

Pete Mauer Podcast Transcript

John:

Welcome to the Red List Distribution Download podcast, where we're dedicated to bringing valuable insights around strategy and leadership for distributor sales reps and all the associated staff in the fuels, lubricants, and chemicals industry. So, as you know, our podcast aims to shed light on an often overlooked yet essential sector that truly keeps the world turning. And we're excited today to have a solid guest with us. Pete Mauer, welcome.

Pete:

How you doing, John?

John:

Doing good. Thank you very much. Just enjoying the weather here in Utah. It was about 75 degrees, and now we're right back down to the mid-40s today, so...

Pete:

I understand that. We're up to 83 degrees here in Michigan today, so we're enjoying the weather, can't complain.

John:

That's a hot day for Michigan in April.

Pete:

It is. It is.

John:

Oh, that's good. Well, Pete, you've got a solid career that spans over 27 years in the lubricant industry. I wonder if you could maybe start by just kind of letting our listeners hear a little bit about your journey, maybe what got you into this in the first place and what kept you there?

Pete:

Well, I started off at a young age working in the family business. I come from a family of meat processors. So, in '96 I got out of the family business. I had enough and decided to become a truck driver. So I started out with a local oil company here in Jackson by the name of Pipeline Oil Company and started driving for them a little bit and doing warehouse work. One of the sales managers at the company looked at me and how I operated with customers and said, "I want to put you in sales." So I kind of laughed. And said I don't know if I'm that guy, but let's talk it over. So he ended up hiring me. I worked in the end to get into the industry. So I started in sales, you know, at a young age and had a really good mentor and just kind of kept climbing the ladder from that point forward and learned a lot, made some mistakes, but kept on going. I left Pipeline Oil and went into another local distributor in Coldwater, MI, for 10 years selling Chevron lubricants, chemicals, and fuel. And then I had an opportunity to get in with the fourth-largest oil company in the world, Total Energies. I started with them in 2012, and I was traveling across 18 states for them, doing a lot of industrial and distribution on that network sales since 2015. I got my Certified Lubrication Specialist badge from the Society of Tribologists and Lubrication

Engineers, which expanded my knowledge and allowed me to venture into new areas and establish rapport with higher-level individuals. At that point, I reached a stage where I wasn't fond of traveling across 18 states throughout the country. I desired to be closer to my family and spend more time at home. So, I made a decision to transition away from the hotel life and joined Vesco Oil Corporation, where I am today. We are an ExxonMobil distributor here in Michigan. We cover Michigan and about 3/4 of Ohio. We sell Mobil, Castrol, and a bit of the Sunoco brand as well as metalworking fluids from Boy Chemical. And we do a nice job. I also serve as an industrial sales manager here and handle a lot of the technical support for the company as well.

John:

That is a great journey there. You know, I think it's funny to hear about your transition from truck driving into sales. I remember when I was about 18, one of my early mentors in life was like, "You know, you gotta come and try to get a job in sales," and I was like, "No way. Are you kidding? The sales guy, he's just... I think there's a common misconception when you're outside of almost any industry and you think sales guys, you're thinking bad suits or lotion people at the mall, you know?"

Pete:

I'm with you.

John:

And so I guess maybe my question was, what was it that they said to you in that first conversation when you're moving from driving to sales? What did they say that kind of persuaded you that it was not all tweed jackets and...?

Pete:

I'll be honest with you. They said, "Do you want to make more money?" That was a comment that got to me, and at the time I was ambitious, so I said yes. I wanted to make more money, and that's what got me in.

John:

That's awesome.

Pete:

Period. End of story.

John:

That's the first sign of a good sales guy, he wants to make money. It's kind of, I think that's great. You know, it's an interesting contrast 'cause I've been on a lot of ride-alongs with some of the big OEMs, and their sales engineers or their lube engineers all kind of tell you that it doesn't matter, it's not gonna change how I make money. You know, but and I was like, there's a challenge of the alignments there. I love how in the Distribution world, it's like, yeah, if you want to make money, then you gotta sell. Correct. Yeah, that's correct. Tell me a little bit about 18 states. I mean, what in the world was that like on a regular basis, and how did you keep in contact?

