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MCAD

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Multiple Benefits of Publishing Parts Catalogues Online

Should 3D CAD be given away rather than hidden away?

When customers search for parts online, manufacturers and their distributors obviously need to be found. User surveys show that more than 90% of engineers and buyers search for and compare products online. This means there's a real urgency to have an online catalog on your web site. But catalogs alone are not enough to ensure a sales increase — the smart play is to offer downloadable 3D CAD files as well as traditional product information.

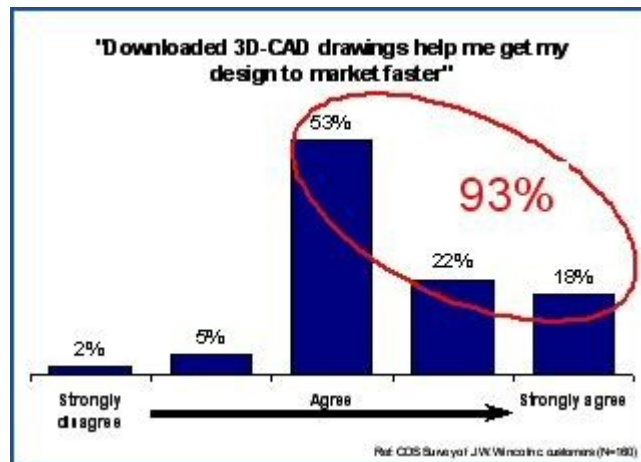### Why provide 3D CAD files for your customers to download?

1) **To save design engineers time** and help your customers get to market faster. Rather than redrawing individual components, design engineers can download/drag and drop models right into their CAD designs. In return for saving them design time your products are locked and loaded into those designs, and buyers can order them later. Basically the mantra is: **"Get selected by the design engineer, get the sale"**

2) **To generate sales leads** - if you ask users to register prior to downloading a CAD model you generate sales leads, actually high quality sales leads according to John M. Winkler, CEO, J.W. Winco Inc, *"Since implementing 3D CAD downloads (in Feb. 2006) we have averaged over 850 downloads/month from our 18,000 CAD model library. Already 60% of our sales leads are from CAD models and 40% from traditional marketing. CAD downloads sales leads convert to sales at a higher rate and even more importantly they convert faster! And the cost per lead from CAD downloads is less than 10% of the average cost per lead from traditional marketing. We're delighted to have already achieved so great an ROI on a very modest outlay."*

The manufactured parts catalog has evolved in recent years from the traditional printed catalog to a PDF version of the print catalog online, to online catalogs that take advantage of digital capabilities such as search-by-attribute, CAD model downloads and product configurators for more complex parts.

John Major, CEO of Catalog Data Solutions, says *"manufacturers should give away their CAD models rather than hide them away in order to build this symbiotic relationship with customers. When an engineer specifies a part in a design, it remains in the final design more than 80% of the time because buyers rarely change what the engineer spec'd"*

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"Downloaded 3D-CAD drawings help me get my design to market faster"

Catalog Data Solutions has produced a white paper on turning web site browsers into customers - it details user surveys, multiple case studies and explains many of the considerations that should go into selecting a supplier of online parts catalog technology (along with good reasons for not wanting to try to develop it yourself).

Here's a quick summary of key points to keep in mind when building an online parts catalog that includes Downloadable 3D CAD files.

CAD Source

If you're designing with 3D CAD, you likely have models of your parts available to use in an online catalog. But do you want to make those files available freely over the Internet? The fact is, those models are likely far more detailed than your downloading customers need, and may even contain proprietary internal details that you want to keep private. It is recommended using what is called a CAD model "factory" — ideally provided by your catalog supplier. Using a factory ensures that your part files are built consistently and compactly, and that they contain only the data that customers require.

"How important do you think 3D-CAD models are when selecting a supplier?"
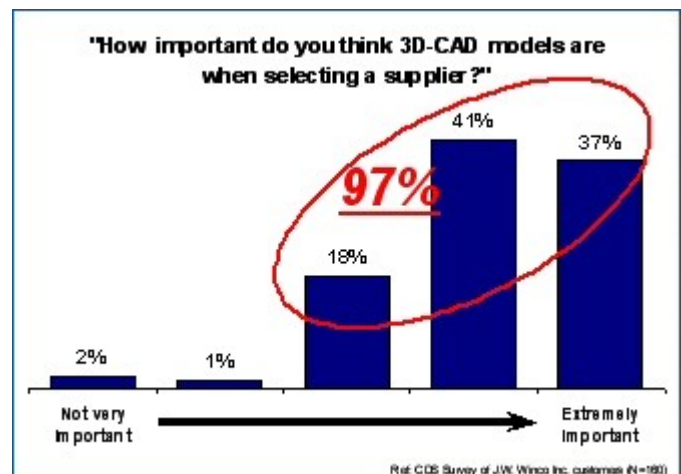
CAD Format

Build your downloads (or have them built) in a commercially available 3D CAD application rather than a proprietary scripting language. That way you can port them to any CAD system in the future and you are not locked into one model vendor for future updates. Whatever system you choose, make sure your models are available in multiple CAD formats, especially in vendor neutral formats such as IGES and STEP.

Model Size

The smaller the model, the quicker the download and the easier for the designer to manipulate in their CAD system. Remember, your component is destined to become part of a much larger assembly so size matters.

Model Maintenance

By the time you develop, test and publish your online catalog, something will probably already be obsolete. Be sure to consider the process for making changes to models or other data. Catalog Data Solutions recommends your supplier have its own CAD factory to maintain your models, with Web-based project management tools you can use to request new models and changes to existing ones. Another approach is for you to maintain your own models, but if you choose this path be sure to budget staff or money as changes and updates are sure to be necessary. Also think about how to alert your customers that models have changed. Some tools allow catalog users to request product change notifications — they can receive an e-mail alert when a CAD part they have downloaded is changed.

Cost

Consider ways to trim the cost of creating models. If you have families of similar products, it might make more sense to build family table models from which to generate all the variations, using a spreadsheet or table to control the dimensions and other options. If you want to provide 2D drawings in addition to 3D models, ask whether your provider can automatically generate those from the 3D model. If your products are made-to-order or highly complex, be sure your selected CAD model solution can work with a product configurator that will allow customers to input preferred dimensions and select different options before downloading the exact part that they need.

Responding to customer requests for CAD models of its products, Ohio Nut & Bolt decided to offer 3D CAD models for download. *"We feel that when a customer downloads a CAD drawing, they will purchase the product,"* said Rich Bryda, Sales Manager, Ohio Nut & Bolt. *"Providing online CAD has made us a faster company, the online information is readily available anytime an engineer wants to view the CAD drawings/models and when a specific product meets their needs, download it directly into their design. With the addition of 2D/3D CAD drawings to our website, we are meeting the needs of our entire customer base and will undoubtedly increase our sales."*

Online catalogs need to help site visitors search for and find the parts they need, ideally by searching on the attributes most important to them. Then download CAD models to save time. In return you will turn browsers into customers.

CAD Spaghetti is grateful to Catalog Data Solutions for contributing this article. For the full details of the Catalog Data Solutions white paper, referred to in the article please go to: *Convergence of Market Trends Creates New Online Opportunity for Manufacturers and Distributors*.

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