‘It’s good to have educated customers’

A prominent engineer challenges suppliers to help customers understand that lubricants are a critical operating component.

LUBRICATION ENGINEER BRYAN JOHNSON works at a nuclear power plant in Arizona’s Sonoran Desert outside Phoenix. This is an impressive and important job under any circumstances but especially so when that facility is the largest nuclear power plant in the United States. The Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station produces more than 30 million megawatt-hours of electricity annually—making it the largest power station in the country serving the energy needs of more than four million people in the Southwest.

Lubricant challenges at this sort of mega-facility were the topic when Johnson spoke at a technical session during the recent Independent Lubricant Manufacturers Association (ILMA) Annual Meeting in San Antonio, Texas. His presentation emphasized the fact that the Palo Verde operation regards lubricants as designed parts within the plant’s operating protocols, not as a secondary consideration or afterthought.

While a nuclear power plant is not exactly a typical industrial facility, the changed attitudes at Palo Verde also might be gaining acceptance at many other types of operations with a growing recognition that lubricants are a critical component within expensive capital equipment, according to Johnson. This trend, coupled with workforce changes brought about by the need for plants to replace long-tenured operating personnel with younger workers, presents lubricant suppliers with a golden opportunity.

In Johnson’s words, “It’s good to have educated customers, right?”

Sitting in the audience at the ILMA meeting that day, my reaction was twofold. One, this is a very good point! And, two, STLE can be of enormous help to suppliers who want to take the initiative and add value for customers who will benefit from a deeper understanding of fundamentals and sound practices.

STLE’s role in lubrication education dates back to our founding in 1944, so this is not new ground for the organization. But much as the plant environment is evolving, STLE in the past few years has changed both the nature of available content and ways to access that information. Content is targeted to segments within our audience, which means that end-users will find plenty of lubrication fundamentals and best practices advice that they can apply to their everyday problems. Access to this information is simple and inexpensive, thanks to greatly expanded digital content.

For example, did you know that since 2011 STLE has conducted over 60 technical Webinars, which have been recorded and are now archived on the STLE Website? In addition, there are six targeted e-newsletters dealing with technical issues in grease, metalworking fluids, power generation, synthetics and hydraulic lubricants and lubricant fundamentals. The Lube Fundamentals newsletter is being introduced in conjunction with a new best practices reprint series featuring TLT articles by STLE director of professional development Dr. Robert Gresham.

Distributing content to customers through our supplier members is what you would call a pass-along distribution strategy. In early 2014, STLE will launch a Website intended to provide a more direct connection between technical content and the lubricant end-user audience.

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This initiative is part of STLE’s new strategic plan, which emphasizes a value proposition built on the simple phase: Connect, Learn, Achieve. Clearly this is a proposition that targets the supplier and the end-user community as well. It’s a strategy to make sure that the tribology and lubricants community is ready and able to meet the demands of a changing industrial mindset that recognizes the value of an educated workforce.

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