Pete:

Well, I wouldn't say I was covering all 18 states throughout my time with Total. I primarily traveled 18 states during the last 3 and a half years. When I obtained my CLS certification, they decided to establish an industrial division that involved traveling across the states to secure more direct business. We had four individuals with CLS certifications within the company, so each of us was assigned a quarter of the country. I had the largest chunk, covering North Dakota all the way across to Maine and north of Kentucky. That should give you an idea of the territory. However, I mainly focused on the region from Iowa to the east. I did a lot of work on the East Coast and throughout Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio as well. I had a loyal customer base and worked with exceptional distributors. We learned a lot from each other and it was a constant learning curve.

John:

You know, it's interesting, in a lot of experiences, it doesn't apply to everyone, but many people in this industry have families and strive to provide well for them. That's a significant motivator. But that type of travel can be really demanding on the family. May I ask how you managed with all that travel going on? I'm not sure if you had kids at the time, but how did you find balance in your personal and work life?

Pete:

Honestly, I had to make time and make it work. If I was traveling, I was always on the phone with my wife in the evenings. That's how we managed. It reached a point where I wanted to see my family more. I was basically leaving on Sunday afternoon or early Monday morning and not returning until Thursday evening, sometimes Friday morning. I would have a little time at home and then be back out again. Although I could set my own schedule, I had so much going on that it kept me constantly on the move. But there came a point where my attitude changed. When you start leaving at the beginning of the week and you're not happy, that's your first indicator that it's probably time for a change. That's how it led me to where I am today.

John:

No, it's good. I think what you're saying is you started out wanting to make money, and then you realized you wanted to provide for your family and spend more time with them. So, things eventually worked out. Your previous experiences helped qualify you for where you are today, right? It's like paying your dues, I guess that's not what you're saying.

Pete:

And I'm not saying today that I wouldn't go back to a traveling atmosphere. I wouldn't have a problem with that. During interviews, they often ask how much I'm willing to travel, and I usually say around 50-60%. However, I definitely want to be home for a minimum of two days per week. Many companies are starting to understand this. Today, with tools like Teams and Zoom, you can accomplish more sitting behind your own desk at home than being on an airplane trying to figure things out. If there's a technical call or an issue that needs immediate attention, that's when traveling is necessary. But for simple meetings and collaboration, computers and the Internet have made life easier for many salespeople.

John:

That's a great point. The COVID pandemic brought about a real transition for many people. A lot of individuals couldn't even meet their customers due to the risk of shutdowns. We worked with larger industry places that were cautious about someone bringing in COVID. So there was a significant shift towards digital means. Can you tell me a bit about that transition? Were you already utilizing digital tools as much as possible, or was it a major shift for you?

Pete:

When COVID hit in early 2020, we, like everyone else, had to shut down. However, we were still considered essential, so our trucks were still on the road. But business drastically declined because many places were closed. During that time, we transitioned to supplying hand sanitizers, face masks, and other COVID-related safety gear along with oil products. That's when we started using Teams and Zoom and embraced the digital age. Honestly, it took me about a month and a half to set up my home office properly before I could start interacting with customers. We informed them that they could come in, but they had to follow certain protocols, which I understood. That's when you started to see more people working from home. Although some larger corporations may not favor it, I personally find that I can accomplish more during the day from my home office without interruptions compared to being at the office. It's a two-way street.

John:

Yeah, I think it is.

Pete:

I guess.

John:

"Well, you know, it's interesting. In my experience, there are different roles that perform better in high accountability scenarios, while others excel when they have time to focus. Ultimately, Pete, I believe it all comes down to the drive that got you into this in the first place – the desire to make more money. Because, let's face it, you don't make more money just by pulling a paycheck. More money comes from selling more product, right? So, I think that's great. Over the past decade or so, I've had conversations with numerous people in this space, and it seems like there are essentially two types of individuals. On one hand, you have those who encounter something like COVID-19 and immediately think, 'Oh man, I'm in trouble this year. Making money is going to be tough.' On the other hand, there are those who, when asked about their year, respond with enthusiasm, saying, 'It was the best year yet! I made more money than I knew what to do with.' So, based on your experience, having been in this field for a while and managing people, what do you think separates the people who thrive from the people who struggle during these types of challenges?"

