



Ask the Expert: Specialist Sourcing

The BOSS Ask the Expert series provides dealers with practical, commercially useful insight into key diversification opportunities across the workplace supplies industry. This edition focuses on **Specialist Sourcing**, helping dealers better understand the breadth of the category, recognise opportunities within their existing customer base and approach customer conversations with greater confidence. The aim is not to turn dealers into category specialists, but to provide clear guidance, useful starting points and an understanding of how supplier and partner support can help them develop sales in this area.

For this edition, we asked **Jason Kinsey**, Flashy Cactus to answer our questions and share their perspective on **Specialist Sourcing**. Drawing on extensive experience in this area, Jason provides practical guidance to help dealers identify opportunities, have more informed customer conversations and develop their offering with confidence.

Meet the Expert: Jason Kinsey

Jason Kinsey has worked in the workplace supplies industry for more than 20 years, building extensive expertise in product sourcing, specials procurement and commercial sales. His career includes roles with DB Computers and evo Group, where he spent more than a decade managing Specials and later added responsibility for Tech and EOS product management, developing a strong understanding of sourcing solutions and supporting dealer growth.

Since 2021, Jason has been Managing Director of Flashy Cactus, a trade-only procurement specialist helping workplace supplies dealers source everything from everyday essentials to more unusual customer requirements. He is particularly passionate about helping businesses turn Specials into a strategic sales opportunity, creating new avenues for growth, profitability and customer development.

Contact Jason: jason.kinsey@flashycactus.com

Q&A questions

Why should product specials be on a dealer's radar as a growth opportunity?

For me, the biggest opportunity is incredibly simple: **your customers are already buying these products – the question is whether they're buying them from you.**

Dealers have spent years building trusted relationships with their customers, but historically we've tended to define workplace supplies by the products in our catalogue or the ranges offered by our core wholesalers. The customer's requirement doesn't stop there.



They might need equipment for a new site, unusual PPE, branded products, catering equipment, furniture, electrical items or something completely outside the traditional dealer catalogue.

Every time we say, *"Sorry, that's not something we supply,"* we're potentially sending that customer – and their spend – somewhere else.

Specialist sourcing allows dealers to capture more of the customer's overall spend without having to become experts in hundreds of different product categories.

There's also a wider relationship benefit. If your customer learns that they can ask you for virtually anything they need for their workplace, you stop being simply an office supplies provider and start becoming a **genuine procurement partner**.

What do "product specials" mean in a workplace supplies context?

I'd define a Special very simply as **anything the customer needs that sits outside your normal product range or established supply chain**.

That could be a completely unusual one-off enquiry, but equally it could be a perfectly ordinary product that simply isn't something that dealer traditionally supplies.

It might be a bespoke or branded product, something required for a new office or site opening, an unusual piece of equipment, a seasonal requirement, an alternative to a discontinued product or something needed for a particular project or tender.

That's why I actually prefer the phrase **Specialist Sourcing**. We're not necessarily talking about strange products – we're talking about sourcing beyond the dealer's normal boundaries.

The important point is that the dealer doesn't need to know where to buy everything. They simply need to be comfortable saying:

"Yes, send us the requirement and we'll see what we can do."

That change in mindset opens up a surprisingly large opportunity.

What would you say to dealers who feel sourcing products outside their usual range is too difficult or time-consuming?

I'd say **they're absolutely right – if they're trying to do all of the sourcing themselves**.

A salesperson spending 45 minutes searching Google, opening trade accounts, comparing unfamiliar suppliers and checking whether a product is suitable isn't necessarily a good use of their time. And that's before considering credit terms, delivery, returns, warranties or whether the supplier is reliable.

The answer isn't that dealers need to become better at searching the internet. It's to have a sourcing partner and process behind them.



The dealer should concentrate on what they're good at: understanding the customer, identifying the requirement, managing the relationship and winning the business.

A specialist sourcing partner should do the heavy lifting behind the scenes – finding the product, identifying suitable suppliers or alternatives, checking availability and helping establish a commercially viable price.

The complexity shouldn't sit with the dealer.

If we can make sourcing something unfamiliar almost as straightforward as requesting a price on a familiar product, suddenly a lot more enquiries become worth pursuing.

Where are the most natural starting points for dealers looking to identify opportunities for product specials?

I'd start with the opportunities dealers are **already receiving and potentially turning away**.

Ask the sales team: *What do customers ask us for that we currently say no to?*

Those enquiries are probably the easiest wins because there's already a customer and an identified requirement.

The next place I'd look is existing customer spend. Rather than asking, *"What else can I sell you?"*, find out what they're currently purchasing from other suppliers and why.

Site openings, office moves, refurbishments, events, seasonal requirements, health and safety projects and customer tenders can all create requirements well beyond a dealer's normal catalogue.

I'd also pay attention to the awkward enquiries – the photograph emailed over with *"Can you get me one of these?"*, the discontinued part number or the product nobody immediately recognises.

Historically those enquiries could be frustrating.

I'd encourage dealers to see them differently:

That customer has chosen to ask you first. That's an opportunity, not an inconvenience.

What are the best ways for dealers to uncover customer requirements that fall outside their usual product range?

Don't start by presenting the customer with another list of products. **Ask better questions.**

One of the best is:

"What are you currently buying elsewhere that you'd rather buy through us?"

Another is:

"What products are difficult or time-consuming for your team to source?"



Those questions change the conversation completely.

