

Technical Guide to Outsourcing Your Precision Metal Fabrication

A quick reference guide to choosing a new contract partner in a complex marketplace.

7 Secrets to Choosing a New Contract Partner

How do you qualify a new sourcing partner and ensure an efficient and problem free experience? Considering the following 7 points in your search will give you the leverage you need to make a decision you can feel confident about.

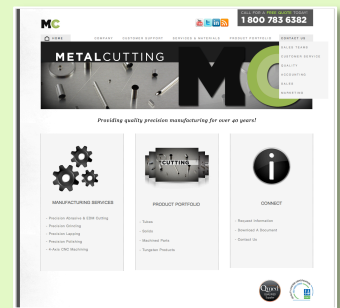
Communication

A vendor's responsiveness can be crucial to proper supply chain function, so it's important to know how committed a supplier is to quick, reliable contact. For example, what kind of protocol or best practices do they have in place for both customer correspondence and company wide news? Will you be dealing with a dedicated salesperson, or a general help line? And more importantly how quickly and efficiently can they respond to a concern or quality issue?



Experience

Expertise often comes in the form of experience. Though newer companies may still offer a quality product, those organizations that have a long history of service will not only have a more established work flow, but also a larger network of partners. You could start by simply asking how many years a company has been in business. You can tell a lot about a supplier's ability to innovate and provide quality service based on longevity.



What's in a website?

Reviewing a supplier's website is a great way to get a sense of their communication style.

Consider...

Do they list a general contact or give you access to specific departments or people within the company?

How many methods of communication do they make available? Just an email? Or local and toll free phone numbers, fax, document uploading and blog commenting?

Do they have a presence on social media sites like Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook?

Materials Knowledge Base

Experience goes hand-in-hand with technical acumen and a strong materials knowledge base. As technology evolves, simply knowing how a material reacts under mechanical stress is no longer enough. Today, it's vital that companies know how to improve the end use of component materials. For example, understanding how potassium doped or gold plated tungsten functions differently from 99.999% pure tungsten will mean a supplier can make smart recommendations based on production functionality.

Quality

It's important to remember that just because two companies appear to sell the same product, components vary greatly based on a material's country of origin and in-house quality standards. In the case of specialty metals, it is crucial to understand what your application requires in terms of material quality, and if your application is subject to FDA or other regulations, what restrictions you're required to abide by and standards you're expected to meet. (In light of the recently enacted Section 1502 of the Dodd-Frank act, you may be expected to produce proof of conflict-mineral free sources.) Critical questions include: Does your vendor have a transparent quality policy? Are they ISO 9000 (or higher) certified? Do they require their sources to complete a vendor questionnaire? What kind of in-house inspection do they provide? Would they be willing to subject samples to independent testing?

Secondary Services

In today's tight economic times, finding a supplier with secondary capabilities such as cut-to-length operations, grinding and machining services, straightening, or surface treatments like passivation, sandblasting or polishing is often a cost-conscious way to shorten your supply chain. However when asking a supplier about their capabilities, be conscious of how their methods meet your quality standards.

Time line

Lead times aren't always the most important consideration when choosing a supplier, especially when it comes to products comprised of specialty or precious metals. However determining your lot requirements early can help you decide whether or not a supplier can support your project plan. A good supplier is transparent about lead times, and will often be willing to

Critical Question

Do you know what materials are considered conflict-minerals, based on Section 1502 of the Dodd-Frank act?

Answer: Gold, Tin, Tantalum and Tungsten

maintain customer-specific inventory at an affordable price if you can commit to certain annual volumes.

Inventories

Does your supplier maintain a consistent inventory of your material? This may seem negligible in the beginning phase of a production, but what happens when you suddenly need to up your volume? It's important to be transparent about your volume needs as early in the process as possible. (Be generous in your estimation, so that your sourcing partner can accurately anticipate inventory depletion). And, be sure to ask about the quality and additional charges associated with rush orders.



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