Pete:

"Well, let me share with you how COVID played out for me. We actually do business with a chemical company that manufactures hand sanitizer products. So, I thought, 'You know what? Why don't I explore this opportunity?' I went to our management and discussed things like pricing and container sizes. Then, I decided to start pitching it to my accounts because I knew they would all need it. I sent out emails to every single one of my customers – even the ones I couldn't get through to before. I basically said, 'Hey, look, we have hand sanitizers available. I know they're hard to find in stores right now, but if you need them, I can have them to your

doorstep within three days.' And you know what? That really opened up a lot of business for us. It even brought in customers who couldn't get their hands on hand sanitizers elsewhere. This whole experience helped us grow our relationships with them. So, what I'm trying to say, John, is that when things get tough, you've got to think outside the box. You have to find ways to get ahead and make it a bit easier for yourself. It's about finding alternative approaches to achieve the same outcome. I understand that it's a challenge, believe me. I face it every day. But in the end, you just have to find a way to make it happen."

John:

"Okay, let me ask you another question because I find what you're saying really intriguing. You've been in this field for a while, and you've managed to figure things out and think outside the box. However, I sometimes have a hard time when I tell someone to think outside the box, and they just don't get it. Some people seem to have a method or a routine that helps them do it. So, how do you personally get outside the box? Is it just a habit you've picked up along the way? Or do you have specific processes or routines that you follow to help you think outside the box?"

Pete:

"Let's take cold calling as an example. It's a good way to illustrate my approach, which might be quite different from what most people do. You see, I'm not the type of person to walk into a factory, drop off a business card and a line card, and ask, 'Who do I talk to?' because, more often than not, that information ends up in a pile, and you never reach the right person. My methodology revolves around using LinkedIn extensively. I try to find out who is in charge of what positions within an organization. You can always find a list of people and start by reaching out to someone. They may not be the person you need to talk to directly, but they can guide you to the right contact. Through this process, I gather email addresses and phone numbers, playing the game of connecting the dots. I also rely on my existing customers and ask them if they know anyone at a specific company. They often say, 'You know what? I know someone there who might be able to help you.' So, I continue gathering more information. John, this has always been my approach. I'm not claiming it's the right way to do it, but it has worked for me. Everyone has their own way of handling their business, and I respect that. This is just my way."

John:

"I love how you approach it. There are two key aspects that really resonate with me. First, you mentioned that innovation doesn't happen in a vacuum. You actively engage with your clients and colleagues, bouncing ideas off them. Some people tend to internalize everything, but you open yourself up to sourcing ideas from others, exploring LinkedIn and other platforms. Second, it's fascinating how you prioritize gathering information before taking action. You're not just going in blindly; you're thoroughly preparing and aiming correctly. I believe the results speak for themselves to some extent."

John:

"Yeah."

John:

"Some people struggled during that period. One common theme was, 'Sorry John, I can't talk right now. I need to focus on keeping my customers satisfied due to supply chain challenges and issues.'"

Pete:

"Yeah, we all went through that."

John:

"And some people are still facing challenges."

Pete:

"It depends on the product category, but I would say, for the most part, we're about 95% back in business in terms of the supply chain."

John:

So let's discuss the periods when your supply chain faced challenges. This is another example of those "oh crap" moments, where you're like, man, I have some tough situations. You can either dive or thrive, right? Well, we're facing them. What were some techniques you discovered when you didn't have the product to fulfill customers' needs? How did you keep them engaged and satisfied? Like, how did you manage to keep them happy?

Pete:

Well, it was a bit of a mixed match.

John:

Yeah, it was a unique approach.

