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# No Markets Are Immune To Change

If the previous article detailed how reps from four very different markets view the differences and similarities of what they do, each of the four went on to agree that the responsibilities and duties expected of their agencies have changed over the years. The passage of time has seen to it that today's rep, no matter what industry he serves, had better be ready and able to perform a myriad of tasks that his predecessors were hardly prepared for.

For instance, Jack Morgan, John H. Morgan & Assocs., maintains that today his "manufacturers are asking for more feedback



Jack Morgan

from the field for the consumer wants and needs. As a result, we're performing more market research functions and recommending new and innovative products for the manufacturer to add to their offerings."

He continues that "Years ago reps performed sales and training functions. Times have changed, and now we offer more as consultants on the marketplace, such as:

- Training on our products and evaluations of our competitors' products.
- Marketing and advertising ideas.
- Assistance in designing displays.
- Consulting on business management.
- Motivating our customers to become involved with industry trade associations."

Morgan is hardly alone in voicing thoughts on how the role of the rep has changed. Instead of concentrating on how the role of



Bernard (Bernie) Weisman

the rep has changed, however, Bernard Weisman, Royal Sales, notes that the mentality of people desiring to become reps has changed to a certain extent — at least in the retail market that he serves. "A lot of people looking at our business approach it with

***"...we're performing more market research functions and recommending new and innovative products for the manufacturer to add to their offerings."***

a view that they want to know all about the hours, vacation and perks before anything else. They don't really know or want to know what a rep does. What we do, if you're going to do it well, requires a lot of homework, work at night and a lot of acquainting yourself with what it really takes to run a business. Part of what I'm referring to is what I call the 'Friday syndrome.' Someone takes the job and the main thing they expect is that paycheck on Friday afternoon. That's not the way it goes. I'll predict that if someone becomes a rep for retail with that mentality, they'll become disenchanted in a hurry. At the beginning, at least, it can't ever be about the money. It's got to be about doing the job well and getting to know the customers and building relationships with them."

Looking back at his career, which began in the 1970s, Weisman notes that "the only regret I have is that I didn't become a rep from the very beginning. I love what I do, and if I had started as a rep at the very beginning, I'd be much happier today."

### Getting an Early Career Start

One rep who can boast of having started on his career path fairly early is Steve Redmond, Redmond Sports. Still in his 30s, Redmond maintains that "Reps used to be just order takers. We'd get the order and then move on. Today, however, if the rep approaches the business that way, he's going to work his way out of the business in a hurry. Instead of taking orders, what the professional rep has to do now is a lot more complex. My job is to act as

an unofficial consultant to my principals and my customers. Sure I take orders, but I follow up by asking, 'What do you need? What do you want to make your job easier?' By just dropping in on customers, asking questions and building relationships, you can spot trends and pass along valuable information to them. That's all part of the business today. I call that process building your circle of influence."

Redmond adds that with only a couple of years under his belt as a rep, "I love this business. I'll never be content to just sit back and collect residuals for my efforts. I've got to continue to add value and establish my identity in the marketplace."

### Offering a Menu of Value Add

The extent to which the role of the rep has changed and continues to change can perhaps best be understood in what Pete O'Brien, O'BH Associates, LLC, explains. O'Brien is quick to offer a full list of enhanced value-added services that perhaps never would have appeared on the rep's radar screen just a few years ago.

According to O'Brien, some of the factors setting O'BH apart from other sales agencies include:

- "The O'BH headquarters includes office and warehouse space. This allows us to act as an extension of our principals when local stock adds value for our customers.
- "Fully trained, in-house, knowledgeable customer service staff, who are in constant contact with our principals and customers.
- "Participation with principals in direct marketing campaigns, including introducing new prin-

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cipal products or programs to our marketplace.

- "Annual customer appreciation golf tournament.
  - "Up-to-date computer technology and database software. O'BH keeps close tabs on customers and prospects through follow-up on quotations, programs, inventory and principal reporting. Keeping our principals in the loop is a very important part of what we do. We use T-1 lines, in-house servers and updated web site links to our principals.
  - "Annual O'BH sales and training meetings. These are held at our principal's locations and in-house in order to develop strategy, forecasting and product training for each product line and major customer. These forecasts are developed and shared with each principal annually.
  - "O'BH staff attends all local and national industry shows, where we work hand-in-hand with principals."
- If this menu of value-added services sounds daunting, it shouldn't. Rather, it should serve as an example of what successful reps are undertaking and providing in these challenging and competitive times. □



*Pete O'Brien*

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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](mailto:mana@manaonline.org) • Web site: [www.manaonline.org](http://www.manaonline.org)  
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