

The value of lubricants and lubrication

By R. David Whitby

During the last several months we have all heard a great deal about the huge increases in the prices for raw materials, both base oils and additives, used in finished lubricants. As a result of the increases in the costs of crude oils, natural gas and chemicals, manufacturers of base oils and additives have experienced problems maintaining adequate profits. At the same time, manufacturers of lubricants have found it difficult to raise the prices of their products in the market. Manufacturers and users of lubricants are all being squeezed.

Unfortunately, during this time I have heard much less about the value of lubricants and lubrication.

I teach training courses dealing with the lubricants business and technology, and I often ask my students, "Are there any industries that do not use lubricants?" This is a trick question, since there are no industries that do not use lubricants of one type or another. (Some industries use many more lubricants than others, while some industries use only specialized lubricants).

The economies of the developed and developing world rely, among many other technologies, on the correct application of lubricants and lubrication in all types of machines and equipment. However, marketers and sellers of lubricants and lubrication technologies have generally paid too little attention to promoting the value of the products and services they provide. Too many developers and marketers of lubricants have focused for too long on the technolo-

gy at the expense of the value.

Perhaps it is time that many more customers should be asked to recognize the contribution made by lubrication and lubricants to our society.

"Value" is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "the regard that something is held to deserve; importance or worth." If customers don't know how important lubricants and lubrication are to their everyday activities, how can they be expected to value them? It is probably true that, without lubricants and lubrication, everyday activities would literally grind to a halt.

The importance of lubricants can be described in many ways. For example:

- Lower viscosity means reduced friction and lower energy consumption.
- Longer oil life means lower total cost, better cost-effectiveness and reduced disposal.
- Less wear means less maintenance and longer equipment life.
- Lower volatility means longer oil life and less environmental pollution.
- Better thermal and oxidative stability means higher energy density and better energy efficiency.

Tribology also plays an important part:

- Carefully engineered surface finish means reduce friction and wear.

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- Surfaces with friction-reducing or wear-resistance coatings means longer equipment life and reduced energy consumption.
- Tight mechanical tolerances means reduced lubricant leakage, lower wear and better energy efficiencies.
- Correct material selection means reduced friction and wear, leading to longer equipment life.

Customers need to be made aware of these and many other actual benefits when they are asked to pay higher prices for lubricants and lubrication. Many items of equipment will simply not function without the correct lubrication or lubricant. Customers who refuse to pay higher prices for lubricants may be sacrificing more than they think.

I have found that developers and marketers of lubricants, who focus on value rather than price, find it easier to convince customers of the need to pay for the higher costs of products when raw material prices go up. In my view, tribologists need to focus on developing and selling lubrication and lubricant solutions and services, not just products. <<

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