

Gather Lots of Samples and Information Before Trying to Solve Customer Complaints About Failed Parts.



I receive many calls from fastener suppliers who say something like, “My customer has complained that our bolts are breaking. What do you think the reason is?” The first four questions I always ask are:

1. Where and how are the parts used?
2. Do you have some of the failed parts?
3. Have you gone to the customer’s location and observed the problem?
4. If you do not have failed parts and have not seen the problem first hand, can you tell me exactly how and in what location on the parts they are failing?

Unfortunately, most callers cannot answer any of these four basic questions affirmatively. They do not know how the parts are specifically used. They have not gotten failed samples. They have not seen the problem first hand, and they have not asked the customer exactly how the parts are failing or the exact location of the failure.

I usually request callers to get this information and get back to me with the specifics needed to analyze the problem. Trying to solve customer complaints without having very specific information about the nature of the problem is a poor and potentially dangerous way to deal with customer complaints about failing parts.

Frequently callers have already had the parts extensively retested by independent laboratories without ever having gotten specific information from the customer. The supplier receives the complaint that the parts failed and they immediately start doing testing without knowing what they should be testing for. This is usually a big waste of time and money.

Experience has taught me that more than half of the complaints from customers about fastener failures have nothing to do with the quality of the parts. The majority of fastener failures have to do with the wrong fasteners being used in the application or the user using improper installation techniques.

If callers can tell me how the fasteners are used, how they are failing, and can show me samples or pictures of the failed parts, then the reason for the failure is usually easy to determine and logical solutions can be suggested. With these specifics it can be quickly determined if the problem relates to fastener quality or to improper use or to improper installation of the parts.

Sometimes the caller will report that the previous parts worked fine and the current parts do not. I then ask if they have gotten samples of the previous parts that worked, samples of the failed parts, and unused samples from the lot in question. If the current parts are compared to samples of the previous parts, the reason the previous ones worked and the current ones do not is obvious. If only the current parts are examined it is very difficult to say why previous ones worked and current ones do not.

The best way to be an effective problem solver of fastener complaints regarding failing parts is to get a lot of information about the entire situation. It is much better to gather too much information than too little. I suggest the following steps be taken by fastener suppliers when customers inform them of failing parts:

1. Find out specifically where the part is used.
2. Find out exactly how and where it is failing.
3. Find out if it is failing at the time of installation or some time after installation.
4. Find out how the parts are installed and at what torque values.
5. Get samples of the failed parts, unused samples from the same lot, and samples from previous lots if the customer states that the previous parts worked and these do not.
6. If at all possible, suppliers should go to the customer's location and observe the problem. Many times customers do a very poor job of describing what is really happening, which makes it very difficult to solve their problem.
7. Only do part testing that might specifically relate to the problem that is occurring. Testing parts for characteristics that do not pertain to the specific problem at hand is expensive and frequently confuses the issue further instead of contributing to a solution.

Every time I encounter a problem I think about Stephen Covey's "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People". One of the habits is, "Seek first to understand before you seek to be understood." This means that if we want to be able to have a

customer understand the solution we want to offer them, we must be sure we clearly and thoroughly understand his problem.

Wonderful proposed solutions to the wrong problem are worthless to fastener user. Asking lots of questions and reviewing failed parts help in identifying true root causes of problems and lead to effective solutions.

For more information on fastener failure analysis or other fastener quality issues contact the author at 817-870-8888 or sales@greensladeandcompany.com.