

---

# Reps Learn The Value Of Evolving With The Profession: A Veteran Perspective



While long-standing veterans and fairly recent arrivals to the profession agree that relationships remain the core to the rep's existence, they also agree that the rep can hardly afford to stand still. Change presents a challenge, and it's only those individuals who successfully meet that challenge who will survive. On the following pages, four reps recount how they began their careers and then how they evolved to become what they are today.

**I**t was 58 years ago when Ben Dixon learned who and what independent manufacturers' reps are. As the former MANA Board member and still-active rep recounts his introduction to the world of "repdom," he explains, "I had just been released from the service and was going to work for Graybar Electric Company in San Francisco, but before I was to report to work on a Monday, I spotted a want ad for a manufacturers' agent. I didn't know what an agent was, but I answered the ad. From the beginning I was intrigued by the idea of not working for a salary, but rather being compensated for what you actually did. On top of

that, you had guaranteed work for 50 weeks and a two-week vacation.

"As I said, I was intrigued, but my wife wasn't. I can't say I blame her. She wanted to know what I was going to bring home and what she would have financially to run the house."

Dixon worked for the agency for three years before opening his own doors in 1949, and he's kept those doors open ever since. His current firm is Dixon Coordinator, Pico Rivera, California.

"Evolution or extinction" are the words the veteran rep uses to describe a philosophy that has served him well while surviving nearly six decades of toiling as a rep. An important part of being able

to evolve, he maintains, is being able to deal with change — and that's something he's had plenty of experience with over the years.

---

## Reps are Businessmen

---

According to Dixon, "One of the greatest changes I can point to is that we're no longer salesmen who are in business for ourselves. Rather, we are businessmen and our business is sales. That's true today to a greater extent than it has ever been."

Dixon emphasizes that if anything has presented him with a challenge during the course of his career, it's been the business, as



***“One of the greatest changes I can point to is that we’re no longer salesmen who are in business for ourselves. Rather, we are businessmen and our business is sales. That’s true today to a greater extent than it has ever been.”***

**Ben Dixon**

opposed to the sales side of things. “I’ve always been long on relationships and cooperation,” he says. “My feeling is that if there’s anything I can do to make this buyer’s life better or improve his company, then I’ve done my job. I never really had any formal training in business, economics or accounting. To fill that void, I’ve had a partner who handled that side of things and I could continue to concentrate on sales. I lived and survived on relationships and the ability to get my principal to do what he’s in business to do — to provide quality products on time, at competitive prices. That pressure to get the principal to perform is something that hasn’t changed over the years. It’s as constant today as it was yesterday.”

---

#### **Increase in Sophisticated Buying**

---



***“Just as they always have, relationships determine the outcome of the sales call more than anything else. At the same time, those critical relationships are harder to develop.”***

**Ralph Taylor**

He adds that another important part of the evolutionary process he’s experienced is that “there’s a greater level of sophistication in the sales process than in the past. Whether the buyer is an engineer, a specifier, or the traditional purchasing agent, they are much more sophisticated in their approach to conducting business.”

Once those evolutionary developments are identified and dealt with, he explains, then you have to deal with actual changes in the sales call. “Years ago when you went to see a prospect or customer, you’d walk in and work your way through a crowded room of factory salespeople and reps. The first thing you had to do was sign in. Then you just sat down and waited, often having to wait your way through a room full of 50 people who got there before

---

you. Now, as a result of everything from voice mail, e-mail and the need for appointments, when you get to the customer's location you can't even get a game of pool going because no one else is there."

More than just the sales call has changed, however. "Before we even got in front of the customer during my first 30 years as a rep, we had a lot of work to do," explains Dixon. "The information you needed about prospects and customers wasn't available then as it is now. There were no web sites and no locations where you could actually find principals who even wanted to work with reps. A lot of your time was spent making phone calls, driving around in the hopes of locating a prospect and then making a 'cold call.' One part of the job I especially remember was spending entire days in the field, armed with samples and going through 3 X 5 index cards in the hopes of finding someone to call on."

He continues that the advent of e-mail, voice mail, laptop computers, and online directories have all dramatically impacted the way today's rep performs his job. "That's why I emphasize how important it is for the rep to continue to evolve. I can't say I ever spent any sleepless nights anticipating change, but when change did come my way, I dealt with it."

