

SALESMANSHIP AND FIELD DEMONSTRATIONS OF PLANT AND EQUIPMENT

By T. J. Welch

Throughout a lifetime of active participation in many branches of the Engineering trades, no doubt one must automatically become exposed to not only the declared or accepted hazards of such calling, but also to those pitfalls which are ever so frequently disguised under other titles. Those disguises are mainly in the form of salesmanship, sometimes tinted or flavoured with a certain amount of joviality, so-called good fellowship and, of course, lighter vein.

In this article it is intended to treat the basic subject and including some of the main features of the present day approach made by many Agents and their representatives towards the marketing of mechanical plant on the basis of buyer reaction through field, or similar demonstrations, or possibly the showroom burlesque.

Whether the item of plant offered is of the magnitude of the largest crawler tractor or other earthmoving unit, the medium class motor vehicle, or the diminutive chain saw, nevertheless, the principle governing the presentation and testing remains fundamentally the same, or at least it should be considered so in the eyes of the potential purchaser, if he is astute in his search for the greatest value from his investment.

All too often we have received the salesman who, unannounced and without appointment, as "dropped in, in the hope that he will

find someone", is armed only with a single leaflet, of which 50% is taken up with elaborate photographs, or which has been printed for conditions other than our own. Worse still to come may be the fact that it is in a foreign language, with little or no attempt at offering even a reasonable amount of translation or technical interpretation.

This type of situation is bad enough, but, however, when the acid test is applied and the salesman has expended his coffers of knowledge, which after all were limited to the scope of the said pamphlet, and he then enlightens us with such as - "well we haven't received any more information from the makers yet" or - "this is really not my line, but the firm asked me to fill in while the other man is away", then perhaps only an electronic computer could come up with the precise answer as to the potential losses, not only in terms of sales, but in the interests of the industry for which the benefits as claimed were intended.

More than a few salesmen encountered, have no real knowledge of their product, and it would appear that in some instances the firms themselves prefer to foster the psychological approach of the well groomed social line, in the hope that sales can be made amidst a setting of serenity. Another view may be that whilst the salesman may not be in a position to discourse fully on technical points of his product, he therefore is not placed in the vulnerable position of having to answer embarrassing questions, the obvious exit being - "we will have to refer that to the Head Office" etc.

In the field of motor car sales, we already know of the "tones" of colour and trims to suit the fastidious and delicate tastes (or more subtly aimed at the female element in order to pressurise the deal) the "more than adequate" glove boxes and ash trays, the "full X cubic feet" of boot space (either it is or it isn't X cubic feet, the "full" being added for padding. From this the next dramatic step in announcing heavy industrial plant could well be "the family economy size model" and close on it's heels could follow "the enclosed plastic toy gift".

If these are to be accepted as true symbols of the traits of the industries, then it is evident that unless the potential buyer is prepared to demand much more than he now receives in the form of data and technical information, genuine admissions, facts and fair comparisons regarding the plant, then he will continue to be compelled to accept plant along the lines of policies of the marketers which, after all, are designed primarily for the monetary benefit of those few.

There are many reputable firms in our midst which have, over a great many years, contributed considerably to the betterment of industry and the community in general, due to the fact that they had a proven product and at the same time the "know how" to back it. But with the changing times thrusting the responsibility onto young shoulders, no doubt there may be a lesson for them to pass on to those who are inclined to take the line of least resistance in an attempt to "get figures".

It can be fairly safely stated that in the present era goodwill ceases to exist in commerce. This should be a warning to both parties, to the buyer that he can expect, in some cases, little after sales backing, and definitely no sympathy for financial failures, and, on the other hand, to the seller, that he must expect to extend himself in order to prove that his product is of the class as claimed by him.

Let us take a look at the events as quite often encountered in the course of many attempts to stage a field test or demonstration.

It is often possible to sense the outcome of most demonstrations, as the symptoms usually become apparent in the very early stages and what was intended to be an industrial debut occasionally culminates in a retreat of crestfallen exhibitors and disgruntled audience alike.

