

How to Get the Parts You Need, and When You Want Them

It has been a long time since I wrote an article for *The Kansas Lifeline*. I was a KRWA employee 18 years ago. I then began work in the waterworks supply industry. I thought this article might be of help to those folks who specify and order parts and supplies for the waterworks industry.

Let's begin with this comment: Just because it can be found on a Web site, in a catalog or a factory representative says it can be made does not mean it is readily available! Almost any product can be obtained if given enough time and spending a lot more money than is necessary. The old saying, "There's nothing that time and money won't cure" comes to mind. Usually a similar product that is available will do the job just fine.

RUSH orders

Now don't take me wrong, there are times when emergencies occur, and those cannot be helped. The instances I would like to address are "perceived emergencies". These are times when the items are not needed as quickly as perceived. For example, an expansion on an existing water or sewer line has probably been in the planning stage for

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a considerable time. Now that planning has been completed, someone thinks the project needs to be started tomorrow. Rush orders can be done occasionally, but they cannot be accomplished all the time. The manufacturers are not equipped to handle that kind of business with regularity. They are simply not geared for it. They have to run large productions of the same item in order for them to be profitable and to keep prices low. There is always the question, "Whose order is the biggest rush?"

I know of one manufacturer who has instituted a fee for rush orders. They charge \$100 above and beyond the price of the product and the shipping charges. The reason for this simply is

they had been receiving so many rush orders they could not handle day-to-day business, as well as the rush order business. They had to stop production and change the machines to make the one or two items for a rush order. Machine set-up took considerable time, and then they had to make the items. The machine would then have to be reset to continue on with the regular production. Enough of these rush orders in a day stop regular production. To top it off they had too many of these same rush orders returned for various reasons. These included wrong item ordered or the end user decided to do something different to speed up the project. Some products were returned because they weren't needed after all. More and more manufacturers are not willing to take back items that are not regular stocking items.

An example scenario

Our firm just went through an interesting scenario on a rush order. We had a customer in a big hurry to get a 12-inch MJ cross. This is heavy and has to be shipped by truck line. We have a great freight rate if the customer can be patient. One or two days can

actually save a lot of money. We could have had it shipped from our supplier direct to the customer for \$87.90 and it would have arrived in two days. Our customer required it the next day with morning delivery. This cost the customer \$1,250 in freight alone! Keep in mind this was not used to repair a blow out or another type of water leak. It was simply a mistake in the planning and installation process of extending a new line. This “rush order” could have been avoided with good communication between the interested parties.

An important point for those who order materials is to keep in mind that the person who is taking your order needs to know if there is something on your order that you will be needing quickly. If you give an order to someone and it has an item that is needed in a few days or earlier than the rest of the order, then be sure to explain that to the salesperson. Supply companies can make things happen quicker than normal, but they have to know what items need special attention. Items can be ordered individually for faster service. It takes

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longer to get parts if there is a larger order at the factory waiting until the entire order is ready to ship. If you call in and want an item broken out of the order process it creates problems and that is where mistakes tend to happen. So let your order taker know what items you may need as priorities when you place your order.

The ordering process

When you need something and are not sure what you need, just admit it and work with your salesperson or customer service representative. I have had the best luck getting customers the correct materials the first time when they begin their conversation saying they don't know what to order, but here is what they want to do. The worst case

scenario is when someone acts like they know what they want but only have a very basic knowledge of what is available and how the product works. That situation creates all sorts of opportunities for the incorrect parts to be requested.

There's nothing wrong with a little humility. The staff at supply houses work with common items every day. Let them guide and help you get the right material. Don't be a know it all and try to bluff your way through an order that you are not completely sure of. While I am on the subject of personnel and waterworks supply establishments, please do not think the ladies who work in this industry are not well versed in waterworks. I personally know of many that will put the guys to shame in product knowledge. One fellow would call in a few years back and get our best customer service person, who was female, would always then request her to “get me a guy who knows something”. The joke was on him. He already had the best person and was going to get someone who was not as knowledgeable or as likely to handle his requests as well.

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Helpful hint and reminder for everyone

Today, with all the hands-free phone equipment and making calls as you are driving, the background noise and poor connections do not make for clear and concise communication. Also when talking over a speaker phone in the office there are times the sound quality is less than desirable. The message is this. It's important that people you are communicating with are able to hear and understand you. Talk slowly and clearly. For example, when placing orders, when someone talks fast and runs words together and adds in part numbers, the chance of missed communication increases. Most people cannot write or type on a computer as fast as someone can speak. Consider also, the person you are talking to has to think about what you are saying. If the sales representative is also reviewing a manufacturer's Web site, additional time might be required.



Many water systems have both 5/8 meters and 5/8 x 3/4 meters. Water system personnel may only ask for a 5/8 or a 3/4. When questioned further the common answer is "They are the same size on both ends." The supply house then needs to ask numerous questions unless a prior order is available.

Document your order

When you call in an order please make sure and document the name of the person the order is given to. This will make things a whole lot easier if you need to add to the order or change something on the order. Even though there are other people who will help you when you call back, you

won't have to answer the same questions again that you already answered on your first contact. It will also save you and the personnel at the supply house a lot of time if you have to call back with more information about the order you placed. Future orders will go smoother if you try to work with the same person each time

you order. They will soon learn your likes and dislikes and will be able to accommodate you better.