Pete:

You know, at Vesco Oil, like many other companies, I'm sure, we have multiple products available for our customers. So we had to adapt and reach out to several different companies. We would say, "Hey, look, today I might not be able to get this gear oil from Company A, but I can get it from Company B. So, Mr. Customer, you're used to buying this particular product, but I can't supply it today. However, I have an alternative that fits your needs. It might come at a slightly different price, but we'll ensure your business keeps going." We did that with practically everybody, and fortunately, they understood the challenges we faced. It wasn't just about the oil business; supply chain disruptions affected everything, from soup to nuts. It was a crazy situation. Sometimes, one product category improved while another was unavailable for months, and then it shifted to yet another category. It was mainly because additive companies struggled to meet the demand and didn't have the product. Base oil availability wasn't an issue, but losing the grease plant was another major blow. It forced us to scramble and find alternative sources for grease, which was a significant challenge to overcome. However, if customers were looking for a specific product, we would guide them towards similar options within our product range. We considered their application needs. Even if we couldn't provide the exact product, we found ways to upgrade them to alternatives that would last even longer. Those were some of the advantages we gained by navigating the hurdles of product allocation. We successfully upgraded customers from mineral oil to synthetic, taking that route. That's how we tackled it.

John:

I think it's great, you know, a little bit of memory lane there—the big American grease fire, as some people were calling it. I think it's interesting because as you're even talking about that, I was just thinking about the other day. I was at the supermarket, and it was like \$7.00 for a dozen eggs. And I was like, what the heck? And then you see, there's a bunch of egg fires and like there's just these challenges with the supply chain. And I guess, only because I'm saying, they don't go away, right? Like these, like you say, we had this challenge and then this challenge and then this challenge. That just can be fatiguing because, because I guess what it suggests is there's going to be more challenges, definitely.

Pete:

Oh, absolutely.

John:

So, I mean, how do you, Pete, you're a thriver. So, how in the heck do you stay motivated? Knowing that there's another grease fire around the corner, like what is it that really keeps you going?

Pete:

I guess it's just the contacts and know-how to get around the situation. I'm really good at bouncing, so you know, I can get hit 1000 ways from Sunday, and you just have to know how to deal with it. I kind of have that down pat. It's just one, so you know, I can do anything from sales to transportation, figure stuff out, and make sure the customer has product, and there's not going to be a hiccup. I'm good at that. I can multitask with the best of them. So, I mean, we could have another grease fire tomorrow. Is that going to be an easy thing to get around? I'm not saying it's going to because we don't have a lot of grease capacity in this country today. You know, the biggest hurdle here lately is just being able to get tubes to put the grease in, not that we don't have the product. It's just we can't get the packaging. And packaging has been getting tight, drums have been getting tight, you know, it's a whole 360 ball game now, so you just have to know how to get around the situation. I guess I'm probably not giving you the best answer you're looking for, but I guess the best way to sum it up is, as long as you have enough contacts out there and people to lean on, there's a way around the problem.

John:

You know, actually, no. I'm just sitting here, kind of smiling, thinking about a 360 ball game and you're expecting the pitch to come from the front, and then you get being in the back of the head, I think.

Pete:

Correct, that's a good way of putting it.

John:

No, that's an interesting point. I think when we talked briefly before the show, we were talking and you mentioned a theme for you is kind of not giving up. And then I just wonder, can I ask, I mean, like, are there, can you tell me the time when you really wanted to give up? But you

actually and then and then how did you find the motivation to like, okay, I guess I'm not going to give up. What was, can I ask that question? If that's too personal?

Pete:

Well, yeah. Here, I'll give you kind of a synopsis. When I was probably in my 4th year with Total, you know, I was doing a lot for them. I was doing very well. I wanted to start climbing the corporate ladder and kept getting knocked down. The manager at the time just wanted to hold me back because I was doing well for him, and he didn't want to see me go anywhere else within the organization. I can understand that to a point. So here I am, frustrated that I can't move forward. The harder I work, it seems like the farther I fall. And I had to sit back and take that in. So I talked to a good colleague of mine at the time, and he said, "Look, I think what you need to do is write a letter and send it off to your manager and human resources, just kind of lay everything out. See what you've got to do and see if that kind of helps you out," he said. "Be cool, calm, and collected and see where it goes." So I did that, and it worked out in my favor. I was able to get a little bit more of a bump, a better spot within the company at that point. But I was at the point of throwing in the towel. I had enough. I felt like I was getting pushed more than what I really had to be pushed. And you kind of sit back after all this happens, and you keep moving on with your life, and you start to ask yourself some questions. What is it that's really going to make you happy? Are you just going to work to bring home a paycheck, or are you going there to do well and yet smile every day? And like I said earlier, I think if you show up to work on a regular basis, from 7 o'clock in the morning till 5 o'clock at night, it's at that point you really have to sit back and say, "What else should I be doing with my life?" And you kind of have to have that figured out. That's what I did toward the end. I got to a point where I said, you know, I just don't think I can be here and be happy anymore. And I made that choice to move on, and so far, so good. I can't complain.

