, allowing manufacturers to concentrate on product innovations and improvements."

And just what is an "authorized" distributor?

"BSA defines an 'authorized distributor' as (one) who has been notified, specifically and demonstrably, by a bearing manufacturer that it may (offer) itself to (potential buyers), and as having the status of an authorized distributor for one or more of such manufacturer's basic (bearing) types and sizes," says Church, adding, "If (the) manufacturer withdraws such authorization, the distributor is no longer considered an authorized distributor for that manufacturer's products."

Revisiting counterfeit bearings, it must be said the problem continues to exist, worldwide. What to do?

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"Counterfeit bearings continue to be a serious problem," Church confirms. "However, end users who purchase bearings from an authorized distributor can be confident that they are purchasing materials from the identified manufacturer."

"PTDA has adopted a joint statement with our European affiliate, EPTDA, regarding all counterfeit product," says Arnott. "(The) PTDA and EPTDA jointly support and promote among

their members the highest standards of quality, authenticity, legality, safety and ethics in the supply of industrial products and equipment, and do not condone the distribution of illegal counterfeit product."

Nevertheless, the bearing supply chain remains compromised around the globe.

"The more we look for, the more (counterfeits) we find," says Lynch. "This continues to be the single-most

important issue facing the global bearing industry. Over the last 15 months, Chinese Customs has seized more than 1 million counterfeit bearing products at their borders, and we have seen a huge up-tick in bearing seizures by U.S. Customs in the first quarter of 2013. This issue is not going away, and all partners in the bearing supply chain must remain vigilant to ensure that only genuine products are sourced."

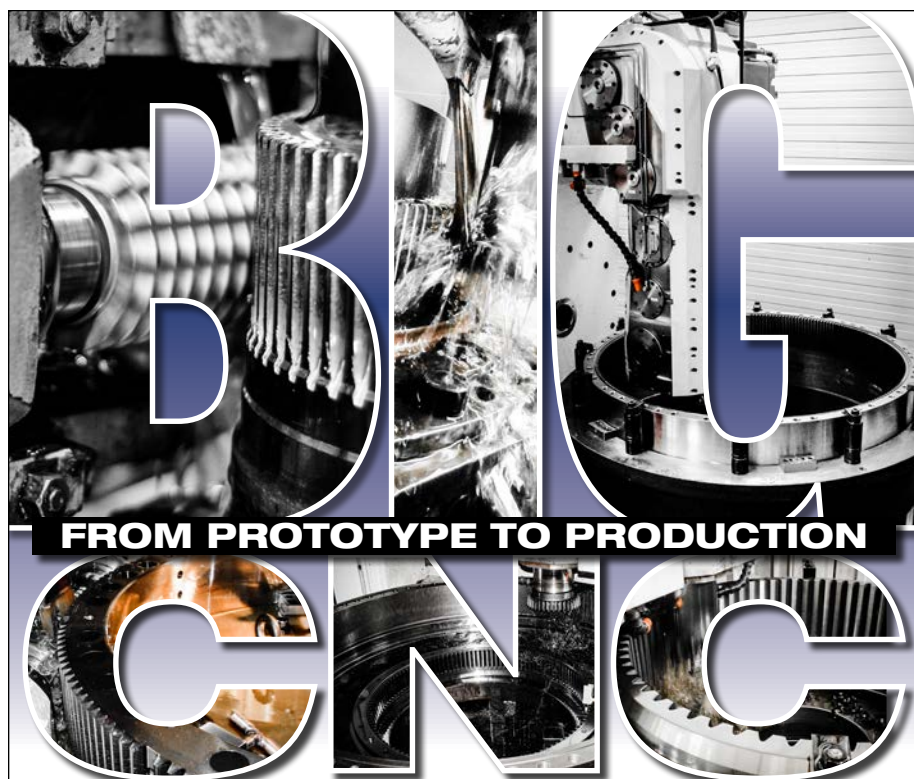
And what happens—hypothetically—if bearings bought from a distributor should prove to be bogus? It will be expensive, for one thing.

"An example is a December 2012 conviction and tough sentence which sent a strong message to the market in a recent high-profile case," Church says. "And although this is the first time people in Sweden have been identified, charged and found guilty, it once again focused the need for ongoing vigilance in the battle against counterfeiting. The case resulted in a one-year jail sentence for the guilty individual, as well as a five-year ban on trading, and a payment of SEK 600,000 (\$91,472 USD) to SKF."

Given all of the above, it is not hard to understand why bearing associations and distributorships—affiliated or otherwise—have a place in the market. On the other hand, the mantra throughout the world of manufacturing today is that reliance upon one-source suppliers is the optimal business model. Where do associations fit in?

"(In fact), our distributors *are* being asked to carry a wider selection of products," Arnott allows. "That means they need relationships with manufacturers from several product categories in order to get their customers what they need. That's where the relationship and networking aspects of PTDA's meetings really become valuable. Our MD-IDEX during the Industry Summit features more than 130 manufacturers, giving our distributor members the opportunity to refine marketing and sales plans with current suppliers and start conversations with potential suppliers."

Lynch adds, "While the distributor/manufacturer relationship is a focus of BSA and PTDA, ABMA has had recent success engaging other partners in the



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bearing supply chain with a membership expansion with material suppliers to the bearing manufacturers, and a Webinar series focused on OEM end users."

"A desire for one-source suppliers doesn't alter the importance of relationships," Church explains. "Maintaining and building relationships among buyers and sellers up and down the supply chain has never been more important than it is now. Participation in BSA helps to strengthen those relationships for distributors, manufacturers and the end-use customer."

And then there is the Internet—an international bearings bazaar open to all comers and takers. How are the associations/distributors coping?

The bearings universe is indeed a vast one, and one can't help but wonder what the future holds for such a huge industry.

"Anything that twists, turns or moves probably has a bearing, so we are present in a variety of industries," ABMA's Lynch says. "In addition, with

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JERILYN CHURCH, BSA

the globalization of all industry sectors, in many cases it is more about the economics of the country/region, than the sector.

"For example, the American automobile sector has been a bright spot, but as you look to Europe that is not the case. Wind energy has picked up since the re-authorization of the tax credit but much of this could be due to a lack of demand in previous quarters due to the uncertainty of the credit."

There you have it, and Lynch makes perfect sense. After all, don't bearings make the world go 'round? **PTE**

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