

# Rep Performance Up To Par For This Manufacturer

This is the fourth in a continuing series of articles that focuses on manufacturers that have been identified by their reps as ideal marketing partners.



*Left to right: Ken Belding, Empire Comfort Systems, presents Bob Jones, The Jones Company, with the "Million Dollar Club" plaque, an award for achieving one of Empire's sales objectives.*

Perhaps owing to the fact that he was interviewed shortly after one of this year's major golf tournaments, Ken Belding respectfully compares the talents of independent manufacturers' representatives to those of professional golfers.

According to Belding, vice president of sales for Empire Comfort Systems (ECS), Inc., Belleville, Illinois, "We enviously look at pro golfers and think about the millions of dollars they can earn over the course of their careers. But there's more to it than just playing and winning. They, just as the independent rep, have a number of skills and talents that separate themselves from me. They take all the risks on their own shoulders, they are out there on their own with no manager and often without a team. When things go bad, they have to survive the down times."

It's the complimentary tone of the words Belding offers that undoubtedly caused Bob Jones, The Jones Company, Wheatland, California, to contact *Agency Sales* magazine for our ongoing series of articles on "The Perfect Principal."

Jones, who has been representing ECS for 20 of his 24 years as a rep, volunteers that "I'm a graduate of CPMR and relatively successful. As with most reps, I've gone through dozens of lines over the years. Along with everyone else, I've had good ones, bad ones, big ones, small ones and everything in between. In my entire rep life I've never had a company that takes care of its reps like Empire Comfort Systems. Not only have they always stayed with reps, they have supported them with programs, products, and all the other things needed to be successful.

"My first year with them, sales were under

---

\$100,000. Last year it was almost \$5,000,000 and a couple of reps had sales of more than \$9,000,000. Their business has grown at a great rate through acquisition and investments in equipment, people and technology — all supporting the rep.

“Most important, they listen to the reps. A small example is that they have a two-day sales meeting annually. During that meeting, they share all the data about the industry. They cover what they’ve done and provide all the good and bad information. Then after the first day and a half, everyone from Empire leaves except the vice president of sales, who then has a closed-door session with the reps. We discuss anything and everything to help us in our relationship with Empire. Nothing is off limits and it really helps to be able to talk ‘a little off the record’ about things.”

---

### Long History with Reps

---

There’s nothing “off the record” about what Belding thinks concerning the reps with whom he’s gone to market for more than two decades. According to the sales executive, ECS, which manufactures space heating, fireplace and outdoor products, has been working with independent reps “forever.” “The company was founded in 1932 and I’ve been here for 20 years,” he explains. “The reps have been here since before I arrived. I would guess that they probably came on board at a time when ECS was attempting to test itself nationally in the ‘50s and ‘60s. Back then we had probably 20 independent reps who went out and traveled down that long and dusty road in order to make contacts and sales to independent dealers.”

He notes that shortly before his arrival at the company more than 20 years ago, “we had so many dealers we were selling to that the task became overwhelming for us. It was at that time that we steered ourselves toward distributors rather than going dealer direct. Our reps were so entrenched in the territory that the distributors accepted them with open arms. The reps had worked so hard at developing relationships that the distributors were not only comfortable with them personally, they were comfortable with our company and our products. If anything, that taught us a lesson of how important it is to be face-to-face with your customers on a regular basis, and that’s what our reps provide us — the personal customer contact.”

It’s that personal contact coupled with the cost factor that has cemented a firm relationship between ECS and the dozen rep firms — including The Bob

Jones Company — that take its products to market.

---

### Staying the Course

---

“We’ve never seriously considered a change in how we go to market,” Belding explains. “We’re only a \$60-million company, and I don’t know at what point people think it makes sense to even consider something different. If you want to make a change and have a direct salesman cover a territory, there are trade-offs to consider. At the same time, you’ve got to keep in mind that whatever commissions are paid to the rep don’t all go into his pocket. He’s got a variety of travel and entertainment expenses that he has to cover. Those are all costs that the manufacturer would have to bear if he ever decided to go direct.”

He adds, “Our people are fully aware of the ramifications and pitfalls of making such a change. Right now we’re operating with 12 agencies and when any of those 12 reaches a point where they need more people in their territory, then it’s up to them to provide that coverage. It’s their responsibility. That’s why we work with them.”

During the two decades he’s been with ECS, Belding notes that he’s only had to replace one rep firm. However, if he was placed in a position where he’d have to seek out other rep firms, he maintains that he’d approach it two ways. “First, I’d ask our present rep force for their recommendations. Next, I would approach our customer base because they are the ones who know who the good reps are.”

---

### Attributes of a Good Rep

---

Looking at his present rep sales force, Belding has clearly identified qualities that he would look for in any new firm. “Part of what we’d be looking for is

***“As a manufacturer, we tout ourselves as being a service-oriented company and that’s the same attribute we expect in our reps.”***

---

***“...after the first day and a half, everyone from Empire leaves except the vice president of sales, who then has a closed-door session with the reps. We discuss anything and everything to help us in our relationship with Empire.”***

that the agency must be service-oriented. As a manufacturer, we tout ourselves as being a service-oriented company and that's the same attribute we expect in our reps. For instance, if you call our offices, you get a person answering the phone, and if someone leaves a message, we get back to them immediately. That's the same thing we expect our reps to do. In addition to the service quality, we'd also expect that they have a specific plan where they call on all the level 'A,' 'B' and 'C' customers and allocate specific amounts of time to them.

After all, that's why we have reps in the first place — we want to ensure that we have the face in front of the customer. We have to know that they're there and taking care of business.”

If that's what Belding and ECS look for in a rep, in turn, why would a rep want to partner with the manufacturer? “I don't know if this is a good or bad answer,” he says, “but the main thing we do is we

don't treat our reps as reps. In other words, we treat them as if they were actually here with us in our headquarters. I know of some other companies that don't treat their reps well. That's not anything we do. If they have questions or problems, we get back to them immediately. We provide them with all the support they're going to need. I know the term 'family' can be overused, but I've got to admit that that's exactly how we treat them.”

Part of that “family” treatment that Belding alludes to entails communicating with reps. “You name it, we do it — phone, fax, e-mail. We do whatever it takes to get the message delivered. In return, we don't believe in call reports, but what we do believe in is the rep keeping us informed. If something goes wrong or they need something, we expect them to tell us right away. They are independent entrepreneurial businesspeople. As such, we know they probably can't stand the thought of sitting in an office and they don't like to write reports; but since they're on their own and working with us, we have to be kept in the loop — and that's exactly what our reps do for us.”

When asked if there are any specific challenges to working with reps, Belding didn't hesitate to respond, “In general, this has been a great experience. Perhaps the only thing that concerns me is our ability as a manufacturer to create enough new products to satisfy the needs the reps encounter in their territories; but, by and large, all of our reps are terrific to work with.” □

Copyright © 2004, Manufacturers' Agents National Association

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)

All rights reserved. Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited.