



Reps Share Approaches To Varied Industries

For anyone who has spent time working on the MANA Online Directory, one of the major points of attention pops up when the box marked “products” is clicked. In addition to the expected industrial product categories that the user can scroll through there are a variety of far-ranging product areas — everything from apparel to jewelry to sporting goods.

The fact that these product areas are contained in the directory may come as a surprise to some, but the fact is that the presence of these categories points to the breadth and depth of the membership in the association.

Typically in the pages of *Agency Sales* we’ve concentrated on the challenges, problems and experiences of reps and manufacturers serving the industrial sectors. This month we go a little far afield as we take a look at reps that serve the sporting goods, kitchen and bath, furniture and the retail markets.

And once we’re done letting the reader know how some of these reps work in their markets, we’re going to continue in the

next article with a theme that we introduced in last month's *Agency Sales* magazine — The Changing Role of the Rep. Each of the manufacturers' representatives we contacted will provide their thoughts and opinions on how new and added duties have impacted them and changed the way they do their jobs.

For Steve Redmond, crafting a career as a manufacturers' representative was a perfect marriage of personal and professional interests.

"Becoming a rep allowed me to combine my passion for sports and competition with making a living by doing something that I love," he explains.

The Charlotte, North Carolina-based Redmond heads the single-man Redmond Sports, selling cycling, running, triathlon products, clothing, nutrition products and a variety of sporting goods to specialty cycling retailers and running stores. He opened his agency in 2002 and joined MANA the next year.

Redmond brings to the rep profession experience as a sales manager for a company in the electronics industry. "I was involved in business-to-business corporate sales. It was very global, very complex, with a great deal of team selling. It was a lot of fun, but business was eroding as more and more manufacturing began to move overseas."

As he began to see business moving away from the United States, Redmond opened communications with a friend who was already a rep. It wasn't long before he got bitten by the rep bug himself. He combined efforts with that friend, who unfortunately suffered an accident and wasn't able to work for several months. "He needed me to help him, and

I began subbing for him. After he recovered, he didn't want to work as a rep anymore. I realized I thoroughly enjoyed what I was doing and decided to take over and grow with it."

The Secret is Good Lines

And grow he has. "I've been very fortunate with the lines I've obtained. After just one year I've got nine lines, and business is very good. I've heard all the horror stories about other reps not making any money. That hasn't been the case with me. The lines and the customers are great, and they've taken care of me."

Looking back on his admittedly short career as a manufacturers' rep, Redmond has already formulated his thoughts as to what talents are needed to truly make a go of it with the customers and principals he works with. "From the outset, I'd have to say that persistence is the key. By nature, I'm a planner and an organizer. When I plan and organize and find that what I'm doing isn't working, I just redouble my efforts and try again. You can't take things (i.e., rejection) personally in this business. If you do, it will kill you. For instance, many of the customers I call upon are single-person operations. I make an appointment and maybe half the time when I get there, they don't

have the time to see me. I understand that, and I don't take it personally. You just keep at it until you get to the customer.

"And, once I get in the door and in front of the customer, I view my job as that of a liaison between the customer and the manufacturer as well as an educator of the customer. The customer will let me know what their concerns are and what they need, and I let them know what matches I can make to allow them to do their jobs better. That's what I like about being a rep."

One important facet of the job that he's had to learn in a hurry, however, is when to say "no." "Already I've experienced unlimited opportunities. There's always another new product or a new territory to take on. If you agree to do everything that comes your way, you will be pulled in too many directions to be successful. If a new venture doesn't fit into my business plan, I'll say no and stay focused on what I had already planned."

One reason Redmond was quick to join MANA after he decided to become a rep was "I didn't want to have to reinvent the wheel every time I made a move. I read *Agency Sales* religiously and learn from others. One thing I know I have to do is more networking. That's another ideal way to increase your knowledge of the business."

"...once I get in the door and in front of the customer, I view my job as that of a liaison between the customer and the manufacturer, as well as an educator of the customer."

Steve Redmond

“In the rep business I believe in the philosophy ‘You eat what you kill.’...We strive to be the best in our industry.”

Jack Morgan

Eating What He Kills

Jack Morgan, John H. Morgan & Assoc., Baltimore, has emboldened himself and his career path by exercising the belief that “You eat what you kill.” That aggressive stance has served him well as his agency has grown from its 1969 beginnings to the point today where the firm has three outside sales people and one inside sales/office manager serving the building materials and kitchen and bath distributor and home center markets. He has been a MANA member for more than 20 years.

According to Morgan, “I was a regional sales manager for a major manufacturer in the kitchen and bath industry. While I enjoyed working with the manufacturers’ reps in my areas, I wanted to have more control over the sales performance and be rewarded for the effort and the results achieved. In the rep business I believe in the philosophy ‘You eat what you kill.’”

That’s a philosophy he’s consistently followed as “We strive to be the best in our industry. In addition, on a national basis, we try to represent the manufacturers’ representatives in the kitchen and bath industry. We also work hard to be aware of all new technology and use whatever technology will

help us to become more valued to our vendors and customers. We offer sales, marketing, training and consulting services. The fact is that we want to be the best; we maintain a positive attitude; we are persistent and we continually do things that will move us closer to our goals.”

