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How Much Quality? Ask the Customer

A quality revolution is taking place in America. Most companies now realize that to attain long-term success, high quality products and services are a prerequisite.

As knowledge of purchasers increases in all markets, customers expect increasing levels of quality. No longer is "I'll know it when I see it" or "good enough" acceptable. How much quality in our products and services is enough? The answer to this question will significantly affect our future success and may even determine our future existence.

First, we must define what we mean by quality. As commonly used, the word "quality" is quite vague and subjective. The term may be used to describe a level of workmanship, such as "high quality," or to directly describe excellence, such as "quality products." To make the meaning of the term more objective, we must strive to classify the parameters of quality into measurable quantities and to clearly communicate these parameters to all concerned. Since perfection in the strictest sense is not an attainable goal, how do we establish acceptable levels of quality?

We don't. Since our customers are the source of all sales, it stands to reason that they ultimately set the requirements for our products and services. Hence, quality is frequently defined as meeting the requirements of our customers. This sounds simple enough until we realize that just determining *who* our customer is, let alone what a clear definition of his requirements and expectations are, is difficult at best. We must also realize that the customer is more than the person who actually gives us the order. Owners, developers and design professionals are even more important customers since they actually create the construction projects that sustain our industry.

To analyze how the quality movement affects our industry, let's consider where we have been. Fortunately, precast/prestressed concrete is a superior construction material that lends itself to a wide variety of applications. Our members have blazed a trail over the last 40 years, establishing an image of quality for our products and services in the construction marketplace. PCI has helped immeasurably with contributions in the technical area. The PCI Plant Certification Program is recognized as the premier program of its kind and has contributed significantly to actual and perceived product quality.

PCI has also led the industry in partially defining quality through the publication and now wide acceptance of quality

control manuals for structural and architectural precast concrete products. While these manuals go a long way in technically defining quality, more work is needed — particularly in the familiar and highly visible quality parameters that the automobile industry has termed "fit and finish."

As technological changes take place and competitive conditions intensify, what is an acceptable level of quality today is likely to be inadequate tomorrow. So where do we go from here? Each Producer Member must first recognize that attainment of a level of quality sufficient to meet his customers' requirements is an essential element in attaining an adequate return on investment. Quality improves profitability through minimizing waste and increasing demand for our products. In addition, the planning required to provide a quality product or service improves productivity and minimizes costly re-work. Quality and the pursuit of excellence is a management decision that should be addressed, acted upon and fortified as needed. It is a state of mind that must begin at the top levels of management and be conveyed to and accepted by all company personnel.

PCI will continue to play a leading role in our industry's quality revolution. As we move closer to attaining 100 percent participation in the Plant Certification Program, the marketplace is increasingly recognizing the precast/prestressed concrete industry's commitment to quality. The addition of Field Certification has been recommended and is under consideration. These and other PCI programs and activities help to reinforce our various customers' awareness of precast concrete products and also influence how they are designed and specified.

In addition to existing PCI committee and staff work related to quality, the upcoming Management Activities Council will be soliciting your input in how to address quality management at both the company and industry levels.

The theme of our PCI Convention in Nashville this October is Quality. Join your colleagues and me in determining the direction of quality in our industry. See you in Nashville!

