

The **SECRET** life of an auditor

Written-off cars and wild declarations of love, welcome to the world of auditing according to Sterling Crew.

Picture the scene. A Marks and Spencer auditor arrives at a supplier's factory only to find that everyone is whispering behind his back. The auditor tries to go about his business but the whispering grows louder. And then the looking starts. Eventually someone plucks up the courage to confront him with the news. "A lorry's flattened your Vauxhall mate."

"Let's just say the visit wasn't as positive as it could have been," laughs Sterling.

Gerber's new Technical Manager has seen it all when it comes to audits. Having inspected countless factories on behalf of Marks and Spencer, Tesco and Coca-Cola, he understands only too well the impact they have on business.

"Failing customer audits makes it very difficult to maintain accounts, let alone win new work," says Sterling.

And the key to successful external audits? Rigorous internal ones. "Why should clients spend hours scrutinising the factory when they can

look at our own audits and get the full story in seconds?"

Twenty-five years on the other side of the clipboard has given Sterling a knack for seeing things through the eyes of the customer.

"I do regular walk-rounds with Gerber's Area Managers and Operators to show them what's important to our clients.

"It's about bringing a fresh pair of eyes to the factory. Working in the same place every day can make you blind to potential problems."

But internal audits aren't just to reassure customers. The risk assessments and microbiological tests serve several purposes, as Sterling is quick to point out. Added to the obvious business benefits are the legal and governance requirements. Not to mention the small matter of continuous improvement.

"They help us to develop our quality, health and safety and greenness," he says.

They also help Gerber to make decisions. Audit reports are shared at senior management level to inform investments and training initiatives, which is why the company has appointed a specialist committee.

"It's about bringing a fresh pair of eyes to the factory"



(above – clockwise from top) Sterling's old wheels; Tina Norwood: Quality Systems Manager; microbiological testing and (below) Sterling Crew: Technical Manager

Sterling heads up a team of five internal auditors who are all accredited by the British Retail Consortium. The team covers quality, environmental and health and safety standards and one member, Quality Systems Manager, Tina Norwood, has just developed a new tracker tool.

"It's a simple way of identifying what the audits have found and making sure the work is being carried out."

The proactive approach is typical of Sterling's attitude to auditing. Tackling root causes is the team's priority, not "finger-pointing".

"We're not some kind of internal policemen, our job is to work with staff to help them improve our factory."

And the hard work is paying off. Not only has Gerber received independent accreditation from the international standards organisation (ISO), but its new Technical Manager is impressed with what he sees.

"I've visited hundreds if not thousands of factories and Express Park is certainly one of the best. But

we've still got a lot of hard work to do," Sterling stresses, "the focus now is on driving our standards in good manufacturing practice."

High praise indeed, especially given the calibre of Sterling's former employers. But then again, this Technical Manager has always been a charmer.

"I remember doing an audit for Wella in France and foolishly trying out my pidgin French on the factory manager," he says, amused. "In English I asked her to shut a door but what she heard was 'je t'dor', which is apparently French for 'I love you'. Luckily she saw the funny side.

"So auditing nearly cost me a job and a car."

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