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Leveraging Quick Shipment in the Fluid Automation Supply Chain

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When it comes to getting automation parts shipped, everyone in our industry wants to receive those parts as quickly as possible—it's a natural inclination. But often, speed is more than nice—it's critical.

There are many components in fluid automation where the rate of access counts. Those components include fluid control elements such as solenoid valves, angle body piston valves, redundant control systems and linear position indicators. They also include fluid power products such as valve manifolds, filters, regulators, lubricators, cylinders, grippers, slides and gantries.

For original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), such parts are often one of the last pieces added to a new equipment design. Thus, ready availability can become an important gating factor in timely delivery of the equipment to customers. For end users, such availability is just as vital: being forced to wait for a component can bring an entire process or plant to a standstill.

This article addresses leveraging supplier quick shipment throughout an operation and demonstrates how, when it comes to fluid automation, using the right quick-ship program in the right way can have a significant impact on business, as well as the bottom line.

AVOIDING UNPLANNED SHUTDOWNS

For end users who run processing operations, accelerated delivery schedules provide risk prevention. For today's time-crunched businesses, long lead times are not only unacceptable, but sometimes not survivable. Downtime for a single piece of equipment can mean unexpected shutdown of an entire operation, with consequent crippling costs, schedule disruptions and deeply dissatisfied customers.

Planned deployment of qualified supplier quick-ship programs can eliminate or greatly reduce the risk of catastrophic shutdowns for machines, processes and plants.

Express shipment can also be factored into maintenance arrangements to shorten the intervals allotted for planned shutdowns. In this case, production lines can be engineered with greater efficiencies, and processors have an opportunity to get plants up and running sooner, saving money and precious time.

SLASH MRO INVENTORIES

Excessive parts inventories for maintenance and repair operations (MRO) often represent a serious waste of space in warehouses, supply rooms and service vans. Increasingly, businesses realize too much inventory also can represent a drag on profitability. Such excesses tie up trade working capital that could better be invested elsewhere.

Relying on a quick-ship program with a wide product range means end users can obtain part replacements and rebuild kits on an expedited basis. The result is reduced MRO inventory for maintenance departments. This lower inventory, as well as the quick turnover time, can substantially cut inventory cost.

A critical element here, however, is choosing a supplier with a shipping program that covers the exact products and parts needed, not just a few of the more popular models. If a supplier makes a necessary part but

doesn't quick-ship, that puts the company in need back to keeping extra parts for the long term *just in case*.

ENSURE GREATER ASSET AVAILABILITY

In recent years, plant executives that regularly engage in high-level planning put more and more emphasis on the importance of maximizing the availability of critical process assets. Simply put, a plant can be more profitable if the equipment is up and running as long as possible.

At this level, we are not talking about one or two emergency calls for quick shipment. The goals here are a combination of minimizing both planned and unplanned downtime, reducing maintenance efforts and costs, optimizing process performance via increased process efficiency and extending the lifetimes of associated process equipment.

SLASH DEVELOPMENT/BUILD CYCLES

On many projects, it makes sense for OEMs to establish quick or just-in-time shipment of fluid automation components as a standard—not only for prototype part procurement, but for beta and pilot phases as well.

These pneumatic or valving components are often added to an equipment assemblage relatively late in the phase, so any delay in supplying them can prove fatal to timely delivery of the finished machine. At the opposite end, leveraging shipping of critical parts available through accelerated scheduling can have positive effects across the board.

Experience shows that strategic quick shipping may sometimes cut days or even weeks from OEM development and production cycles.

LAST-MINUTE CHANGES

Optimization adjustments, new feature sets and numerous other tweaks to an original design—whether that design originates internally or by customer request—are the bane of many OEM development projects.

Good quick-shipment programs provide ready solutions by allowing OEMs to purchase fluid automation components to make critical last-minute engineering changes without disrupting production or product delivery schedules.

MINIMAL TIME TO MARKET

All too often—and sometimes regardless of technical merits—the first design that makes it to market wins the most market share.

Obviously, reliable quick shipment of fluid automation products alone cannot ensure an OEM of initial market entry and dominance. However, it can ensure that no project misses the mark because of delays caused by late arrival of desperately needed valves or by cylinders that fail to materialize at critical times.

CONCLUSION

Perceptive managers across multiple industries are realizing that their fluid automation supplier's quick shipment program can be more than an occasional convenience. They're making regular use of such programs from reliable vendors as integral parts of strategic operational planning.

Planners say this approach saves time and resources, improves operational performance, achieves competitive advantages, optimizes supply chain and shortens purchasing cycles. OEMs confirm they've been able to cut development cycles, accommodate late changes and shorten time to market. End users report they're avoiding shutdowns, reducing maintenance and repair parts inventories, and increasing asset availability. VM

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