John:

No, I think that's a, that's a. I think there are two fundamental elements that I'm going to isolate as you were talking, and one of them was when you were looking for some direction and motivation again, you went to your trusted voices, right? Obviously, they didn't tell you what to do. You were soliciting some perspective and insight, and they kind of gave you direction. And then I think the way you said "cool, calm, and collected" sounds like something you've probably drawn on more than once in your life because it worked then, and you probably continue to use that. Is that a fair question?

Pete:

I'll be honest when I say "cool, calm, and collected," I am. When I'm by myself and I start to get a little bit frustrated, I start to get a little bit loud. And you know, it reminds me to just sit back and relax and just think. And 9 times out of 10, I might just drop the whole problem overnight, get a good night's rest, and read.

Pete:

With a cup of coffee in the morning, and you have a cool hat. But ever since I got started in this oil business, I had a good mentor. You know, I lost him in 2010. But I found another one, actually. I found a few more and also very close people. But I really have to say this to everybody today, having the right mentor, I think, means everything in the world. You have

somebody to lean on and kind of bump ideas back and forth. It kind of keeps you on the straight and narrow.

John:

No, I think there's a lot of good wisdom in what you're saying there, and I'm going to ask you a question that sometimes people have asked me, and I'm usually at a loss for words, but I want to ask you this question anyways. In your experience, have you found the good mentors? Yeah, I told you it wasn't easy.

Pete:

By accident. And I'm not lying to you, all of them by accident.

John:

Give me an example of one of these accidents. Well, so.

Pete:

My mentor, now one of my mentors, might grip now. He's down in Ohio. He became a sales manager at one of the distributors I was doing business with. He just called me up out of the blue, and him and I just started talking. I'm telling you what, it was like a click. I didn't know this guy from Adam. So him and I, we hooked up for lunch, and I'm not joking. We must have sat there and talked for four hours. And ever since then, it just kind of clicked. It worked out. Another guy I met at the same spot. I was actually stopping by to meet a customer, and he was there selling another product line. We just kind of got, he knew where I was from, and I knew where he was from, but we didn't know each other. And we still talk today, and that's kind of how it all worked.

John:

You know, there's the... OK. So as I'm hearing you talk there, I'm kind of hearing maybe two principles we could share with the audience of people who are looking for mentors. I think the first is that you gotta have an open mind. I think because if you didn't have an open mind, if you weren't looking and open to anybody at any time, could be the right guy, I don't think you could have had that serendipitous type.

Pete:

Correct, correct.

John:

And then the other...

Pete:

You know, I think the deeper the conversation, John, the deeper the conversation with these people that you meet, you're gonna know who's gonna be within your circle. I mean, who you can trust. It's not going to happen overnight, but you can figure that out. I'm gonna say pretty quick. At least I did.

John:

OK, so that's even another principle, like not just being open-minded for them, but also being open, like vulnerable. You're willing to go deep early on to see if there is that click. You can't, if you don't go deep, you can't click, I guess. And then the other principle is kind of one of my early mentors shared with me, he said, "John, the man in motion improves his luck."

Pete:

Correct, correct.

John:

In other words, you've got to be open. You weren't just open once. "Oh, I got a mentor, that's all done." You're like, "OK, I'm going to keep being open, vulnerable to find that another person because you weren't just looking for one, looking for anybody who could really help lift you up."

Pete:

Correct, I agree 100%.

John:

Now, what about when people want you to mentor them? Because I'm sure if I were to do a straw poll, I'd find people who say, "Pete, he's my mentor." What are you looking for when someone wants you to mentor them?

Pete:

Somebody who wants to actually listen and learn, that's really all I look for. I have no problem mentoring anybody. You just have to want it. If you want it, I have no problem helping people out. I do it all the time.

