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Brand names versus house brands

Sometimes, with lubes, you do get what you pay for

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In a challenging economic climate, manufacturers constantly seek ways to reduce operating costs. Increasingly, plant managers are focusing on operating and maintenance items such as lubricants, which typically account for less than four percent of most plants' maintenance, reliability and operations budget.

Seeking to reduce lubricant costs, some plant managers are tempted by the prospect of purchasing generic lubricants known as "house brands," which are typically marketed as a low-price alternative to major brand name lubricants. House brands are usually limited to basic hydraulic fluids, engine and gear oils, and are often purchased from third-party compound blenders or, in some cases, blended in-house by distributors.

On the surface, purchasing house-brand lubricants can appear to be a viable option. However, the lower costs can mask a fundamental question: Is it a quality product that won't compromise equipment life cycle, performance and production?

When considering the purchase of house brand or brand name lubricants, plant managers should consider several aspects before making a buying decision.

Manufacturing and QC

It's wise to inquire whether a lubricant supplier's lube refining and blending facilities meet quality standards of ISO 9000 (International Standard) and QS 9000 (Automotive Standard) certification. Typically, major lubricant suppliers have these key certifications at all of their facilities, reflecting a considerable investment of time and money to ensure product quality. In most cases, maintaining an ISO certification requires the use of ISO-certified suppliers.

Conversely, distributors and blenders that manufacture house brand products maintain no such industry standards. As a result, the quality of house brand lubricants can vary greatly from supplier to supplier and, over time, from a single source.

For a major lubricant supplier, these certifications provide a distinct advantage, demonstrating to customers that the company has the resources to guarantee the quality of its products and the expertise to support its application recommendations.

Material quality and consistency

Base oil quality is a key driver of finished lubricant quality. Therefore, it's extremely important that the base oils used in blending be chosen for their performance attributes, and not solely on cost.

Naturally, base oil quality can affect the additive package performance. Moreover, switching base oils introduces variability into the quality of the finished product. A good example is found with hydraulic oils.

The ability of the base oil to maintain the proper viscosity at operating temperature has a direct bearing on hydraulic pump wear and system operation. The viscosity index of a base oil, or its relative change in viscosity with increasing temperature, is an important consideration—the higher the viscosity index number, the less an oil changes with temperature.

In the case of house brands, managers of purchasing and operations don't always have the assurance that the hydraulic oil they buy is manufactured with high-viscosity index paraffin base oil instead of a base oil material recycled from used oil.

Besides viscosity index, other factors can dramatically affect product quality and performance, including oxidation stability (ability to resist deposit formation), flash point, volatility, and pour point.

House brand products are typically batch blended in kettles. Sometimes, to minimize cost, house brand blenders introduce additives directly into a tanker of base oil and allow the materials to mix while in transit. Furthermore, they sometimes use their own in-house or contract labs with varying levels of performance to check the consistency of their blends.

Industry specs and field performance

House brand products are sometimes advertised as meeting industry or builder specifications. However, lab tests alone can't always define the service characteristics of a lubricant. While these tests can help users screen out products unsuitable to a specific operating environment, they have limited value in predicting actual field performance.

An oil's test results in the lab may not ensure it will perform under actual operating conditions. Also, meeting a certain standard doesn't necessarily mean that an equipment builder has approved the product. "Approved" means that an equipment builder has documented that the supplier's lubricant formulation has met performance criteria in the field.

"Caveat emptor" or buyer beware

Furthermore, the claim of meeting original equipment manufacturer's specifications is often based on additive supplier's tests, rather than the blender's actual formulation. It's therefore imperative to check the house brand product data sheet for specifications and bench tests. In many cases, you'll find the product only "meets" specifications.

When considering a switch to a house brand lubricant, ask to see a copy of the supplier's warranty. Paying a warranty claim can be costly. If you have a warranty issue with a house brand lubricant, it's imperative that you know who to contact, whether supplier, base-oil manufacturer or additive supplier.

Even if the identity of the contact person is clear, another issue is whether the house-brand supplier has the financial resources to back up a claim. Be sure the supplier provides the support necessary to deal with any problem that may arise.

In a challenging economic climate, it's understandable that manufacturers will seek ways to reduce costs. However, lubrication typically counts for less than four percent of a company's MRO budget. With the range of equipment problems that can result from using lubricants whose performance and quality vary, a plant manager must ask whether the money saved in the short term by buying generic brand lubricants is worth the potential for long-term risk.

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