

The funny things that happen in the Internet forums

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Some of you, who are at least as old as I am, may find the title of this column familiar. It's my take on the title of a Broadway comedy first produced in 1962 called "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," based upon the book written by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart. I remember the movie version with Zero Mostel released in 1966. It was a very funny flick. If you've never seen it, you should rent a copy and watch it.

My reason for using this title is to discuss the use of the Internet and its blogs or forums to obtain knowledge or information on the topic of powder coating. These venues provide unbridled and unedited information on a variety of subjects on the topic of powder coatings. Some of the information is very good and can be helpful when you're trying to support a powder coating process that is having difficulties. However, you have to be cognizant of the fact that by definition anyone can ask a question in these forums and anyone can provide their opinion or answer to that question. This doesn't mean that the person answering the question or providing the opinion has anymore knowledge or experience than the person asking the question in the first place. It just means they have a computer and an Internet connection to publish their "advice."

An interesting trend in Internet blogs and forums

I've spent some time on these forums to see what subscribers of several magazines were talking about (when I had the time that is). What I noticed were questions asked by readers who were having trouble with their powder or equipment or pretreatment system and so on getting numerous answers from a variety of sources. Some answers were provided by other powder coating end users, while other answers were provided by suppliers, quasi-consultants, and techno-geeks. I figured the techno-geeks were lost and ended up on these forums by mistake when they were looking for the forum on Windows XP.

Upon careful examination of the questions and the posted responses (I can't actually say they were answers, as they really didn't answer the question), I noticed an interesting trend. The other powder coating end users provided their response in terms of their particular experience. Although this information is very important, it's often incomplete, as it's very rare that one issue is created by one problem with one solution. Frequently, there are several problems, each with multiple possible solutions, that can cause an issue with a powder coating process. Without a broad base of exper-

ience to draw on, you wouldn't be capable of providing a complete and cogent answer to the original question. There's always the possibility that other end users will post their experiences as well, eventually providing a complete answer to the question. However, you have to ask yourself, "how many successful powder coating end users have the time to surf the net to offer advice, possibly to a competitor, on Internet forums?" I suspect that not many have the time.

The suppliers always responded to the questions with products or services they sell. Sometimes, they had the right solution, but often they were hoping to get the questioner interested enough to call or email them. They would say things like: "Our company has the solution to your problem, call us at 555-1212." Now don't get me wrong. Very good companies are out there with products that can help many powder coating end users with creative solutions to their problems. However, that doesn't mean that there's a product for every problem. Besides, improper use of these products may only make the problem worse.

The techno-geeks typically offered computer code to questioners or directed the questioner to other Web sites for additional help. Sometimes, they offered computer tools to make the problem go away. For instance, someone asked how they could improve the profit in their powder coating business, and a techno-geek recommended a better accounting system software package. Although that may help let you know how bad the problem is, I can guarantee you that no one ever made more money because of their accounting software alone. Knowing your market and operational costs to properly position your company's services and products, and to determine your selling price is the only way you get to be more profitable. While having a costing software program or accounting software program is helpful in attaining this goal, it alone is not the silver bullet.

The quasi-consultants are the most fun to read in these forums. It's like

watching a child ride a bike with training wheels for the first time. They're unsure of their skills at this point and hedge with their answers, not willing to commit to make the "hard call." The most difficult thing about being a consultant is to tell someone something that they don't necessarily want to hear. The real trick is to do this with conviction and back it up with your credentials and experience. Most quasi-consultants have none of these tools yet (experience, conviction, or credentials), so they hedge their answers, or provide vague answers, to avoid the potential liability. This is why these quasi-consultants often have a regular "day job" to ensure they have something to fall back on if this consultant gig doesn't work out.

Caution advised on the Internet

Now I know that the world hasn't been the same since the Internet has become so popular. I also know that the dissemination of information is the focus and goal of using the Internet. However, I just want to you to exercise caution and realize that you may not be getting the quality information you expect from Internet blogs and forums.

We need to take the same approach many universities and colleges have taken with research obtained from the Internet and not rely on one source for this information. We've all heard the horror stories of research projects and term papers written for class based solely upon the information provided from Wikipedia and other Internet sources. Often, the results of these research efforts contradicted known facts and the textbooks used for that particular class. This is the reason most schools no longer allow this work to be based upon just one source.

By all means, you should take advantage of the various Web-site forums on the topic of powder coatings to obtain information. Just don't use it as your only source of information. Verify the Internet information with the information from other sources. There are numerous books on the topic of powder coating that offer

information that has been vetted by editors, research assistants, technical committees, trade organizations, and so on to ensure that the topic is discussed completely and accurately. This may take some additional time but may save you time and money in the long run.

The old principle of commerce "caveat emptor," Latin for "let the buyer beware," has special meaning when asking someone with unknown experience or credentials how to fix a problem with your powder coating process. While this may seem very obvious to some, I expect that others will be happy I decided to discuss "the funny things that happen in the Internet forums." **PC**

Editor's note

For further reading, see the "Index to Articles and Authors 1990-2007," Reference and Buyer's Resource Issue, *Powder Coating*, vol. 18, no. 9 (December 2007), or click on the Article Index at [www.pcoating.com]. Have a question? Click on Problem solving to submit one.

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