With a lot of years under his belt as a successful independent rep, Dixon remains as enthusiastic about the profession today as he was when he began. "I'd recommend the profession to anyone who is interested and capable. However, I would offer some advice. Don't just call yourself a rep and think you can go out and begin calling on businesses without some form of preparation. An integral part of the preparation is a

***"...the ideal potential rep is someone who comes equipped with sales management experience, industry and product knowledge, and a thorough understanding of the territory in which he desires to work."***

knowledge as to whether you can afford to be on your own. On top of that, the ideal potential rep is someone who comes equipped with sales management experience, industry and product knowledge, and a thorough understanding of the territory in which he desires to work."

#### **Considering Sales as a Career**

When Ralph Taylor was just out of college and newly-married, his father-in-law encouraged him to look at sales as a viable career option — and that's exactly what he did. After stints with Mobil Oil and the Eaton Corporation provided him with an initiation to the profession, he then turned his sights on the rep business.

"It was with those large corporations that I successfully completed sales development and technical training and learned how to read drawings and blueprints," he explains. With that experience laying the foundation for a sales career, he joined his father-in-law's rep firm in 1982. Today, Taylor heads L&B World-

wide, LLC, Victor, New York (near Rochester). The 35-year-old MANA-member firm sells injection/blow molding, metal stampings/fabrications, aluminum extrusions, and other products.

#### **Changes in the Profession**

Over the close to a quarter of a century he has been an independent rep, Taylor points to a number of changes that have impacted the profession and the markets he serves. For instance:

- "Customers are much more discerning in their selection of suppliers than at any time in the past."
- "While the orders we get today are larger than they've ever been, they take a lot more work and they're a lot harder to get."
- "Just as they always have, relationships determine the outcome of the sales call more than anything else. At the same time, those critical relationships are harder to develop. The reason for that is there is so much more sophisticated buying going on than in the past. For instance, consider the level of electronic-bid activ-

***"We're connecting with our customers and suppliers electronically in a much more rapid fashion than ever before."***

---

ity and the constant rotation of buying staffs that occur at large corporations. A direct result of that activity is that you don't get the opportunity to establish and nurture the types of relationships you enjoyed years ago."

- "Then there's the change from how the rep operates on calls. Instead of conducting the typical sales call as we did in the past, today our time is spent making presentations. On top of that, we no longer quote jobs, now we're making proposals to customers. All of these changes require an adjustment on our part."

- Taylor continues, "Looking back over 24 years, it's clear to me that the job at one time called for the rep to complete as many sales calls as possible. That emphasis on quantity isn't present anymore. Instead, it's up to reps to develop relationships with individuals to whom they will make very targeted presentations that will lead to that very discerning buyer to look at the products their manufacturers supply."

- Then there are the tools the rep now has at his disposal that have drastically changed the way he works. "Just consider the impact cell phones and laptop computers have had on how we work. The difference is like night and day. We're connecting with our customers and suppliers electronically in a much more rapid fashion than ever before. At the same time, our hard line telephone and postage costs have dropped off while our web site development and Internet access expenses continue to grow."

Taylor notes that "to cope with these changes in tools, it's been necessary for the rep to successfully negotiate a steep learning curve." While he maintains he is a believer and a user of these high-tech tools, Taylor says, that "I'm not sure we're where we should be yet. For instance, our web site serves as an excellent tool for others to learn about us. From my conversations with other reps, however, I've determined there are others who are using it

more effectively than we are."

---

### Relationships Remain a Constant

---

At the same time Taylor details the changes he's experienced firsthand in his profession as a rep, he notes he's also witnessed changes among the manufacturers he works with. "While their core methods of conducting business in the marketplace may not have changed, they've joined the electronic age just as the rest of us have. What remains the same, however, is that good, solid relationships remain the constant."

Given all the challenges and changes that have impacted the rep profession over the years, Taylor remains resolute in his opinion that he made the right decision years ago to work for a rep firm. "I wouldn't hesitate to recommend this profession. There are greater rewards and higher commissions to be earned today than at any time in the past." □