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## Are reps and distributors extinct?

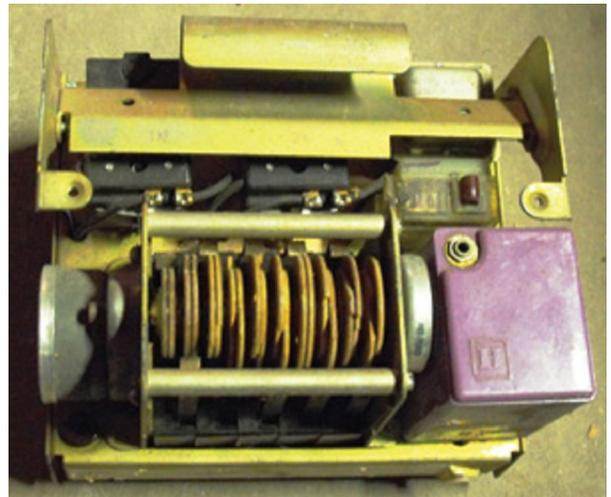
**Face-to-face customer service beats buying online in this business.**

By [Ray Wohlfarth](#)

November 18, 2013

One of the companies we represent was owned by **Russ Geaslen**. He changed the boiler industry as we know it by designing and patenting the primary/secondary piping of modular boilers in 1964 (Patent No. US3329343A). Russ was half genius and half mad scientist. Unfortunately, he passed on to the big boiler room in the sky in 1996. I still miss him.

Often Russ would call me early in the morning and ask technical questions, a kind of quiz. I would answer the phone at 6 a.m. and hear, “Hey kid, what is the coefficient of expansion of steel?” Russ was based in Chicago, where it is an hour earlier than my home in Pittsburgh. You could tell by his tone and enthusiasm that he had already been up for hours.



*Figure 1. Photo credit: Ray Wohlfarth*

“Uh, I am not sure, Russ. I just got up. I have not had my coffee yet,” I would sleepily answer.

“You gotta know this stuff,” he said. “If you want to sell my boilers, you need to be the best-trained boiler guy in your market. If you are not the best, the customers will go somewhere else and so will I. The engineers and designers will look to you for your expertise. They deserve a real professional. Anyone can pick out something from a catalog.”

Russ and I would talk for hours; he taught me so much about boilers and the heating industry. It was not uncommon for me to come into the office and see a multipage fax from Russ filled with calculations comparing the consumption of one type of boiler to another.

### ‘It’s five o’clock somewhere’

My Generation Y children, who are in their 20s, prefer to do almost all their shopping online. “Nobody goes to the store anymore,” they argue. I wonder if this will be the future boiler purchasing model. Will boilers be

sold directly from the factory via a flashy website? I warn my family that the traditional brick-and-mortar shops may be shuttered and local people with product knowledge will lose their jobs if everyone buys online.

In addition, I worry about what will happen when a contractor is on a jobsite at 5 p.m. on a Friday and the client has no heat. Allow me to elaborate about two such calls we had with completely different results.

The first was to a house with a newer mod/con boiler that provided heat for both space heating and domestic hot water. Upon arrival, my technician found a defective inducer fan. We called the “stocking” distributor and were told the part we needed was not stocked and would have to be ordered from the factory.

We were given a toll-free number to order the part directly as the distributor would have to wait several days before it could place the order because it did not meet the factory minimum amount. After numerous voicemail options, I finally contacted a real live human being.

She said the part could be shipped that day and would arrive on Monday morning. I explained that the weather forecast called for temperatures in the teens and asked if anyone else locally stocked the part. She could not tell me but suggested I order it quickly as this was the last one in the company.

I further explained that the part should be under warranty as the boiler was only six months old. I gave her the model and serial number for the boiler. Even though it was still under warranty, I had to pay for the part until the manufacturer verified it was a legitimate failure. Once the failure was verified, I would receive a credit in 30 to 60 days. In addition, there was an overnight expediting fee of 20%, which would not be refunded.

The price of a replacement in-warranty inducer is now within \$200 of the price for a new boiler. Can you feel the anger building? I grudgingly ordered the part and let the owner know the status. We furnished several electric heaters but the owner decided not to use them because the heaters would cause the breakers to trip. The client had his family move to a hotel for the weekend and he stayed at the house to make sure that nothing froze. He was not pleased with me or his new mod/con boiler.

The second Friday call was to a nursing home about two hours from our shop. The lone boiler that heated the building had failed due to a defective flame safeguard control (see Figure 1 on page 62). By the time the diagnosis was complete, it was almost half past five. The owner was concerned that the staff would have to evacuate the nursing home.

I called the distributor just as the counter person was about to leave. The part was in stock and he offered to hide it in a secure outdoor location. I picked up the part and delivered it to the nursing home. The client had heat immediately and we were heroes. The clerk called me the next day to verify that the part worked and the client had heat. What a difference! I kept the old control to remind me to always go the extra mile for the client.

I received a call from an engineer friend of mine who was designing a replacement boiler job using a boiler that the building owner wanted. The designer was not familiar with the boiler and asked the manufacturer's rep to answer some questions about the equipment. The rep simply sent over a cut sheet from the manufacturer's manual.

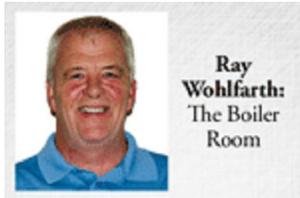
He was located several hundred miles away at the company's corporate headquarters. The engineer again called the salesperson to ask a technical question and was told that he should call the toll-free technical support number for the manufacturer. I sensed his frustration and offered to stop over and help. I twice called the technical support line myself for the engineer and have yet to receive a call back for a question we had. The engineer told the owner he would not use that boiler and used mine instead.

I still believe in face-to-face customer service and hope our industry distribution will continue to go through professional distributors and representatives and not some impersonal website. In my career, I've met some amazing people and saw some really cool places by simply offering to walk through a boiler room. I love the smell of pipe dope in the morning.

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