



ASCO Numatics

John Meek tells how the world's largest supplier of solenoid valves stays number one thanks to top talent, unbeatable customer service, and products of superior construction.

Going With the Flow



How many companies formed in the 19th century can say that they remain the industry leader in the 21st? ASCO Numatics can. Formed in 1888, the company made its name with magnetically operated valves and elevator controls. Those early successes ensured the future for the company, which is still the world's leading manufacturer of solenoid valves (automatic magnetically operated valves designed to control the flow of air, gas, water, oil, and steam).

A subsidiary of Emerson Electric, the Florham Park, NJ-based firm produces comprehensive fluid automation solutions, flow control, and pneumatics. It designs, manufactures, and sells solenoid automatic valves for use with liquid or gas. Important in flow control, solenoid valves are used in such process industries as oil and gas refining; bulk and fine chemical manufacture; potable water and wastewater treatment; and power generation, both traditional and nuclear. ASCO offers more than 50,000 types of solenoid valves and works with more than 400 major suppliers.

"ASCO's products have a reputation for reliability and long life. That's why we have such a large marketshare in the process plants—because downtime can mean hundreds of thousands of dollars per hour," said John Meek, president of

ASCO Numatics Americas. All valves are meticulously designed and 100% tested. Whereas most competitors make pneumatic valves with plastic components, ASCO Numatics uses stainless steel for internal spools.

In addition to process plants, ASCO makes valves for general industrial use. Its products are placed into compressors, gasoline dispensing pumps, hospital sterilizers, oxygen concentrators for medical use, and commercial washing machines. They create environmental controls for engines and pollution reduction, too.

With such a wide range of products, it only makes sense that ASCO serves a wide range of customers. The same company that provided solenoid valves for 80% of the planet's nuclear power plants supplies Disney with valves for special effects. The next time you pump gas or visit a theme park and take in the dancing fountains, Meek said, know that there's an ASCO engineer behind the scene.

Build from within

ASCO Numatics employs about 4,000 worldwide, and its parent Emerson employs more than 125,000. However, Meek states fairly quickly that numbers and product models



are less important than people. “We hire the most talented people that we can find technically, but they must also have a finely tuned understanding of our mission to provide our customers with great value and customer service.”

Meek cites ASCO Numatic’s job for BP. This summer, when BP was in the process of capping the oil leak, the ASCO team was there to help. “BP had to get a ship in place with instrumentation to measure the pressure, and the Coast Guard held the ship until they had some new valves in place. The customer chartered a plane to pick up the valves at our South Carolina facility. We put every bit of energy we had behind those resources and turned around a job that would normally have taken five weeks in only 48 hours.”

It was a true team effort. ASCO needed to find parts to make the valves. After consulting with suppliers and distributors, it located similar stock valves with different configurations, took them apart, ascertained what other parts were needed, and quickly reconfigured them. But Meek said such efforts are not atypical. “They’re fairly routine, actually; we have people in place who have the authority to go to extraordinary lengths to expedite a job and meet customer needs.”

Customer service extends to e-commerce, establishing a strong presence on the web and also Global Spec, the engineering search engine. The company website is sophisticated, offering automatic configurators. Customers plug in specs, and the configurator builds the product. Meek said that 2,000 discrete configurations can go out the same day and that in five or fewer days, the company can ship out an additional 30,000 configurations.

Along with customer service, ASCO places a premium on keeping diversity within the workforce. ASCO has offices in 42 countries. With global customers and suppliers, its reach must be global. “We hire for ability and diversity. Here at our headquarters we have 22 nationalities represented,” said Meek.

ASCO, which is currently hiring, recruits selectively and assertively. To build awareness with new college graduates, the company awards two \$5,000 scholarships to US engineering students who are pursuing careers in industrial automation-related dis-

ciplines. It makes \$1,000 grants to the engineering departments of the colleges in which the winners are enrolled.

The scholarships are merit based and are awarded on the candidate’s potential for leadership and for making a significant contribution to the engineering, instrumentation, systems, and automation professions, particularly as they relate to the application of fluid control and fluid power technologies, according to the company. Scholarship recipients may be eligible for an ASCO Numatics internship.

Once students come on board, they find more opportunities for learning. “We support continuing education greatly. It is essential for companies to keep and retain employees. In addition to tuition reimbursement programs, there is extensive product training, functional training for salespeople, and a leadership program through Emerson,” said Meek.

Management is founded on a four-point strategy to keep the company healthy and strong. Its tenets, in order, are dedication to customer service, quality, and rapid delivery; strong internal teamwork and communication; best cost (i.e., making sure that the company is fully competitive in all the products it manufactures); and investing for growth and new products.

The tenets have been in place for the past seven years. “Those four tenets have remained unchanged in good times and bad times,” said Meek. Although it seems the bad times at ASCO Numatics are few, even in this economy.

It is true that ASCO has been handling the effects of the Great Recession better than many, said Meek. After the 2008 stock market plunge, ASCO did not lay off any salespeople in the Americas division. “The economy was a challenge, but we’d positioned the company well, and we restructured quickly.”

As for the future, Meek sees similarities to the past. “We’re not resting on our laurels. We’ll continue to invest in new products, marketing, social media, and fulfillment to make it easy for customers to find what they need.” ■

—Mary Cresse

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