
Manufacturer Specializes In Removing Obstacles

This is the second in a continuing series of articles that will focus on manufacturers who have been identified by their reps as ideal marketing partners.

Jay Schechter



Left to Right: Nick Giuffre, executive VP; Bob Carnevale, CEO/president; Fred Vattimo, director of marketing for Bradford White and Ron Jaworski, president of the Philadelphia Soul during the inaugural game on opening day, February 8, 2004 at the Wachovia Center. As a sponsor for the 2004 season, Bradford White was the corporate host for the Soul's Nationally televised game.

Before offering his recommendation of a perfect principal to *Agency Sales*, Jay Schechter volunteered that in his opinion, there are a number of attributes that any manufacturer must possess even to be considered. "It's a given that they must manufacture a quality product, ship on time, bill accurately, and be more than capable in the area of customer service," he maintains.

But the president of Focus Sales, LLC, Middlesex, New Jersey, continues that for a principal to negotiate the quantum jump to the next level, the level that potential perfect principals occupy, "in the eyes of a rep, an outstanding manufacturer is one that makes it as easy as possible to represent them. **Rather than creating obstacles to the relationship, they concentrate on removing obstacles for reps.**"

When Schechter, who serves as president of AIM/R, communicated his recommendation of Bradford White Corporation, he emphasized that "they believe that independent manufacturers' representatives are a significant contributor to their success in the field. Proof of that belief is seen in the fact that they truly like their reps and work well with them. They are the best at what they do."

A visit to Bradford White's web page (www.bradfordwhite.com) will provide a visitor all he needs to know about the manufacturer of water heaters. What it won't tell you, however, is why the company was nominated as a "perfect manufacturer" by one of its reps.

To learn further why the company is held in such high esteem by one of its independent manufacturers' representatives, and to gain insight on the company's marketing philosophy, one needs an in-depth conversation with Nick Giuffre, vice president of sales. It is only then that the company's commitment to reps and its involvement of its rep network into company operations becomes evident.

Bradford White, an associate member of AIM/R, traces its beginnings back to 1881. Today it is one of the most technologically advanced water heater manufacturers in the world. With headquarters in suburban Philadelphia and its manufacturing operation in Middleville, Michigan, the company builds its products strictly for wholesale distribution. Bradford White water heaters for residential, commercial and hydronic space heating applications are designed to be installed by plumbing and heating professionals.

Giuffre wastes no time when it comes to explaining how and why his company has decided going to market with reps is the best course of action. "It's

critical in the plumbing and heating business to achieve two goals:

- "Get your story told out in the field.
- "Gain the coverage you need in the territory.

"In our opinion, the use of reps allows you to meet both those goals. You immediately have more people in the field than you would if you employed direct salespeople. At the same time, you achieve a big bang for your sales buck."

But there's more to the manufacturer's decision to use reps. "There's also the issue of the synergy that reps offer us," explains Giuffre. "If we had a direct sales force, I realize we'd have 100 percent of their time in the field and wouldn't have to worry about sharing part of their selling time in the field with other manufacturers. Despite that fact, we still wouldn't achieve the level of coverage we enjoy with reps."

Gathering Field Intelligence

It's not just the synergy that Bradford White enjoys, however. "There's also the matter of gathering information from the territory," says Giuffre. "Whenever our reps are calling on customers, we find that one conversation leads into another. The good rep knows how to cover all the bases in his conversations. Before he's completed a call, he's gathering a wealth of information on contractors, distributors, etc., all of which is valuable to us.

"Working with a good rep is a wonderful experience. I spend time with them (including Jay Schechter) in the field and there is so much to learn from it. When they talk, all you have to do is listen. There is so much to be learned about the territory, about the market, and about your competition."

The manufacturer continues that over the years Bradford White has fine-tuned its approach to locating reps to fill voids in its marketing efforts. "Before there was an AIM/R directory, we'd check in various publications where we knew we could find interested reps. Now with the directory, we go right to it, find potential reps, and then check with their rep peers for recommendations. Once I locate the potentials, I'll call them and schedule interviews."

Before that interview is set, however, Giuffre explains there are a number of attributes that must be present in order for him to be attracted to the rep and his capabilities. "I'll attach a one to 10 point score (with 10 being the highest) to various characteristics

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sales force? A view of the sales force is initially achieved via an agency resume. Once that step is taken, “We’ll ask to personally meet their entire sales staff. At that

that the rep possesses,” he says. Included in the characteristics are:

- How many years has the rep been in business?
- Are his existing lines synergistic with the Bradford White line of products?
- What is the status of its administrative organization? Is its infrastructure set up to properly administer paperwork and orders in an accurate and timely manner?
- What is the status of its

meeting we’ll ask each of them the very same questions we ask of the agency owners.”

- What are the affiliations the agency has with professional organizations, including AIM/R?

Giuffre says that some of these areas are more heavily weighted than others, depending upon their needs in a territory. “For instance, if we need pioneering work more than some other function, a characteristic such as strength of sales staff might be more important than something else.”

Communication Needs

As Giuffre explains it, the area of expected communication between rep and principal is one that Bradford White’s reps probably appreciate more than reps in other situations. “Over the years, I’d say that we’ve been rather loose with our reps when it comes to communication from them to us. Our feeling is that if you’ve done your job correctly in hiring the right reps for the right territory, then they’ll communicate to us when they need to. I’m not really big when it comes to written sales reports. Sure, we expect our reps to share competitive and other information with us on an as-needed basis, but we trust them to communicate with us when they have to.” He adds that communication in any form that is effective is acceptable.

As far as communication from the manufacturer to the rep, he says that Bradford White employs a number of approaches, including the company web site, annual sales meetings, newsletters, product bulletins, e-mail and “webinars.”

Perhaps the best weapon the company uses in its communication, however, are four highly-qualified regional managers. “Each of them has gone through all the ranks in the company and they have vast experience with the company and our products. They know where to get all the answers.” He explains that the regional managers are on the road three or four days a week. “I don’t require them to do much administrative work, but what I do expect from them is to make joint calls, serve as counselors for our reps, and identify our strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps the most important role they fill is that of establishing a strong and trusting relationship with our reps.”

Jay Schechter agrees that Bradford White has done all it can to nurture those relationships. “While their goal is to eliminate obstacles between themselves and their reps, by doing that they allow us to reach our goal-eliminating obstacles in the relationships between ourselves and them.” □

Jay Schechter and Nick Giuffre speak with one voice when they discuss the benefits of reps and manufacturers participating in AIM/R.

The willingness of reps and manufacturers to join and participate in AIM/R are real positives, according to Schechter. “For reps, their participation in AIM/R is an example of their desire not only to raise the bar of their professional performance, but it also speaks to their willingness to invest in the future of their organizations. For me as an individual, the AIM/R annual conference has been a great opportunity to meet not only with the other Bradford White reps, but reps for all other manufacturers. By networking with each other, we can learn what they’re trying in their businesses and get a fix on what works and what doesn’t work. There’s a real willingness to share information.”

According to Giuffre, “From my participation in AIM/R and my association with reps who are members, I’ve become not only a better businessman and manager, but also a better person. Membership in AIM/R serves as an example of the benefits of hanging around with the ‘cream of the crop.’ By doing so, you get to be the cream yourself.”

He continues that, “I know many reps who are great, but as businessmen they aren’t quite there yet. Before it’s too late, they’ve got to surround themselves with others who have already made themselves better and stronger. AIM/R helps them discard their old ways of thinking and teaches them how to add value to what they do. As a result, I insist that all of my reps are involved in the association.”