Problems arising very early in the programme can invariably be traced to one or more of several points which, had any one of them given a second thought, would never have presented itself. Setbacks can stem from such as lack of attention paid to invitations to those most concerned, uncertainty of times, or no strict adherence to any published times, delivery to the scene of only some of the equipment ("it was thought that some items were not really needed"), plant not thoroughly prepared in advance, no specialised service tools to carry out any adjustments, no skilled operators available at the last minute. In these circumstances it may be presumed that all that is necessary is "a quick run through the familiar routine" and then everyone will be eager to join in at the "refreshment bar".

The trend in sales today leans more towards the principle of "acceptance on the showroom floor", and although this may be to a degree satisfactory for some purchases such as household appliances etc., the capital cost of modern field plant is such that the buyer needs to assert himself if he is not to be coerced into embarking on the proverbial and somewhat uneconomical "ride".

For those potential purchasers who may not be in the position to take advantage of many of the facilities for executing searching tests, it may be well for them to reflect awhile on the old axiom - "Know your Diamonds, or Know your Jeweller".

Whether the item of plant is to be exhibited to only one firm or organisation, or to several independent bodies, the Agent would be advised to make actual contact with the most senior or responsible head of each and every interested party and to ascertain that those who are to make the final decisions as to probable purchase, are well represented. Failure to do this is ever recurring and can result in an overload of insignificant onlookers, who may possibly retard progress and crowd the issue to the detriment of valuable contacts.

Selection of a location conveniently suitable to all can be most difficult, particularly where firstly, the practical application of the plant is paramount, seasonal or other requirements must be met and the fact that easily obtainable sites are rare in any crowded metropolis.

Precise timing of any meeting depends on accurate information as to the programme and no doubt if parties are to arrive at the scene in a good frame of mind, some clearly defined road directions will have been worthwhile.

Delivery of a large and varied amount of plant to any point has its own problems and so special treatment must be administered by the service staff to ensure that every section has been prepared. It is seldom considered that this aspect has any real connection with sales, but, it may be worth a reflection as to how many sales are lost before the plant leaves the works for the field demonstrations. All points of the plant which are required to be altered or adjusted in any way during the normal working life, must be given a thorough lubrication and manipulation, so as to avoid a combination of embarrassment, criticism of the staff and firm, and perhaps nullification of the whole aim of the tests. Likewise, all service tools normally required for such adjustments and running maintenance under normal working conditions should be on the site if full advantage of the adaptability of the machine is to be observed and also to provide a true indication of the capital outlay.

Beware of the highly attired operator who has been sent along to "show how easily it can be done". It is important that operators of industrial plant should be attired and otherwise equipped in a way so as to allow for complete freedom of action and thought, and so be literally and psychologically unencumbered if the best is to be got out of the machine. The nuisance of gold wrist watches, fountain pens, colourful neckties, and uncontrollable tobacco packs do not impress the spectators, quite the contrary should the demonstration not be working out to schedule or expectations.

The aim of any demonstration should be to cover as complete a cross section of work as possible and this is best achieved by mapping out a specific project, in lieu of just using the machine aimlessly or, as in the case of earthmoving, where "dirt is pushed around until it is lost". This will ensure that the plant has the capacity to perform the duties to at least a fair standard of accuracy and reliability measured over a given unit of time, and also be a pointer as to operator reaction.

Most plant designed and built overseas can be economically applied to meet the needs of our industries. However, there is always the rare item which is said to be equal to the task, but which could become a costly experiment for the unsuspecting in the event of failure in early life, or the necessity for modifications. Equipment such as this should definitely be by-passed, knowing from experience that the lowest priced plant is not always the best investment.

The average user cannot afford to become the "guinea pig" in taking on prototypes or other untried machines and so should be guarded against tempting offers of large discounts or attractive trade-ins.

