

Where, Oh, Where Has Our Quality Gone?

By Robert A. Dovich, ASQ, Fellow, CQE, CRE, Quality Manager, Field Fastener Supply Company

This is the first, and hopefully the last, of my ranting-and-raving columns about the quality (or lack of it) that I run across in my normal activities. Product failures seem to come at an accelerated pace lately, so let's begin by asking: "Where, oh, where has our quality gone?"

Consumer Products

Last year I purchased a new 25-inch stereo television set (you will find I'm a Madison Avenue dream; they advertise, I buy). I was told this set was "super." Within a week, the sound died. It was repaired in a day, only to fail again within a week. In my own unique way, I convinced the store to replace it with a new one. When the sound failed on that one, I convinced the store to replace it with another brand. Fifteen days after the warranty ran out, guess what?

I talked myself into buying a top-of-the-line gas range when we moved into our home—you know, with electric igniters and all that jazz. The electric igniters are supposed to save all kinds of money by eliminating pilot lights. Six months after the warranty ran out, the electric igniters died out, too. I could have bought a lot of natural gas for what that baby cost to repair.

How about a rowing machine for reducing the large upper body I've developed from pumping Twinkies and Ho Ho's. Within a couple of weeks one of the welds holding the cylinder to a bracket broke (guess I didn't know my own strength).

Within the last two years, I had a water softener put in and was told I was all set, that the unit was installed and tested. The first night it regenerated, the basement flooded. They repaired it, and the basement flooded again. The third time, they left with the unit.

When I bought my home, I had a fence installed to keep my dog inside the yard. The gate post was not cemented properly, so after 30 calls (no exaggeration), they came to recement the post. When they were done, the gate would no longer close, so they wired it shut until the cement dried. I never heard from them again.

Ever purchase a gas-powered grass trimmer (made by a well-known company)? My new one took a real man to get it started. Although it was adjusted, tuned up, you name it, this trimmer was so hard to start that my wife would no longer try it. I had to plan an open hour or two for trimming, as it might take as many as a hundred pulls to start the engine. Finally, after a carb rebuild didn't help, I put a sign on it and put it in my front yard when my

neighbor had a garage sale. At least I got \$10 from my \$150 trimmer (not including tune-ups). I kept expecting to read in the paper about a man having a heart attack while trying to start a lawn trimmer.

Other questions: Why is it that garage-door openers sold in the northern climates won't work properly when it gets below zero degrees? Why do we have to buy videocassette rewinders because the rewriter on the VCR is always the first thing to wear out? Why do humidifiers never seem to work well the second year? Why do basements always leak? Why do so many math textbooks have wrong answers in the back, causing hours of frustration for the student?

Computers

A while back, I purchased a home computer that was supposed to revolutionize home computing. Upon booting up, the computer would sometimes access Drive A, sometimes Drive B, sometimes neither. On some of the most popular programs, it wouldn't address the printer correctly.

Furnished software wouldn't work with the standard monochrome monitor supplied with the computer, because it was written for an optional color monitor. None of the popular boards would work with the computer because the slots were too short. The phone jack for the modem was soldered in at an angle, and I couldn't plug the phone line into it. I called the service people and got their supervisor's name. I called the supervisor and got his supervisor's name. I eventually got the chairman of the board's office, which agreed to a refund (sent by Federal Express) when I informed him I was giving a talk at a national conference on computers and quality, and I would be glad to relate the story.

I purchased a different brand of computer, which was set up and tested at the dealer. When I got the computer home and booted it up, the first message I received was Error 301 (a keyboard failure). The good news is that I have had no other failures with the original equipment in three years.

Those of you who use a hard drive know that backing it up is a must, as failures are inevitable. I didn't, and it did. The question is this: Why are hard-drive failures inevitable? Why do we accept this inevitable failure? We not only accept it, we purchase software to make back-up easier, because the back-up software supplied with the computer is woefully inadequate.