John:

That's awesome. But that's another thing though, that's the same thing we started with in the very beginning. Did you want it? So you got it. And if other people want it, then you're like, you want them. You want to help them get it. I think that's awesome. I think Pete, there's just a lot of really good principles in there, and I think there's a lot of people that are out there, if they're the right type, which we have a lot of those, then that's just, you know, do they want it? That's the question, you know. So another question for you, kind of just looking at this, like we've talked a little bit about COVID and the grease fires, then we got packaging shortages starting to maybe rear their face. Maybe tell me, what are some of the top opportunities that you see for distributors in this space? Like, where do you see it going to really separate the winners from the losers coming up here in the next, you know, 6 to 12 months, maybe before the end of 2023?

Pete:

As far as opportunity, I would say right now, keep your eye on the ball with everything going on with electric vehicles, electric trucks, hydrogen engines. A lot of battery plants are being built across the US. There's a lot of opportunity to try to get into some of these new facilities. Not really sure how long the whole battery idea is going to last until we get into something bigger and better. I think that there's a lot of good technology coming out right now that's trumping the next deal. So, I think right now, the big focus is where we're headed in the next five years. That's kind of what's driving our company right now. You know, we're looking out for the big picture.

The electric vehicle market is going to be a big hit, I think, to the whole Lube and fuel industry as a whole. I'm just not sure exactly how quick it's going to happen. I'm not sure if it's going to happen by 2035. That's what they're pushing. But time will tell. Just keep looking out for that new opportunity within the new sector.

John:

It has a lot of big transitions that are taking place right now, and the one thing that seems really certain for people is the uncertainty of it all. That's just the last part.

Pete:

Right, I agree.

John:

Maybe where do you go to try to find to gain some confidence in those types of projections, like in those types of transitions? Is it just the normal news guy, or are you going to certain newsletters? What's your source?

Pete:

I am, you know, I'll be honest with you like that. This morning, I was reading up on some hydrogen technology coming out of Cummins, someone at Daimler. You know, I'm looking more into the 18 Wheeler market, what's happening there. And then I read a lot of trade magazines that I get here at the house. In the news too, I'm going to be going to the STLE annual meeting here in Long Beach, CA in May. So there's going to be some good talk and hydrogen cells there as well. Looking forward to that and just kind of getting a little bit more of a glimpse of what's coming up in the near future.

John:

No, I think that's great. I really appreciate you answering that because, you know, just for our listeners out there, you are actually on that CLS committee, and you're part of the group that writes and adds questions to the CLS exam, right? So you kind of do have to stay up to speed on things, and these are the types of things that...

Pete:

And I'm not saying I have it all figured out yet. No, honestly, we all kind of bounce things off of each other. It's a big panel, about 12 people all together, so.

John:

So I think it's interesting, you know, a lot of times. There's, I've heard there's lots of different approaches to things and I think. So it's always important people find their approach, right? But at the same time, I think clearly in your world when you're out there as a thought leader, really helping your customers in some sense with all the shortages and everything, one thing has helped you adapt and pivot so quickly is because of kind of, I guess, almost like a defensive driver. You're always looking around the marketplace with those different, keeping yourself informed. So when the time comes to change lanes, you're ready to change lanes pretty quick. Yeah, that's good. I think a lot of people. Uh, yeah, I've never been to campus there at Exxon Mobile campus

and seeing just how many Teslas were parked in their driveway. And I don't think, yeah, there is something happening there.

Pete:

There you go. Absolutely, absolutely.

John:

No, I think that is, Pete, I tell you, I have really appreciated all your insights today and I think there's a lot of great nuggets of wisdom there, so I appreciate that. I hope that if any of our listeners that if they send us any other questions for you, I'll be sure to pass those along, right?

Pete:

Well, I appreciate it.

John:

So I want to just kind of shout out to our listeners that if you guys have enjoyed today's episode, please be sure to subscribe, share, and leave a review. We'd love to hear your thoughts and questions, so feel free to reach out to us. And also, thank you again, thanks to Pete Mauer, and until next time, this is John signing off from the Distribution download Podcast. Thank you.