Complementing those personal efforts, Morgan adds that “I belong to the National Kitchen and Bath Association and am a Certified Kitchen Designer. I’m also a member of the Manufacturers’ Representatives Council, and represent the Council as a member on the Board of Directors for the National Kitchen and Bath Association.” He adds that his son, John K. Morgan, raises the profile of the agency by not only working for the firm, but also by writing a column for Kitchen and Bath Design News magazine.

It’s interesting that from his perspective as a rep for principals and customers that are far different from the industrial sector, his concerns and challenges are very similar to his rep peers serving that market. According to Morgan, “The greatest challenge I face today as a rep is to be able to use the available technology to inform and educate the customer concerning new products on the market.” At the same time, he notes that one of his most important tasks is to “keep up to speed

with new products and be able to show how they can be designed into the kitchen. For instance, one of the products we represent is the largest kitchen design software in North America. To get the job done properly we offer consulting and training for our customers.”

Working Effectively in a Tough Market

Bernard Weisman has sold a lot of product in his life. In the more than 30 years that he’s been a rep in “America’s toughest market,” the Brooklyn, New York-based Weisman proudly notes that he’s built an organization that covers the New York/New Jersey Metro area with six reps selling more than \$10,000,000 annually.

Royal Sales, which Weisman heads, has its volume divided accordingly:

- 30% home furnishings and housewares
- 30% infants/juvenile and toys
- 30% giftware
- The remainder is comprised of various specialized niche lines.

The agency’s account base is divided roughly 50/50 between chains/major accounts and Mom-and-Pop businesses.

According to Weisman, there are a number of talents that a rep in his position must possess if they

“If you lose the personal touch, you’re done. It’s the personal touch with the customers that will allow the rep to survive, thrive and grow.”

Bernard (Bernie) Weisman

hope to make a go it if in the highly competitive metropolitan New York area. "You've got to know retail to begin with," he says. "I've been in retail all my life. If you don't have that kind of background, you're dead before you even begin."

Next, he maintains, you've got to stay in touch with your customers. "If you lose the personal touch, you're done. It's the personal touch with the customers that will allow the rep to survive, thrive and grow."

While reps in most markets can relate to Weisman's words on the importance of personal relationships, one thing that's different about his business, however, is the size of the market that he covers. "The typical OEM and industrial rep covers an entire geographical area. It's not unusual for an agency, for instance, to cover all of New England or the East Coast. With us, it's quite different. In the retail trade, business is divided into much smaller pieces of pie. And it's up to us to cover all the pieces."

While market coverage is one concern, another concern that Weisman points out is the competition in the marketplace from the large retailers. "As the Wal Marts and Targets of the world continue to grow and expand, they take business from our customers, and that takes business from us."

Building Business in the Furniture Market

Multi-tasker and complete

"In addition to the normal tasks the rep is expected to perform, concurrently he's got to be up on budgets, finances and comprehensive business planning."

Pete O'Brien

businessman are terms that are on the tip of Pete O'Brien's tongue when he speaks about the talents that a manufacturers' representative serving the furniture industry had better have. O'Brien, whom we interviewed for last month's article in *Agency Sales* on the Changing Role of the Rep, together with his partner Gary Hogman, head O'BH Associates, LLC, Fort Worth, Texas. The agency, which was established in 1990, is "a multiple sales force/multiple-line professional sales and service organization specializing in the furniture, fixture and cabinet trade industries in the southwest region of the United States and Mexico."

When it comes to multi-tasking, O'Brien is quick to point out that today's rep is faced with the challenge of being many things to many people, and if he is going to survive, he's got to be able to handle all facets of the business well. "In addition to the normal tasks the rep is expected to perform, concurrently he's got to be up on budgets, finances and comprehensive business planning. At the same time you're performing those tasks, it's critical for the rep — especially in our industry — to

represent himself as a businessman at all times."

As a simple example of the latter, but obviously an instance that he feels is very important, O'Brien cites the occasions when he encounters reps that don't have their own business cards. "We don't need them," they say, 'because we just use our principals' business cards and put our names on them.' That's no way to represent yourself as a professional. That's the old way for a rep to conduct business. If you're not proud enough to be yourself, what do you think others think of you?"

Continuing on the subject of professionalism, O'Brien adds that "in the sector we sell into, we deal with companies that have anywhere between 20 to 300 employees. At one company we'll deal with the CEO or president, and at another, it will be someone that occupies a different level position. But the one constant is that whether you're dealing with an owner or someone else, you have to present yourself as a company owner — you have to be the true professional. You're anything but a salesperson who's working out of the trunk of his car." □

Copyright © 2004, Manufacturers' Agents National Association

One Spectrum Pointe, Suite 150, Lake Forest, CA 92630-2283 • Phone: (949) 859-4040 • Toll-free: (877) 626-2776

Fax: (949) 855-2973 • E-mail: mana@manaonline.org • Web site: www.manaonline.org

All rights reserved. Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited.