
Communication Cements Rep And Manufacturer

“The reason we have two ears and one mouth is that we’re supposed to listen for twice the amount of time that we speak.”

That’s sage advice, and it serves as the foundation for a philosophy that has been built over a more than 30-year career in sales and marketing. It’s also a business practice that John Bermingham, chairman, president and CEO, American Pad & Paper, LLC (Ampad), firmly believes in — especially when it comes to communicating with his company’s network of independent manufacturers’ representatives.

Ampad, headquartered in Plano, Texas, is a more than century-old supplier of writing pads, specialty papers, filing products, and envelopes.

Bermingham maintains that communication, “and by that I mean communication from manufacturer to rep, and communication from rep to manufacturer,” is the key to an effective relationship. He continues that “everything I’ve ever learned about sales and marketing I’ve learned from reps, and the key to that learning process has been the ability to communicate.”

In explaining how he began his career-long relationship with reps, Bermingham relates how after leaving

the military in 1971, he began in inside sales with Shure Incorporated, Evanston, Illinois. He quickly moved to outside sales and eventually became sales manager for the company. He explains that reps were already in place when he joined the company and it was their job to handle the majority of the company’s retail business.

From there he moved to Panasonic and was eventually recruited by Sony as the vice president of sales for their magnetic products. “When I joined Sony, they had built a plant in Dothan, Alabama, and had a 17-year history of failure in that area. I was brought in to turn things around.”



John Bermingham

Switching Back to Reps

He quickly found out that was no easy matter. “Three or four months before I joined them, they had fired all their reps and replaced them with direct salespeople. One of the first things I did was to change from direct back to independent reps — using many of the same reps who had been let go.” If there was any question as to whether that was the right decision, he points to the fact that the company went from \$30 million in sales to \$1.2 billion in seven years.

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Naturally the question begs itself, how did Birmingham and his team accomplish what he did in a relatively short period of time? “I can give you the standard answers that might include:

- a strong sales and marketing effort,
- good distribution and
- a quality product.

“But, the single major reason is that we had the best independent reps in place that anyone could ever ask for. And, we know how to treat and to work with those reps. They weren’t just people you would take out to dinner and engage in conversation. Rather, they became an integral part of our organization — they were individuals we could depend upon to make everything work.”

That brings us to Birmingham and his Ampad experience. When the CEO arrived at the company he admits that it was evident to him that the reps the company had in place historically had been treated as third-rate citizens — at best. “As a com-

pany, we did as much wrong with them as anyone could. To correct the situation, I brought along with me a vice president of sales who had the same mindset as I did. We quickly put our rep philosophy in place and immediately began working closely with our rep network.”

Reps Know the Territory

An integral part of working closely with reps, according to Birmingham, is to communicate with them. “From a company perspective, communication is key. And, from a personal perspective, the goal is to have the reps feel free to call me personally with questions or problems. That’s why we have phones — to communicate. Those people (the reps) know more about the territory than I ever will. If I don’t take advantage of that talent, then I’m not doing my job. They’ve got to be willing to contact me, take me out, ask me questions and provide me with information.”

In addition to the personal interaction with reps, Birmingham explains that Ampad exercises effective verbal and written two-way communication between its reps and the company’s vice president of sales and regional and district sales managers.

He continues that reps communicate to the company in a variety of ways, including monthly reports and as-needed verbal communication. “In the area of communicating, however,” he says, “everything we do is goal and task oriented. We don’t communicate just for the sake of communicating. We truly want to know what’s happening in the market, what customers need, and what the competition is doing.”

Birmingham emphasizes that the company’s reps are the first line of defense in the field. “No one knows more about what’s happening in the territory than they do. For example, I was in Boston just yesterday spending the day with our rep there. The time spent in the field with him was absolutely terrific. In the short period of time we spent over lunch, he briefed me on everything I needed to know in the territory.

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Left to right: Ampad management team members Frank Clementi, VP sales; Barry Schoonvel, Sr., VP supply chain management and John Birmingham, chairman, president and CEO discuss distribution of a product.

There's no other source for me to get that kind of information. Following our lunch, we completed a joint call. Since he had prepared me well, I knew everything I had to say and could answer any questions that were asked by the customer. No direct employee of Ampad could have conducted a sales call as well as he did."

One of the valuable byproducts of the type of communication he's employed with his reps over the years has been an understanding of who and what the rep is, Bermingham explains. "Personally, I've grown to have a great deal of empathy for reps and for the job they perform. I fully appreciate the difficult task they have as entrepreneurs who have to answer to many masters at the same time. Add to that the amount of time they spend on the road away from their families, and you get a much deeper understanding of what they face. Remember, these aren't simply salespeople. Rather, they are entrepreneurs who own their own businesses and happen to be in the selling business."

In order to allow them to do their jobs better, Bermingham maintains that he's a firm believer in providing reps with all the support they need. "We provide them with everything, including product samples, sales promotions, attendance at trade shows, etc. In addition, we support those efforts with individual promotions for territories or specific customers as needed."

Does this approach work? Bermingham swears by it. "From what I see, we're getting more sales calls on our behalf than ever before. In addition, there's simply no contentiousness between us and our reps. Our relationships are excellent because we regularly communicate with one another." □

The Ampad File

Ampad is a leading manufacturer and distributor of writing pads, filing products, retail envelopes and specialty papers for business, home and education.

With a vast range of product grades, price points and selections, Ampad provides "one-stop-shop" convenience for some of the nation's largest and fastest-growing office supply retailers and distributors.

Ampad's corporate headquarters are in Plano, Texas, and the company has strategically placed manufacturing and distribution facilities to provide products, delivery and service to its customers.

Founded in 1888 by Thomas Holley in Holyoke, Massachusetts, Ampad has grown to become a leading provider of office products in North America. The company is credited with inventing the legal pad. Today the company markets more than 1,700 products under several nationally recognized brand names.

Five manufacturing and distribution facilities are strategically located across North America to ensure timely and efficient distribution to customers everywhere. Four of these facilities are highly-automated U.S. manufacturing plants with nearby distribution centers in Massachusetts, Tennessee, Illinois and Utah. The fifth facility is located in Matamoros, Mexico, from which labor-intensive products are shipped to the other four Ampad facilities for fulfillment of customer orders.

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