Review the product

A good way to make sure that you are getting what you really want and need is to take time to look up the manufacturer's information on their Web site for the items you are interested in. Doing so serves many purposes. It will allow you to use the same language as the inside salesperson you will be talking to. Also it enables you to answer the inevitable questions that you will be asked. You will receive a greater appreciation for what the salesperson has to do to handle your request.

If you are truly in a bind, try not to be too particular about brands or styles. Most warehouses have something that will work but it may not be the brand or style of item you prefer to use on a daily basis. Remember you are in a hurry to get the water back on. You may need to be receptive to small changes in order to get the job done quickly.

Describe and verify

Supply houses can also provide uncommon items for you. These require more time and study by both the seller and purchaser. Be very sure

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of what you need from the start. A good supply house person will listen to every word you say, trying to figure out just what you need. They will be looking in catalogs, on the Internet and phoning and emailing all the description and information to the factory or other branches. Chances are the factory will still want more information than what was provided. If you give bad information in the beginning, it will stick with the order all the way through the process and you will receive the wrong item.

When you receive the items be sure to check the material to make sure you got what you wanted. Do not wait for two weeks or just before you need it to make sure that it is correct. Look at the parts as soon as you can after receiving the order. Open the shipment to verify the products are correct. We have had customers return items in whatever box they had handy at the time. We have also had manufacturers put the wrong items in the boxes as well. Just because the part number on the box is correct does not guarantee that is what is in the box. There are likely many people who handled your order. Mistakes can and do happen. It is far better to catch any problem early on instead of waiting until you are in the middle of a job and learn you didn't get what you needed.

People who order parts need to be knowledgeable on what function the parts serve and how the parts work. Anyone who does not actually use the products should go to extra lengths in communicating with the people who will be using the parts before ordering. This will save time in the ordering process and help insure that the correct parts will be shipped.

Reorders

If the parts you need have been purchased before at the supply house you are working with then it is possible to look up past purchases on the supply house computer. This works really well if you have the part number you used the last time. If you have the manufacturer's part number it will work also. Without the part number (even if the item has been purchased before), the information you are giving to the order taker is subject to their interpretation of what you want. Using part numbers eliminates the potential for problems. Another thing about part numbers – use the entire part number when ordering. I have had people use just the beginning or end of a number. That is more confusing than helpful.

As in all industries, products change. Some items are discontinued. Still people will continue specifying and ordering them. Then they are disappointed to learn that they are not available. Items that come to mind include odd size pipe, oversize fittings for oversize pipe and older style water meters, to name just a few.

New items that haven't been out very long can cause problems because they may not be available or they may still have some teething problems. They may be on a table in a trade show as a sample but production has not yet begun. Typically, there will be some disruption in the initial shipments. As an example, we had an order for a new item that got clear to the end user when the factory called and told us that the threads were British pipe threads and not the NPT threads we use here in America.

One last thing that will help you put in an order that is more accurate. Make sure your list is complete before you call. In doing so, you won't have to call back to add on and it will help visualize your order as you write it down. You will also have a way of checking to see that you got what you ordered when it arrives.

Returns and policies

I would like to review returns, and one of the many reasons that we all need to try to get things right the first time. I know of very few supply houses

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Tips on how to obtain the correct parts – and have them when needed

1. Try to order items that are readily available, unless you can wait for uncommon items.
2. Try to keep rush orders to a minimum to reduce costs as well as letting the supply chain function as normally as possible. Be sure to let the order taker know how soon the items are needed.
3. If you are not sure of what you are ordering do a little homework and look up the parts to at least be able to use the correct terminologies.
4. Work with the sales person who is taking the order – not against him or her. It's okay to admit it when you are not sure of what will work best in your application.
5. Make a list to work from using the part numbers you know from previous orders that were correct or those that you researched online or in catalogs. Making a list also helps ensure you get everything you need.
6. In order to get the right credit for returns send a copy of the packing slip or invoice with the items being returned.
7. Last and most important of all, order far enough in advance to allow time for unforeseen delays. No supply house will always have what you want in the quantity you need. The shelf may be full the day before you order and be empty when you place your order. There is not a computer or crystal ball yet invented to predict when orders will be placed.



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or manufacturers who can complete returns without a lot of confusion. We have a major manufacturer, who in this age of computers, still has a form they fill in with handwritten information. It can be difficult if not totally impossible to read the handwriting. It seems that the world is geared to send out orders but not to take back items.

One thing that is a big help is to have the packing slip or invoice that lists the parts that you want to return. We have had quite a few items returned to us that we never sold in the first place. In one instance, a very good customer brought back some curb boxes. I just happened to be at the warehouse counter when he brought them in. I noticed that it was a brand that we didn't sell and questioned him about the paperwork. He didn't have it but assured me that they had been purchased from our business. After a time-consuming search I reported that I could not find any documentation that showed we had sold them to his city. Fortunately, his right hand man was with him and called the city clerk who looked the order up and provided the correct supplier of the parts. Thus it ended well but a lot of time and effort on all parties was expended. They had to load up the wrong parts and take them back to their shop and start all over to get them returned.

Dan Clemens is a Senior Buyer at HD Supply Waterworks in McPherson, KS. Prior to that, Dan was a purchasing agent for Water Products, Inc. for fourteen years. Dan was outside salesman and sales Manager for Central Service, Inc. waterworks supply for 10 years.



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