
Reps Learn The Value Of Evolving With The Profession: A Younger Perspective

by SARAH K. PIERCE

As fairly recent arrivals to the rep profession, the next two reps have also learned the value of evolving with the changing times. The lessons they have learned while establishing themselves in the business serve as good advice to reps at every stage in their career — both young and old.



It would seem that Byron Brewer, Jr., CPMR, would have repping in his blood — but that wasn't always the case.

As the son of one of the founding fathers of the National Electrical Manufacturers' Representatives' Association (NEMRA), Brewer grew up in the world of reps, but he wanted more. What he dreamed of was gaining "much more prominence and importance" than he would by selling electrical products to a distributor in a small territory. His real ambition was to

make it to Wall Street and "earn millions of dollars" after graduating from college.

While he had no intention of following in his father's footsteps, as luck would have it, personal reasons kept him close to home. He began working part-time for his father's company, Northeast Marketing Group, LLC, an electrical manufacturers' rep firm in Wallingford, Connecticut. Brewer expected it to be just another notch on his resume, but what happened in the first couple of weeks with the company steered him away from Wall Street and down another road — a successful career in repping.

"Early on I was introduced to one of our long-time principals who invited us to a product training meeting in Chicago," the 42-year-old rep recalls. "They threw such a first-class event that it really influenced my decision that being an electrical rep wasn't such a bad place to be."

Brewer was impressed by the effort the principal made to accommodate their reps. "They picked us up in stretch limos, took us to nice restaurants all over Chicago, etc.," he says. "They really did a great

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job turning my mind to the fact that the rep business can be fun, you can meet some nice people, and you can do things that are positive.

“If not for the respect that principal showed their rep sales force as a partner and as a party to their going to market, it might have changed my decision to stay in the rep business.”

The Next Generation of Reps

Twenty years later, Brewer is still working with the Northeast Marketing Group and has since taken over the business from his father. As owner, Brewer is involved in

the hiring process and understands how difficult it is

to find young people equipped with the enthusiasm and knowledge he looks for when hiring salespeople. Brewer knows that for most college graduates, looking for a career path as a rep “doesn’t hit most radar screens,” he says. “I think that is something we in the industry struggle with — trying to attract new talent that has the drive and compassion to get into the business.”

Brewer notes that, specifically on the electrical side of repping, “most of the younger generation coming in as potential owners are always sons of bosses or related in some fashion.”

As a second-generation rep, Brewer knows that although it can be advantageous to come into an already established, successful company, it can also be a bit of a burden to assert your independence as a respected rep. “There’s a proving ground and a period of time you have to take to prove yourself as being ethical, knowledgeable and professional,” he says. “It took me a good 10 years to really feel like this is where I needed to be and stay, and to really feel satisfied — and part of that is probably because I was living a little bit under the shadow of my dad, considering his position and respect level in the marketplace.”

The Value of Rep Associations

Although Brewer has fought to step out of his father’s shadow and cast his own light, he still follows his father’s footsteps closely when it comes to strengthening himself as a businessman. As an active member of NEMRA, he’s learned by getting his feet wet the value of joining a rep-specific association. Brewer appreciates the fact that, like many other rep-specific associations, NEMRA has established a forum for manufacturers to cross-pollinate with reps. As a young rep, he has learned that “having the ability to network nationally with professionals who are peers is enormously beneficial. There are different markets that are represented, both small and large,

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Anne Marie Conlon, sales, and Byron Brewer, Jr. display products from Fluke Metering.

and it gives me an opportunity to talk to manufacturers of all sizes.”

Brewer notes that since he’s been a rep, he’s noticed more manufacturers downsizing their infrastructure and their marketing teams, causing them to rely more heavily on local reps to provide marketing services for them. “That’s probably something that has changed a lot in the last 10 to 15 years. It’s a development that places a tremendous amount of constraint on your personal time, as well as during the business day.”

This is one of the only disadvantages Brewer sees to being a rep, but even that, he says, can be counteracted by joining a rep association.

“It’s very easy for me to pick up a phone and call someone from any part of the country to learn their thoughts, needs and issues relative to what we face locally,” he says. “Without an association, it would be difficult to foster the same types of relationships. You wouldn’t have the ability to know other reps with any kind of intimacy without an organization.”

With the help of peers and guidance from organizations such as NEMRA and MANA, Brewer maintains that repping can be a profitable and challenging career for people of any age. “This is a career that anybody can be successful at as long as they’re self-motivated and have the desire to learn and listen.”



LeAnn Lionetti, office manager, and Byron Brewer, Jr.

The Lure of Being an Independent Rep

Just like Brewer, Peter O’Brien, CPMR, knows a good thing when he sees it.

In 1987, O’Brien was working as a factory rep when he noticed that all of the distributor reps he came in contact with seemed to have a better job than he did. “On a couple of occasions when an independent rep came in, it seemed as if they were doing better financially and had more knowledge about the industry and about their products than the distributor reps,” O’Brien says.

“There was one rep who came in a lot representing several different factories. I got to talking to him and he was the one who introduced me to a side of the rep business I didn’t even know existed. I decided then that being an independent rep was what I wanted to do.” Three years later, at 28, O’Brien started O’BH Associates, LLC, with partner Gary Hogman, CPMR. The Fort Worth, Texas-based rep firm specializes in the furniture, fixture and cabinet trade industries in the southwestern U.S. region and Mexico. Hogman was nearly 15 years his senior, but



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Peter O’Brien

O’Brien had just as much experience behind him. O’Brien had worked in the woodworking industry since he was 16 years old, and immediately after graduating college with a degree in business administration, went back to work in the industry as a factory rep.

Advice for Younger Reps

O’Brien advises any young person considering becoming an independent rep to do as he did. “Work in an industry for at least five years before branching

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out as an independent rep. I think just to start off from scratch is too hard," he says. "You have to have a product, know whom to call and know what to talk about. It may be a difficult thing, but I would definitely promote the idea that you learn an industry you like before moving toward finding a way to start a business."

The now 43-year-old rep knows firsthand how intimidating it can be to start an independent rep agency at a young age and compete with older reps

who have been at it for years. At the same time, he knows there are advantages to being green to the industry. O'Brien says that as a young rep, "we create a lot more value for our customer base because we have to learn so much more about the total industry. We have to become businesspeople rather than salespeople, so we tend to relate better to the higher-management levels of companies — CEOs and presidents — since we can speak their language.

"Typical salespeople understand selling products, but they don't have an idea of cost, overhead or margins. They're pure salespeople, and if you're the type of rep I think we should all strive to be, you should be more of a business owner."

Part of being a good businessperson is staying out in front of change. "You have to be an agent of change rather than be affected negatively after the change," he says. Part of being an agent of change for O'Brien has been taking advantage of MANA and its many benefits. "The biggest thing is to treat this like a profession. I explain to my salespeople that if you are a physician, you don't graduate from medical school and continue to practice the same things for the next 50 years.

"I think the challenge we face is that a lot of reps think all they have to know is how to sell. You have to read the books, go to the MANA seminars, take the CPMR training and keep improving your craft so that when you do get to be 55 or 60 years old, you're not considered a dinosaur." □

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