Reality Check on Data Sharing

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Recently, in my efforts to assist a client to find suppliers of certain product, I took the easy route: using one of the search engines. The results were very interesting. Most of the products were available from Chinese and/or Indian companies. All of the sites had minimal to no information on any physical properties or performance data. Asking them for information would have been a waste of time, as they had none.

Since I knew the application and potential products, and I have been following various mergers, my search by companies was an easier route. To my chagrin, I experienced the following: When I clicked on “Contact Us,” more than 75 percent of the websites required a lengthy form (practically giving my life away). Then, I had to wait for a response.

For multi-nationals, I had to dig deeper to get to input my country and hoped there was a contact telephone number, so I would get a customer service telephone number. If I were lucky, I would get the headquarters’ phone number. The project was already on the path for a delayed schedule.

Since not many customer service numbers were available, I called the main office and hoped to talk with a live person who would give me a customer service number. Then I would have to go through a debriefing before getting a number. Once I got the number, there was a 50 percent chance that I had to leave a voicemail message and hoped again I got a call. This could be an unknown time. My project got further delayed.

If I’m lucky enough to talk with a live customer service person, they want to have detailed information about me (e.g. email, phone number and state, besides the company name) before they can tell me whether they have a product that could come close to my needs. It seems they are more interested in filling a form indicating they talked with a person rather than exploring what a potential customer needs.

They also want to know the annual quantity when I do not know whether their product would work for my application. Since we are dealing with chemicals, they want to know how the product would be used. They even have the audacity to ask the details of my product development.

If I tell them it is under development and confidential, my chances of success reduce dramatically. I have to make up some application scenario to go past the customer service person to talk with the right technical person. Since a chemical could be common for different applications, you can be bounced around. You may still end up leaving a voicemail. If one does not answer the questions correctly, there is a good possibility that information may not be provided.

Yes, everyone is busy, and we do not have enough time. Are we too busy nursing our Blackberries and emails that we do not have time to talk with the potential customer who puts food on our table? The question becomes: How can the companies facilitate information availability to engineers, so that they can develop an efficient, economical and sustainable process or product?

ICIS (OPD) directories used to be an excellent source of information, but not anymore. Their size has shrunk. Many producer companies have disappeared. I contacted some companies from the list for the products I needed. Many did not respond, and others had the product category listed but no actual products. On one hand, we want people to be productive, but on the other hand, we create many road bumps for them to complete a project on time.

I can almost bet none of “C, MD, E, V or G” levels at any chemical companies have toyed with their website as a customer, and found the challenges customers (existing and potential) have to face to get meaningful information. I am sorry to say most of the companies in the developed countries fall in this category. Companies in developing countries give you material safety data sheets (MSDSs), which have been copied and have minimal information. By having minimal information, they may be fulfilling a regulatory obligation. I wonder if regulatory overseers have ever looked at them to see if they comply.

What are the downside consequences of one’s inability to get the information on a timely basis?

1. A delayed project.
2. A disgruntled customer who has wasted her/his productive time since the information is not readily/easily available
3. A possibility that the developed product would not work and has to be redone, or the process is inefficient, uneconomical and unsustainable. Unfortunately, for active pharmaceutical ingredients and their formulations, once the process is “blessed,” there are no second chances.
4. A lack of information, which according to my conjecture, is the leading cause of not having “quality by design” processes for the manufacture of pharmaceuticals.

I asked my colleagues/clients in the business if they encounter similar challenges. Each one of them chimed in and shared their sad stories. Less than 25 percent had good experiences. They rely on their network and on the salesperson knocking on their door to share virtues of offerings.

In the good old days — it seems like a zillion years ago — companies had brochures that were helpful and we had them stashed for reference. By the way, they were an excellent source of physical property information. We all know physical and chemical structures do not change with age. Personal libraries were shared. The largest companies had data books.

As chemical companies went through reconfiguration, the data availability started to become scarce. The Internet brought hope that it would reduce personal data banks, and increase access to information for designing efficient, economic and sustainable processes. Unfortunately, that did not happen. It has become a challenge to get minimal information. MSDSs are provided as a substitute of a technical data sheet. They do not even come close. Many agree that their websites are difficult to navigate, and leave a lot to be desired. I wonder why they do not ring the bell up the chain?

If you want real product information, one has to register and almost sign her/his life away and hope to remember the password for future use. All this is dependent on one receiving a confirmation mail that one has to click to be part of the database. There is a 50 percent chance one may not get lucky in these areas. I am sure there is some rational reason for this personal information, but I can bet none of this information is reviewed, let alone used to follow up potential customer satisfaction.

I also wonder how this information is being mined? Is it being abused? If you are able to log in and download the information, there is no guarantee that necessary technical data including physical properties would be available.

The bottom line: The above discussion is not complaining or a recitation of actual experiences, but an identification of an opening and excellent opportunity for the companies to look at filling their half-empty glass. It is very possible that in today's unsecure world, "legal beagles" may advise against easy sharing of information, but every crook could find the information one way or the other. By building road bumps and road blocks, companies are lowering productivity of their own employees and their customers who need information to design a product and/or process.

How can one proceed to make her/his company's information more accessible to potential customers? First, the problem has to be recognized by "C, MD, E, V or G" levels in a company. Let them go incognito on their own website, or a search engine, to see what the reality of life looks like. It seems that in the name of protecting intellectual property, we have lowered our productivity and creative thinking. They may also find out the navigational challenges their website creates.

In addition, websites are designed by designers to look pretty. They do look nice, but I wonder how much input they have from the actual users. A point to cogitate!

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