

Quality: Its Importance in the Firearm Industry

By Joshua Tomlinson

Quality within the ArmaLite rifle market has reached an all-time low. With more companies sourcing cheap parts from overseas outlets like China, the overall quality of the average rifle and its parts have been sacrificed to feed this wave of profit-over-performance thinking. With the ArmaLite rifle market becoming increasingly flooded, and competition fiercer than ever, companies involved in the manufacturing of ARs and their parts have taken a quantity over quality approach. This change in practice has caused the firearms industry to suffer, and it has become commonplace and accepted by consumers to not expect the highest quality from the companies they buy from. To prove that quality and its control are important, I will be sourcing evidence as well as statements from recognized industry leaders to combat this dangerous new mindset within the industry that quantity is more important than quality and reestablish the fact that quality itself has a direct impact on the end user.

Quality in today's world is so much more subjective than it used to be- or should be. Once, it was the driving force...but today, it seems that instead of being a standard to be met and followed, it has become little more than an ephemeral practice within the AR manufacturing community, giving way to mass production in the battle for profit over product. Within the last decade the firearms community has seen proposed gun control bills, accessory bans, and a general attack on the whole industry. These moments in history have caused what the community has called "gun scares", leading millions to purchase firearms and parts in a fearful mad rush, convinced that at any moment they may lose their ability to do so. From this chaos has birthed the "just as good" mentality among some manufacturers. In their desire to keep up with demand, they have decided to sacrifice quality in order to remain competitive and continue making extra profit. Mike Mihalski of Sons of Liberty Gun Works has this to say on what he thinks quality should look like from a manufacturer's perspective: "Quality and consistency go hand in hand. A low-quality widget may never fail, but it becomes difficult to predict that. Having confidence in the equipment does improve overall performance in the shooter."¹ Firearms or parts to build firearms that have been manufactured to a lower quality standard lack that necessary consistency and therefore do not build confidence within the platform or the shooter.

What does quality within the industry look like? Finding quality within a part or complete firearm is not as hard as it may seem. There are certain practices that can be identified by the end user that show the level of care and quality that a manufacturer instills in their products. Kyle Hermes of Review the Pew explained what he looks for in a quality part or rifle that identifies it as such.

"The main thing I look for first is the name of the company. Why name? Because the names I trust will list their tolerances for the public to see. When every hundredth of an inch can impact performance, it's important. Second thing is metallurgy and treatment process. How susceptible the products are to heat, wear, and other forces applied when firing. Last thing is assembly. There are certain things I look for in a finished part or rifle that show me that the manufacturer has taken the time and care to do these things properly."²

¹ Mike Mihalski, "Quality: Its Importance in the Firearm Industry," interview by author. January 3, 2019. Owner of Sons of Liberty Gun Works, San Antonio, TX

² Kyle Hermes, "Quality: Its Importance in the Firearm Industry," interview by author. January 3, 2019. Owner of Review the Pew, San Antonio, TX

These practices include, but are not limited to, proper staking of the gas key and castle nut, application of Aeroshell 33MS grease to the barrel nut threads, and the application of Rocksett and proper timing of any installed muzzle devices. These all directly affect the performance of a firearm and can be tell-tale signs that quality in other aspects has been missed or falls short. Quality shows care for the consumer. Companies that value their customers and take pride in their products will always have more control over the quality of the finished product than companies that chase profit. With the rise in demand comes a binary choice; mass produce at the cost of quality to fill that demand or produce quality even if it means lowering the overall profit.

Quality has a true effect on the industry, both positive and negative. With more and more firearm companies springing up, the market has become saturated with ARs of increasingly lower standards of quality. Some of these companies tout a “bang for your buck” marketing strategy as an excuse to mass produce poor quality parts on customers less knowledgeable and unsuspecting for the sake of making greater profits. Instances have occurred where the incorrect machining of a part or firearm has caused damage to said firearm and personal injury to the shooter. Performance is directly related to the quality of a given part. Sacrificing that quality will inevitably lead to poor performance. Roger Wang of Forward Controls Design described how he sees the quality of mass production in the industry. “Businesses can make a good profit by selling high volume and low quality, or high quality at a lower volume. For us, our [profit] margins are not high, though our product prices are, due to small production runs and high per-unit cost. But we put out quality or nothing.”³ Forward Controls Design and Sons of Liberty Gun Works are two of the few companies that prefer individually tested parts over a cost-saving industry practice called “batch testing.” Batch testing is a method of testing that a company will use while mass producing a product. For example, if a company produces 10,000 items per batch, they will test a certain percentage of that batch to determine whether the whole amount falls within their acceptable tolerances. So, if they test 200 pieces out of that 10,000-piece batch, and each tested piece falls within the measurements *they’ve* determined to be acceptable, the whole batch is considered “good” and sold or distributed. This is where most of the poor quality parts slip through the cracks, here’s why. While machining an item the machines start to build slack within the built-in parameters due to use, the wearing of crucial parts, and the lubrication of moving parts. Each time a machine makes an item, the tolerances slowly degrade over time and use and must be reset when the tolerances fall outside of the acceptable specifications. Mass production may be cheaper on the manufacturer, and thereby cheaper for the consumer, but the final product is almost certainly lacking quality. Mass production can never assure consistency, and as mentioned before, consistency is what builds confidence in the customer.

Quantity over quality is never an acceptable route to take when developing and manufacturing a product. It leads to less care taken in the product itself, and more care given to profit margins. But when all is said and done, consumers still hold all the power in a free market and can demand more of the companies they buy from. Not holding these manufacturers to the highest standard shows the industry that an item will still sell regardless of its quality if the price is right. Quality must never be forsaken or forgotten. It is the glue that binds the industry to the consumer through careful control and allows the industry to continue progressing forward in both design, safety, and innovation with the end user in mind. Quality builds the reputation of the manufacturer and, correspondingly, trust in the customer for the products that company puts their name on. Without a true commitment and dedication to quality throughout the manufacturing process, there can be no true confidence.

³ Roger Wang, “Quality: Its Importance in the Firearm Industry,” interview by author. January 3, 2019. Owner of Forward Controls Design, Pacific Palisades, CA