



Canadian Rep Endorses "Repping" As A Career Choice

How's this for an endorsement of the rep profession as a career choice? "I'd do it again in a heartbeat, and I would advise any young person to consider it as a career choice." That's what Scott Lightfoot, Canada Process Equipment Corp., Mississauga, Ontario, has to say when he takes stock of the career move he made several years ago.

"Working as a rep has provided me with the financial remuneration I wanted and supported the lifestyle I chose for myself and my family," he explains. "I'm not the kind of person who can sit in an office eight to 10 hours a day and look forward to specific vacation times every year. I simply couldn't do it. I thrive on meeting new people every day, working with

new and different products, and traveling to different manufacturing locations. That's just the way I am."

Lightfoot's path to where he finds himself today follows a similar course that many other reps have taken. "I started my career in 1994 in industrial sales and was a direct salesman covering Ontario for a company that manufactured screening and vibratory separation equipment. After two years they closed their plant here in Toronto and at the same time decided to beef up their sales force here." It was at that time that the attractions of "reppdom" began to exhibit themselves.

In his capacity as a direct salesperson, Lightfoot had been attending the annual powder and bulk solids show in Chicago. "At

that same show we always conducted our annual sales meeting. Regularly, there were only a handful of direct employees and everyone else was a rep. That was my first exposure to reps. Before that I knew virtually nothing about them.

Coincidental to Lightfoot's exposure to reps, the manufacturing firm he worked for was looking to cut costs. Seeing an opportu-



Scott Lightfoot

"I thrive on meeting new people every day, working with new and different products, and traveling to different manufacturing locations."

nity, he put together a business plan for the company that would have him working the Ontario territory as their independent manufacturers' representative.

Thus was born Canada Process Equipment Company (www.processequipment.ca). Today that agency represents the world's leading manufacturers of bulk material processing and handling equipment. It serves the territories of Ontario and Manitoba, specializing in the food, chemical, plastics, pharmaceutical, mining and agricultural industries.

Among the first things Lightfoot learned about being a rep was the fact that they aren't "limited to just one product line. Rather, they can sell several synergistic lines, thereby maximizing the effectiveness of their sales call. At the same time, reps aren't so dependent upon the economic and business ups and downs of a single vendor."

Of considerable assistance in this initial learning process, Lightfoot maintains, was MANA. "When I began my research on opening my own agency, I visited the economic development office in my local city. Among the publications and other literature I found there was a copy of *Agency Sales* magazine. That was my introduction to MANA. I drew upon

"It's all about communication, and I've learned the hard way that if you don't communicate, you can jeopardize future business."

information the association had available when it came to putting together my business plan."

In hindsight, he adds that "MANA has been of great assistance to me because it let me know there are many other people out there like me and provided me with the information and the support I need to be successful. The staff at MANA headquarters has been very helpful and it's also been great to see the emergence of a MANA local networking chapter here in Toronto."

Looking back at his start as a rep, Lightfoot admits to having very little — if any — apprehension concerning the career change. "The company that I had previously worked for, which is now my first line, provides more than 50 percent of my revenue in after-market orders. Because there are so many machines in the market that require parts, that provides me with a continuous stream of business. As a result, I had virtually no concern when it came to cash flow. In addition, I was able to get a loan from my principal to get myself started.

"From my previous four years of experience selling for that company, I had an accurate fix on what annual sales would be. I was able to convert that into my commission income and knew from the start that would be enough to support myself and one other person I was bringing on board."

Since opening his doors, Lightfoot has added two more lines — finding both of them

through business contacts. "Both are synergistic, complementary lines that really add to what I can provide my customers," he says.

When asked what are the best and worst parts of being a rep, Lightfoot is quick to answer the former but comes up dry on the latter. "It's great being out in the field every day, meeting new people and having new experiences. That's what makes it all worthwhile. As for the worst part of the job, I can't think of anything. If I had to make this career choice all over again, I'd do it without any reservations."

Some other topics the rep is anxious to offer observations on include:

- Business ups and downs — "The business philosophy I've adopted tells me that sure, there are going to be ups and downs in the business cycle, but because a large number of my customers are in the food industry, the downs are never going to be that down. Everyone has to keep on eating. To counter some of the downs, which naturally are going to occur, I've made a deliberate attempt during the past year to nurture relationships with my mid-size and larger customers. By keeping in close contact with customers, I get a heads-up on major expansion projects or other activities." He adds that of assistance in this relationship-building effort have been some personal efforts such as sending customers Christmas cards and coupons for coffee and donuts.

"MANA has been of great assistance to me because it let me know there are many other people out there like me and provided me with the information and the support I need to be successful."

While not expensive or even major efforts, he maintains “it’s the thought that counts.” He adds that he’s received great feedback from customers for his efforts.

- The challenge of being a rep — “The major challenge I face as a rep is that of continually meeting customer expectations, even when things happen that are out of my control. For instance, if there is a product quality issue or delivery problem and I’m not on the plant floor and can’t influence anything, that’s a concern.

“I’ll admit that perhaps at one time I was a little more pragmatic

about things, but that’s no longer the case. At one time I might have said getting the order is the important concern. But now, because it involves my relationship with the customer and my integrity and my word, I no longer make any presumptions or assumptions about an order. I make sure I’m on top of everything and let the customer know well in advance if there are going to be any problems. It’s all about communication, and I’ve learned the hard way that if you don’t communicate, you can jeopardize future business. I’m not willing to do that.”

- The Canadian market — “U.S.-based manufacturers’ appreciation for the competitiveness of the Canadian market is improving, owing to their increased experience in conducting business here. They’re beginning to realize how competitive things are here and the fact that some customers can appear more fickle than they might be in the United States. In other words, even if they’ve been conducting business with a manufacturer for a number of years, that’s no guarantee that things automatically will continue that way in the future.” □