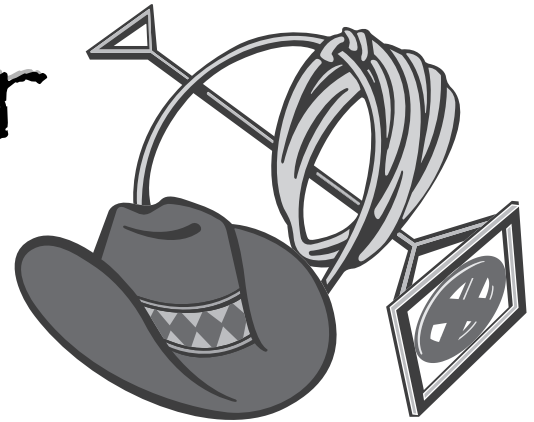

Establish Your Own Brand



by JIM FERRON

Hardly a week goes by without a manufacturers' representative telling me "I've just lost my major line," or "So-and-so company has merged with another and I'm being replaced!" Almost every rep has either experienced this or fears it. You can't prevent this, but you can do something. Establish your own brand. It's a simple but powerful concept and well worth the time and effort you invest.

What do I mean by "establish your own brand"? Many successful reps with whom I've worked are known to customers by their name, "Bob Smith" or "Smith Associates," not what's-his-name who reps Acme Die Casting Company. It's even better if you are known as "Bob Smith — Die Cast Expert." Your customers should know you first and not by the companies you represent. And, by the way, please, only one business card.

Why Establish Your Own Brand?

The quick and simple answer is that you want to outlive any association you have with a principal. You know better than anyone that principals come and go. There's no guarantee of a never-ending relationship — despite contracts, handshakes or any other promise. You are known only for the companies you represent, and when that association ends, you're dead in the water. But, I'm not telling you anything new, really. The biggest mistake you can make as a rep is to identify yourself exclusively with the principals you represent.

Another reason to establish your own brand is, it puts you in charge. You grow at the pace you've established for yourself — not at the speed or agenda of a principal. You become better known and more important than the lines you sell. Remember this: your principals sell stuff (a product) — you sell service, expertise and convenience.

How Do You Establish Your Own Brand?

Make sure your customers know what makes you unique and distinctive. That means not only do you promote yourself, but you should have a unique "self"

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to promote. It's a very important point, and it involves some risk to the rep who may be afraid to specialize, lest he cut himself off from some customers. But it's a risk well worth taking. I'm talking about discovering what is special or unique about you — your particular and unique skill, your distinguishing advantage, so you can differentiate yourself from competitors and focus on just that one difference.

Consider what you do best. Can't think of what makes you different or special? Ask your customers. Yes, I'm talking about surveying your customers. You can do it in person or on the phone. Ask this question: "What's the one thing you like best about doing business with me?" I'm serious. Ask this one question and listen for the answer. Or you could rephrase the question: "What's the strongest benefit I provide you?" You are looking for the single most important point of difference — you from your competition. I promise you that a special trait will surface. Distill that into a few words, and it will become your handle or signature, and it will provide clarity in the marketplace. For example, "Joe Anderson — the pump expert" or "Joe Anderson — the world's best pump service" or "Joe Anderson — the hands-on pump guy."

Repeat your handle or business signature often and regularly. Stick with it. Verbalize it, visualize it and evangelize it. Hammer it home. Put it on your busi-

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ness card, letterhead, envelopes, your web site, handouts, the way you introduce yourself and even incorporate it into how you answer the phone: "Hi, this is Joe Anderson, the high-volume pump expert." What seems annoyingly repetitive to you will barely register with your customers. Spend all your marketing efforts reinforcing your business signature. Defend your unique position with a passion.

If you stick with it, in time, you will become better known and your business signature will help position you to come first and the lines you represent, second. You selected the lines you sell — you have narrowed the selection process to help your customers. They don't have to look elsewhere. You've done their job of finding the supplier.

What About Handouts?

Many successful reps with whom I've worked have helped establish their own brand with their own literature and handouts. Promote your list of capabilities. How about including testimonials from satisfied customers? The important thing is that you repeat your message regularly. You want your customers to remember you. Use your principal's literature and brochures sparingly, only when necessary to document your expertise.

If you take the time to develop your identity and establish your own brand (business signature), you can stand out from the crowd. You can survive principal chum. And, you can grow your business faster than you thought possible.

Here's the action plan in a nutshell:

- Establish your own brand first.
- Focus on a unique specialty that becomes your business signature.
- Keep repeating your story.

So your customers will remember you when they're ready to buy

So you can grow your business faster. □

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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