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The Value of Communication

It is a much different world today compared to when I first started hammering saws, and the exchange of information has certainly improved considerably. These days you can get plenty of useful information and help with just a laptop or smart phone, providing your sawmill isn't located in the middle of nowhere without cable, wi-fi, or cell phone coverage. That's becoming less common every day, but remote areas are usually the last places to get coverage, and that's where a lot of mills are located.

In the beginning of my career I would always tell new customers to let me know if the saw doesn't run right, and also to let me know if it does run right. It turned out that if the saw didn't perform the way they wanted, I might hear from them. There seemed to be an equal probability that they would simply find someone else to work on their saws, assuming that I was just one more saw doctor who didn't really know what he was doing. And, who could blame them for thinking that way? At the time there were some saw doctors practicing who really didn't know what they were doing. But who knew? Saw hammering techniques were closely guarded secrets at the time, and customers didn't have a good way to tell the difference between a competent saw doctor and a wayward one.

So, if the saw ran okay, they assumed it was hammered properly and they didn't see any need to follow up with me. Little did they know that when you first start learning how to hammer saws, it can be a bit of a trial and error game. It certainly would have been a lot easier for me to learn if I had gotten real positive or negative feedback right away. It didn't take long for me to conclude that in most cases, no news was good news. In some cases there were saws that were hammered incorrectly that ran fine because they happened to be wrong in the right direction to compensate for what was wrong with the mill. And in those cases if you hammered a saw properly it wouldn't work on a mill that had those problems.

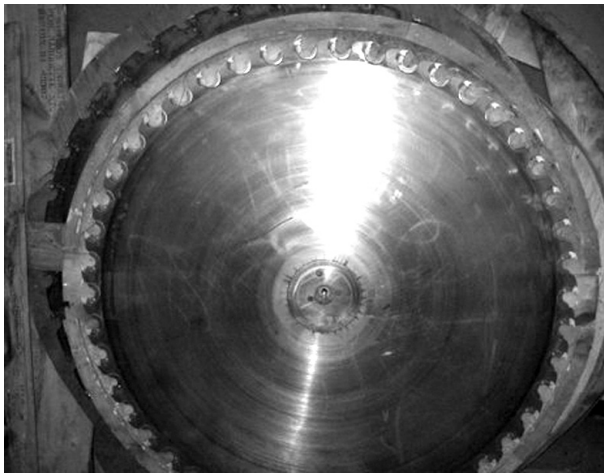
My bottom line is that a lack of communication with my customers early on in my career, made it more difficult to learn the craft.

Nowadays, saw hammering has become much less of a secret, especially since some saw doctors have actually started allowing their customers to watch their saws being serviced. This is good for all concerned, because even if you don't know how to hammer a saw, if you are there watching the process, it will either make sense to you or not. If the process doesn't seem logical and somewhat understandable, chances are it's not being done properly. If you get the opportunity to see your saw being hammered, don't be afraid to ask questions about the process, because it really is explainable. If he can't explain it in a way that you can understand, maybe it's because he really doesn't understand what he's supposed to be doing.

The other thing that has changed is the amount of communication I am now getting from some mills I work with, whether it is from the mill manager, owner or sawyer. Some mills just ship me their saws and I service them and ship them back and everybody seems happy. Others will try to communicate everything they know about what the saw was doing that made them take it off, or they will describe an accident that damaged the saw.

Now here's the deal: If you make a set while the saw is in the cut, I will know it when I see the saw. At that point it might seem like a waste of time to tell me what happened to the saw. But that is not the case. If you regularly communicate what happened to the saw, and then I get one that has been set while in the cut with no communication, that tells me that an accident happened that you might not know about. And since that accident might have caused other damage, such as shearing the pins and harming the collars, it is something you certainly need to be aware of.

More important, the more I know about how the saw was behaving when you changed it, the better the chances are that I can resolve that specific problem when I hammer the saw. Sure, you can say that during the normal process of hammering a saw, all issues with that saw should be resolved. And that is true. But "should" is the operative word here. Isn't it better to make sure that your saw doctor is completely aware of details that will help solve the problem, instead of knowing that it should have been resolved, but wasn't?



Something bad obviously happened to this saw. Wouldn't it be nice to know the details?

And of course, communication is a two way street. It's a dialog. If I know a sawyer really wants to communicate, then I will let them know what sort of things I found in the saw while working on it. The way it works is that as long as the symptoms seem to match what I see in your saw, all is right with the world and things will work properly. But as soon as I see a saw that doesn't match the symptoms or is maybe opposite of what the symptoms suggested, you will have trouble trying to get that freshly hammered saw to run properly. That's because if the saw appears to be the opposite of what I would expect after hearing the symptoms, it is a safe bet that the properly hammered saw will perform worse than when you changed it until you find out what was causing the problem and fix that.

What it boils down to is that the more communication going back and forth between the mill and the anvil room, the better each party will be at getting their job done, i.e., better accuracy, recovery, and productivity for the mill. Of course we know that trying to get a sawyer or even mill manager on the phone is not only hard to do, but you really don't want to take them away from what they are doing. But with the popularity and convenience of text messaging and emailing, effective communication becomes something that is much less intrusive and yet still useful.

There are plenty of people who don't bother getting that involved, but those who do, tend to be enthusiastic about letting me know what happened to each saw, and expecting a bit of a report as to what I found. The bottom line is that if you are successful running the saws I hammered, then I hammered them successfully.

Questions about sawmills and their operation should be sent to Forum, The Northern Logger, P.O. Box 69, Old Forge, NY 13420, FAX #315-369-3736.

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