

From 1998 through 2008 I served as principal design consultant for Branchline Trains for their line of heavyweight Pullman kits. (An unpaid position.) In following the recent thread on Walther's next passenger train, it's clear to me that there is much confusion over how manufacturers seek and get information, and how they use it. I'm not talking about feedback ó customer input on existing products or services ó but about the information needed to select, design, manufacture and distribute new products.

This information is in three forms: opinion, advice, and expertise. When a manufacturer is trying to determine what to do, he'll solicit opinions. Once he's decided what to do, he'll seek advice on how to do it. Finally, when it comes time to spend money, he'll call in the experts. (No single company in our hobby has the resources to do everything well, so they depend on consultants.)

Think of it as an information pyramid. For a new product you might get 5000 opinions, seek advice from 50, and involve one or two expert consultants. Opinions come from everywhere and they are evaluated as a group, not individually. You look for a sense of things rather than specifics. You seek advice from trusted, reliable sources. The best advisors not only help you make good decisions, they keep you from making bad ones. The experts help you spend your money wisely. They know where the information sources are, will be familiar with the prototype, and can evaluate your designs, making sure they are tailored to your manufacturing process and are done to the level of detail suitable for your budget and your intended market. Opinion givers and advisors are with you at the front end of a project, the expert will be with you for the whole time. He checks the drawings, evaluates the test shots, suggests changes and how to implement them, and generally assumes responsibility with you for the quality of the product.

The problem, and you can see it in most product discussions on any hobby forum, is that many people sharing opinions think they're giving advice, and many giving advice think they're offering expertise. These are the ones who get all bent out of shape because the manufacturer "ignored my input", or (phrased with varying degrees of politeness) "didn't meet my expectations". This reaction puzzles, sometimes offends, and unfortunately occasionally discourages manufacturers. They didn't ignore your input, they chose a different path ó often from among a large number of worthy (and sometimes conflicting) possibilities. If they didn't meet your expectations (and it's always cost or quality), rather than giving a knee-jerk reaction damning the manufacturer, you might reflect on your expectations and how they relate to those of the audience the manufacturer is trying to reach.

Remember, it's never personal. No one gets everything they want, every time. Whether it's deciding who to hire, what project to fund, or how many units to produce, decisions get made. Not all of them are good decisions, and the customer has every right (indeed, if things are to improve, even a responsibility) to vote with his wallet. And to criticize. Just be sure not to generalize when you criticize. "That color is wrong" or "That's a piece of junk" or "That's not how I remember it" aren't very useful comments if you want the manufacturer to change something. Assume that the manufacturer really did want to get it right and work from there. Not by bludgeoning them with vitriolic diatribes or

questioning their competence, but by calmly and thoughtfully pointing out what exactly is wrong, and what it should look like if done well. That's how we improve things. (That's also how you become a credible critic.)

Ours is a relatively small hobby and we're all in it together. It's best if we all pull together, too.

Tom M.