You can also ask about upcoming projects rather than products: Are they opening or refurbishing a site? Recruiting? Running events? Introducing new health and safety requirements? Changing their sustainability objectives?

Projects create requirements across multiple categories.

I'd also encourage account managers to look at the customer's operation rather than simply their historic order file. If you're supplying stationery into a warehouse, school, hotel, manufacturer or care facility, stationery represents only a fraction of what that organisation purchases.

Ultimately, the objective is to make the customer comfortable asking you first.

You don't need to promise that you can supply absolutely everything. You need to promise that you're willing to try.

How can dealers assess whether a product specials opportunity is commercially worthwhile?

Don't judge it purely on the value of the first order.

Obviously margin, order value, sourcing time, delivery cost, lead time and minimum order quantities matter. I'd also consider the **strategic value of the opportunity**.

Could this become a repeat purchase? Could the same requirement exist across multiple customer locations? Does fulfilling it protect or strengthen a much larger customer account?

A £225 enquiry viewed in isolation may not look particularly exciting. But if solving that problem means the customer starts bringing you requirements they previously placed elsewhere, its value is much greater than £225.

Equally, dealers shouldn't chase everything at any cost. If quantities don't work, lead times are impossible or there simply isn't sufficient margin, sometimes the right answer is no.

The key is being able to make that decision quickly.

Good sourcing isn't about winning every enquiry. It's about identifying which enquiries are worth winning.

What information should a dealer gather before submitting a product specials request?

The quality of the information going in has a huge impact on the quality and speed of the answer coming back.

At minimum, try to establish **what the customer needs the product to do, quantity, required delivery date and approximate budget**.

Then gather as much supporting information as possible: manufacturer, part number, dimensions, material, colour, certification requirements, branding, previous supplier details – whatever is relevant.



And never underestimate the value of a **photograph**. We've sourced products from little more than a customer photograph and a description of what it's used for.

One particularly important question is:

"Does it have to be this exact product, or would a suitable alternative work?"

That can dramatically widen the sourcing options and potentially improve availability, lead time and price.

The objective isn't for the salesperson to become a technical expert. It's simply to give the sourcing team enough information to solve the problem.

What kind of support can make it easier for dealers to source and sell product specials confidently?

Dealers need **one easy route into a much wider supply chain**.

They shouldn't need to know which supplier specialises in catering equipment, which distributor handles a particular electrical brand or where an unusual piece of warehouse equipment comes from.

That's our job.

The best sourcing support should remove as much friction as possible: identify the product, source appropriate suppliers, suggest alternatives where necessary, establish availability and lead times and provide the dealer with a clear commercial proposition they can take back to their customer.

There's also a risk element. Buying an unfamiliar product from an unfamiliar supplier can create issues around quality, delivery, returns and payment. An established sourcing partner can help reduce that exposure.

Most importantly, the dealer should retain the customer relationship.

We're there **behind the dealer**, giving them the sourcing capability and confidence to say yes to opportunities they might otherwise have declined.

That's fundamentally what Flashy Cactus exists to do.

If dealers take one action after reading this, what should it be?

At the next conversation with one of your good customers, ask them one question:

"What are you currently buying elsewhere that you'd rather buy from us?"

Then listen.

Don't limit the conversation to what you already sell. Don't worry immediately about whether you know where to source it.

You might discover they're buying workwear elsewhere, struggling to source equipment for a new site, purchasing branded products through another supplier or spending significant amounts on something you've



never previously considered supplying.

Take one of those requirements and **test the sourcing process**.

The worst outcome is that it isn't commercially viable and you've learned something.

The best outcome is that you've uncovered a completely new revenue stream within a customer you already have.

For me, that's the real opportunity around Specials:

You don't necessarily need more customers to grow. Sometimes you simply need to supply more of what your existing customers are already buying.

Is specialist sourcing only about one-off orders?

Absolutely not – and this is probably one of the biggest misconceptions around Specials.

A requirement may **start** as a one-off enquiry, but that doesn't mean it remains one.

If you've sourced a product successfully once, you've potentially created a repeatable product line for that customer. And if one customer needs it, there's a reasonable chance another customer operating in the same sector will have a similar requirement.

That's when specialist sourcing becomes particularly interesting commercially.

You're not simply processing unusual enquiries. Over time, you're learning more about what your customers purchase, expanding your product capability and creating new revenue streams.

Some of the best opportunities can start with a customer asking:

"This isn't something you normally do, but can you get me...?"

My view is that those are exactly the conversations dealers should want to have.

One-off enquiries can become repeat revenue

Our own transaction data challenges the idea that Specials are primarily one-off orders.

Across approximately £2.25m of product sales analysed over the period, around 1,500 individual products were ordered on more than one occasion, accounting for approximately £784,000 of sales.

More significantly, we identified around £530,000 of sales from subsequent repeat orders where a dealer had already sourced that same product previously.

Some products initially sourced outside the dealer's traditional range went on to be purchased month after month, with examples being reordered across 9, 10, 11 and even all 12 months of the year.

That's why we don't necessarily see a Special as a one-off transaction. Solve a sourcing problem for a customer once, and you may have created a new repeat product line for that dealer.



*BOSS would like to thank **Jason Kinsey** for contributing to this Ask the Expert resource and sharing his experience and insight. We hope his practical guidance helps dealers approach **Specialist Sourcing** conversations with greater confidence, identify new opportunities within their customer base and take practical steps towards developing the category.*