You Can Qualify A Stamping Supplier Before You Get On A Plane

A remote supplier assessment that actually predicts performance - documents, sample parts, process evidence and the questions that expose a trading company.



DEEP DRAWING & METAL STAMPING
Zhuji, Zhejiang, China

BALFORD.NET
shawn@balford.net
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A factory visit is the most expensive way to learn something you could have found out in three emails. It also usually happens at the wrong point in the process, after you have already decided you like the supplier and are looking for reasons to confirm it.

Having sat on both sides of that table, I would run it the other way: qualify on documents and a sample part first, then book the visit to confirm what you already believe. The visit becomes a formality instead of an investigation.

The document set is where to start, and the order matters more than the length.

First, the quality certificate. ISO 9001:2015 is the baseline. If your programme is automotive, ask what the supplier is aligned to and be careful with the answer: alignment and certification are different things, and any quality claim without a certificate number behind it is unverified.

Then the control plan and PFMEA for your specific part. Read them for one thing only: do they name the characteristics that actually decide whether the part works, and the controls applied to each? A document that restates the drawing has told you nothing.

Then the PPAP Level 3 submission or an equivalent first article inspection report. Look for numbered characteristics with nominal, tolerance and measured value. A report that shows margins rather than pass marks is a report written by a system that expects to be checked.

Two more that separate real suppliers from presentable ones: material certificates traceable back to the mill, and a gauge list with calibration dates. If a repeatability study exists for the features that decide assembly, that tells you somebody has thought about measurement error rather than just measurement.

And then the one I would ask for last but read first: the list of subcontracted operations. Heat treatment, wire EDM, passivation, electropolishing, plating, phosphating, powder coating or painting - in this industry a lot of the route runs outside the building, and that is fine. What is not fine is a supplier who cannot name those sub-suppliers. A supplier who can describe the whole route of your part is a different supplier from one who can only describe the part of it they personally do.

The video walkthrough is the second leg, and it has to be live and unscripted. Walk it in a fixed order: press line, tool room, inspection area, packing. You are not looking for polish. You are looking for whether the tool room exists as a room rather than as a sentence, whether there are instruments on the inspection bench or in a cupboard, and whether the person holding the phone can answer a question about a part they were not expecting to be asked about.

The third leg is the part you can hold. Ask for the dimensional report, then have two or three functional features measured independently and compare. A report with no instrument named, or one where every value lands exactly on nominal, or one that covers height and diameter but skips wall thickness and where it was measured - each of those tells you more about the system than any certificate will.

There are answers that should stop the process, and they all look the same: no subcontracted process list, no calibration records, no instrument named, a quality claim with no certificate number, a tool room that cannot be shown on a live call.

None of this replaces standing in the plant. It just means that when you do stand in it, you already know what you are looking at.

The full checklist, including the red-flag answers and what to ask for first, is here: https://balford.net/how-to-audit-a-stamping-supplier-without-visiting/

I am the founder of Balford, a deep drawing and metal stamping manufacturer in Zhuji, China. We deep draw and stamp metal housings on presses from 25 t to 350 t, to a maximum draw diameter of 250 mm, and quote from the drawing.

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