Why is it that software quality and reliability are so poor? Why

do I have to pay \$75 for an upgrade to Version 1.01 when all it does is fix the bugs that are in Version 1.00? Software companies use so many copy protection schemes that many products won't operate reliably from the hard disk. The companies say, "Sorry, we don't guarantee compatibility." I would be interested in hearing from you on software-quality problems. This is an issue that has been sorely neglected.

Automobiles

On a trip to Detroit, I rented a recently introduced luxury car that was an electronic marvel, except when, on the first day (1) the trunk-ajar light kept blinking when the trunk was closed; (2) the cruise control failed; (3) an emergency-brake-warning light wouldn't go off; (4) the gear-shift indicator wouldn't tell me which gear I was actually in; and (5) the electronic dash flickered and went black. Quality first?

That evening, they replaced the car with an imported luxury sports car and even gave me the first-day rental free (what a company). I found out that, in cold weather, the windshield washer wouldn't work and the speedometer would indicate two speeds: zero and 45 miles per hour. Those of you who have visited Detroit would probably say that a speedometer is an unnecessary option on their expressway system anyway, as it is either bumper-to-bumper or Katie-bar-the-door and put the pedal to the metal. But no windshield washer after a winter storm while driving on the expressway can be an experience.

I recently acquired a new car from one of the other auto companies. After noticing that the car vibrated during left turns, I went to the dealer (no, they did not tell me not to make left turns). They eventually discovered the engine was not centered properly, made the adjustment and called to let me know the car was fixed. I picked it up on my way to the airport and quickly found that their definition of fixed meant they had done some work on it.

Upon the second visit, the dealer discovered that the engine mounts were welded off location, but was not allowed to repair it without the zone manager's approval. I made an appointment with the zone manager, took a day off from work, showed up at the dealer, only to find that the zone manager couldn't make it that day. Eventually, the problem was resolved, but other failures included exhaust-system gaskets and oil leaks (of the massive variety). In addition, the gas pedal fell off, the drivers-side door mirror moved on bumps and the engine would die on the highway when it rained. Needless to say, that car and I have parted ways. Enough auto-company beating. They have made some large strides in the quality-improvement area over the past few years,

and the American-built cars I purchase exceed the quality of the imported brands I have driven. On the other hand, competition from imports has forced a lot of us who wouldn't have improved our systems to do just that.

Airlines

In another life, I flew on commercial airlines about four times a week and, in my opinion, these people need help. Why is it that airline personnel cannot tell you when a plane is going to leave? I arrive at 5:30 for a 6:00 flight and find an empty gate. As my schedules are generally tight, I ask when the flight will actually leave and am told 6:00. "Is the incoming plane on the ground?" "No." If you ask where the plane is, they say they don't know (that's scary in itself). Why do cockpit warning lights only come on after the plane leaves the gate and has been in line for 45 minutes? Why is it that only about 75 percent of the frequent-flier mileage gets credited to your account? Why are five-minute delays at least 35 minutes in length? Why do airlines assign your preassigned seat to someone else if you haven't shown up 10 minutes prior to flight time, especially when you have a boarding pass that was printed when you purchased your ticket?

Counterpoint

Not all the news is bad. There are many times that services or products have, in fact, exceeded my wildest expectations. About four years ago, a local pizza chain sold digital watches for \$1 with the purchase of a large pie. My watch has been covered with paint, vibrated when I use power tools and otherwise mistreated. There are staples in the band to hold it together, but the watch continues to work just fine.

One company that makes software for backing up protected software discovered a bug and sent out letters by overnight mail to all who had purchased it. Every affected party received its letter the next morning.

One of a set of lifetime-guaranteed knives broke when I used it as a screwdriver. The company refused to accept payment for repair, saying that the guarantee covered abuse, too. This same set of knives also carries a lifetime guarantee for sharpness. After 15 years of use, they are still as sharp as the day they were purchased. Yes, there are good-news stories, but they are less frequent than they should be.

Are my experiences unique? Do I seem to attract bad luck, or is our quality revolution more like a slow evolution? Perhaps being a quality/reliability professional makes me more sensitive to the lack of quality around me.