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The Incomplete Technical Presentation

Year

1998

Description

This case addresses issues of theoretical papers being presented at technical conferences that are attended by salespersons and the conflicts that arise.

Body

Particle, Inc. has just designed a new laser diffraction particle size analyzer that can measure three separate particle size ranges of significant interest (0.01 - 1.0 mm, 0.5 - 15.0 mm, and 10.0 - 300 mm) based on adjustable lens orientation. This product is a significant contribution; current technology requires three separate analyzers to measure the size range of 0.01 - 300 mm. William, a research associate, has been assigned the leadership role in evaluating this new analyzer. This is William's first assignment for Particle, Inc., and he is determined to do a very thorough job. William and his task force have determined that the analyzer must maintain the current technology's precision and accuracy standards at each size range.

After a few weeks, William and his team completed the evaluation. The analyzer performed well, i.e., maintained the precision and accuracy of the current technology. William provided the results to his boss, Katherine. She told William that production of the new analyzer would commence. Because the breakthrough of the lens orientation would be beneficial to both academic and industrial research communities, Katherine recommended that he present the results of the analyzer

evaluation at a theoretical conference on laser diffraction. William submitted an abstract.

A few months have passed, and the sales of the new analyzer have broken all previous analyzer sales of Particle, Inc. A technician in William's lab approaches him one day to tell him that he thinks that there is something wrong with the new analyzer. He explains that the analyzer is precise and accurate at each stage. However, the analyzer's measurements of the overlapping size ranges for the same material are inaccurate.

William decides to investigate this problem with several materials. After concluding his tests, he finds serious discrepancies between measurements of the overlapping ranges. William realizes that the accuracy of the overlapping size ranges should have been checked in the initial evaluation, but it was overlooked. He hesitates to tell Katherine about the mistake because it could cost him his job. However, Katherine and William are expected to present the results of the evaluation at the conference next week. Therefore, he decides to tell Katherine about the problem to save her any embarrassment at the conference.

Katherine is very upset after William told her the news. She realizes that overlooking the evaluation of overlapping size ranges was just as much her fault as William's. She is also uneasy because she has just found out that Peter, the director of sales, will be accompanying them to the technical conference to promote their product. Management has decided that Peter must go to boost sales because a competing company just introduced a similar analyzer.

Katherine, William and Peter arrive at the theoretical conference. It is obvious to the conference participants Peter is present only to sell the analyzer. During William's presentation, a professor is very impressed with the idea of reorienting the lenses to use the same test device to measure several size ranges. However, he asks William the question that Katherine and William were hoping that nobody would ask: "Did you compare the accuracy for the overlapping size ranges?"

Discussion Questions

1. Is it appropriate for management to send salespersons to theory-oriented technical conferences to promote their company's products?
2. What should Katherine have done when William notified her of the problem? I.e., should she have retracted the abstract?

3. How should William respond to the professor's question about the analyzer's accuracy in measuring overlapping size ranges?

Notes

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