Reasonable intervals should be allowed for discussion and, if necessary, a further coverage of the technical aspect of servicing and adjustments. Remember, no new item of plant is seen in true perspective until it has performed considerable service and so one must look very closely to be able to form any sort of an opinion in the short duration of a nominal demonstration.

By now it is necessary to summarise the approach to the problem of assessing the potential of the various equipment, with the view to making the necessary reports or perhaps contracting to purchase. In other words, whilst the operations have been under way, what have we been looking for?

These points may be itemised as follows:-

1. A machine with adequate power for the purpose and still have a healthy reserve for all emergencies.
2. Simplicity and ease of operation, together with the minimum requirements of time and effort for adjustments, lubrication, and alterations to equipment.
3. Operator comfort as an essential in this modern age and this can be affected by numerous disadvantages. Apart from seating as in the case of motor vehicles and accessibility of controls, there is to be considered, good vision, ventilation, rain or sun protection, control of fumes, etc.
4. Observe any good "built in" safety features, such as access to the machine by way of good steps or footboards, starting devices interlocked with controls, parking locks, etc.
5. On the other hand watch for hazards in the form of components minus adequate guards or covers, risk of starting fires, either on the ground or within the machine, risk of explosions, close proximity of heated parts, units under pressure which could cause injury by bursting.
6. Inadequacies must also be taken into account, for example, badly positioned openings for replenishing fuel and lubricants, and also for recurring adjustments, insufficient instruments and indicators, required for both the efficient operation of the machine and perhaps to meet the requirements of local laws.
7. Simplicity of body styling, with emphasis on the absence of superfluous features unsuitable for rough bush or similar conditions.

8. Suitability of power units for your particular work, where "high torque" slower speed models may give better performance and longer life, than high speed and so-called "high efficiency" models.
9. Query all points where dimensions or capacities have been reduced over previous models of similar rating. These changes, it may be claimed, are in the interests of reducing unnecessary weight or production costs, but in the long run may have a definite adverse affect on the quality of the machine.
10. Investigate all guarantees and warranties and do not necessarily accept the statements of salesmen as to such guarantees or warranties, technical specifications or performances, unless they are conveyed in writing, or per medium of printed literature presented by the firm and be said to represent the equipment. It may be well to remember that, under common law, no firm or employer can be held liable for claims arising from verbal statements made by their representatives.
11. Do not necessarily accept the sales angle often put forward that "so and so firm has purchased several", as this may only be intended to infer that unless you do likewise, then you may be judged as one who is not up to date with the latest trends in industry and so risk the associated criticisms. Likewise, the claims often made that the same plant performs satisfactorily in other environments or industries considerably different from those immediately concerned, cannot be accepted in their entirety, as cannot many elaborate photographic representations.
12. Investigate all aspects governing the introduction of the equipment into the local scene, viz. whether it complies with Police or other local traffic laws, is acceptable to the property owner with regard to fire risk, or damage to property by virtue of size or weight, acceptable to all parties on the project in the interests of personal safety, acceptable to insurance bodies (at a reasonable premium).
13. The background of the Agents may need a search into, if there is to be an assurance of reasonable after sales service and parts supply, together with staff who are fully conversant with the maintenance.
14. Consider closely whether the new model warrants immediate adoption, or whether it would be more desirable to continue with models in current use in the interests of standardisation, or at least until the new unit has been proven by larger organisations which can afford to take the risks.
15. Actually sight workshop and field service manuals, and specialised service tools, in order to ascertain their true value and availability.
16. In passing, it may be well to observe an attitude of non-committance in opinions expressed during or immediately following such demonstrations, thus allowing freedom to carry out comparison tests on other plant or research at other levels.

And finally, if after the most intensive research of this nature, the item is then purchased, previously unseen and unexpected problems and failures continue to dominate the scene and as sometimes is the case, to succeed in turning the salesman's "excursion" into the industry, into a "nightmare journey" for those left "holding the candle".