EVALUATING YOUR COATING COMPANY

Abstract: How does my company compare to other firms that do coating?
Most companies, with coating processes as part of their manufacturing, may not
be aware how they stack up against competing firms. The first impression by a
visitor to your plant is the appearance of each area and the work force. These
impressions are important and we will look at an evaluation exercise that can
provide ways to develop a picture of their appearance to outsiders, increase
efficiency, your competitive edge and lower your costs.

Over the years, a number of firms using a coating process have asked me “How
does my company compare to other coating companies?”

Most companies, with coating processes as part of their manufacturing, may not
be aware how they stack up against competing firms. Unless they have recently
hired technical staff from outside, who have worked at other coating companies,
there may be a bit of tunnel vision.

Many types of visitors can tour through your plant. Besides the company related
guests such as executives, board members and stockholders, others include
service personnel, customers and potential customers, vendors and even
competitors. If you are willing to ask for their impressions you may gain insight.

The first impression by a visitor to your plant is the appearance of each area and
of the work force. Not only are these two items important for creating a positive
image for an outsider, they are also indicative of how the plant will be run. As
they walk through the plant the visitor will take a hard look at the sophistication,
condition and age of the equipment, both at the coaters and in the support areas.

What can be done to rate yourself against the norm in the coating industry? How
about an internal audit?

Try some roll playing. Put yourself, and possibly some key staff members, into
the shoes of an outsider. Look around with the fresh eyes of a prospective
customer or even a new CEO on a tour. Take a tour of the plant and then
regroup for a critique of the facility and what might be improved.

Here are some of the things you might look for in your facilities.

**Plant Entrance & Lobby** - When visitors first enter your plant the impressions
start here. Pictures, display cases showing products and manufacturing steps.
Awards are good items to have on display.

**Cleanliness** - When a client or even a new operator walks into the
manufacturing floor will they have a good impression? The operation should be
neat and well organized, free of clutter, well lit and free of fumes. This first
impression not only telegraphs a lot about the maintenance of the plant and
machinery but also the quality of the product and the management philosophy.
Mixing facilities - Mix rooms are often the worst looking area in the plant. They can be especially bad if the mixing is done in house and is done in pails, drums or large tanks. If premixed fluids are delivered they may need blending or solids adjustment. All of this can lead to splashes and spills.

Coating equipment - Coating lines are often problematic. Major issues are most often related to older drives and instrumentation. Another issue is the condition of the area surrounding the machine, especially the coating heads. Many times the area is dark, dirty and cluttered. There is peeling paint, rust and dirt overhead and on top of equipment. Upgrading equipment is most often cost justified but even older lines, if well maintained, cleaned and painted can do an adequate job and look very presentable.

Lab facilities - Laboratories, both quality and R&D, should be neat, clean and well lit. Instruments should be easily accessible and the work area not cluttered. The workflow and storage of samples must be well thought out. If you are trying to project a high technical competency, here is an area where modern test equipment and neatness will help.

Warehousing - Another potential problem can come from moving in-process and finished goods through the building. Litter, clutter and water on the floor on rainy days can quickly build up and may require constant clean up.

Management philosophy - Be willing to discuss your management’s plans for the near future. What kind of capital will be reinvested in the current operation? Any plans for upgrades or expansions, or, is it business as usual. Compared to a firm that is into or planning an upgrade, the status quo may not be good enough.

Quality philosophy - Quality programs of some sort all seem to have a positive impact on the bottom line and the customers’ perceptions. “Make it right the first time”, “Total Quality”, “Six Sigma”, ISO certification, Certified Quality, etc. are all means to this end.

Technical support staff - For coating development and high quality production, a strong engineering staff is a must. The process and equipment engineers should have some prior experience in coating, as this is not a subject you learn in college. Hands on experience or in depth seminars and training are a must.

Going Green - Today many customers are looking for your environmental impact. Point out the recycle of packaging materials for the raw material. Indicate how hazardous waste is handled in the solid, liquids and gaseous (VOC) streams. Is there energy recovery used for the dryers and how effective has it been? How are waste liquids handled?

Internal Audit - Here are a number of steps you can take to evaluate your internal perception to the outside world. You can hire an outside consultant. You can tour the plants of other companies, if you can gain access. Or you can do your own internal audit.
Try some roll playing. Put yourself, and possibly some key staff members, into the shoes of an outsider. Look around with the fresh eyes of a prospective customer or even a new CEO on a tour. Think like an outsider or potential customer. Start in a conference room to clear your mind and morph into the role of an outsider.

Roll playing can be a big help both in the exercise and the morale of the troops. Here are some interesting assignments: Plant Manager played by an Operator. Engineer played by Sales/Marketing and a Mechanic played by an Engineer.

Tour of the plant and look hard at the facility, especially areas you normally do not frequent. Then regroup for a critique of the facility and what might be improved. Be sure to capture all the problems, suggestions and solutions. Then have the team work toward prioritizing the issues, selecting appropriate solutions and plans for implementation.

Larry Gogolin is a consultant to the coating industries with over 40 years of experience. He works with clients in the areas of product and process development, manufacturing improvements, equipment selection, company evaluations and project management. He is an independent consultant and on the Technical Advisory Panel for AIMCAL. Larry can be reached at Gogolin & Associates, 978-779-9845, e-mail: lgogolin@gogolincoating.com

September, 2011