



Lester Hensley

Commitment To Reps Pays Off

Relationships take work, and you only get out of them what you put in. That, in just a few words, is how Lester Hensley, president and CEO of Emseal Joint Systems, Ltd., describes his company's relationship with independent manufacturers' representatives. It's the execution of that philosophy that provides the reason why Jim Harris, one of Emseal's longest-standing reps, recommended the manufacturer of expansion joints, joint sealants and gaskets as one of the perfect principals that *Agency Sales* has been profiling in its pages over the last several months.



Left to right: Jim Harris, Preserving & Protecting Structures Integrity, LLC, and Kling Architects' Dave Altenhofen, technical director and Tom Dearing, project architect, review plans for a new USPS facility in Philadelphia.

According to Harris, Preserving & Protecting Structures Integrity (PPSI), LLC, Coopersburg, Pennsylvania, “We’ve been an independent manufacturers’ rep firm for more than 15 years. Over that period of time our philosophy has been to represent principals that produce good products, respond to customer needs, are innovative, solve problems in a timely and professional manner, and pay us on time. We have represented one of the manufacturers that fits that description for more than 12 years.

“Back then, just as it is today, we represented manufacturers that can compete, on occasion, for the same sale. They may produce different technologies, but nonetheless, both could work for that specific application. This was true with our commercial construction expansion joint line. We worked with two professional companies, one of which was partially owned/managed by an independent rep, and the other, a large holding company that was well known in the market.

“We were having some product problems with the smaller firm, but we were making excellent commissions. However, the time was soon approaching for us to make a decision to drop one of those principals and move on.

“The decision was made to depart from the smaller firm, but first we wanted to complete that last big project that was coming up soon and earn the five-figure commission. Once we received it, it was our plan to drop the line. In the meantime, the rep/manager decided that he wanted to move on, so he sold his shares to family friends of the South African founder who had relocated to the United States. This was even more of a reason to drop the line — but not until that fat commission check arrived. It was our feeling that we deserved compensation for all the time, effort and work we had put into this project.”

Events Change Decision

Harris continues that while that was the plan he put in place, events changed things. “After meeting with the new owners,” he explains, “we changed our plans. We believed their commitment to the business, heard their request for help since they knew very little about how to sell to architects and engineers, and we witnessed their resolve to solve the current product problems. We figured what the heck, that large project would ship in two months or so.

“Well, in a short time span, the owner/sales manager/floor sweeper, etc., not only addressed all the field problems we had been encountering, but they also listened to what their key reps were saying. Changes were made and made for the better. Innovative products and approaches to new markets were discussed. We saw positive signs that suggested that maybe we’d better reevaluate our decision. That’s exactly what we did and we decided to drop the larger of the two companies. That decision was the best one we ever made.

“That smaller manufacturer of specialty construction expansion joints, called Emseal, not only moved to the top of their field, it has the larger companies trying to duplicate their products. Their product line is now the line that reps would love to have.

“Emseal has grown from four people and a plant of 12, to a company that employs 50, all located in a modern facility. That was all accomplished because the Hensley family, with their honest professional approach, listened to the market needs, were up-front with people, and just did things the right way while growing their business.

“All of this doesn’t mean that we’ve always agreed on issues. While we still may disagree, at the end of the day I am proud to represent a company that is honest, takes a professional business approach to the market, and has grown and continues to grow while producing outstanding products. Not many reps can say that.”

Singing the Praise of Reps

Obviously, that’s a ringing endorsement of this principal, but wait until you read what the principal has to say about his reps. It’s then that it becomes clear why Emseal, Westborough, Massachusetts, was recommended as a perfect principal.

“We’re a relatively small company compared to others,” says Lester Hensley. “When my father and I took over the company in 1990, we inherited a rep sales force that was already in place, but it was a sales force that was already beginning to fracture as a result of lack of support. The decision to continue with reps was one that made sense to us because we realized how difficult it would have been for a company such as ours to establish meaningful relationships in the areas we chose to market our products. Trying to emulate those relationships with a direct sales force

would have been impossible. We also realized from the start that reps already have the respect you need in the local community. You don't gain that same respect by

sending remote salespeople into a community."

Faced with the prospect of pumping up the rep sales force and gaining coverage in areas where it didn't exist before, Hensley explains that new reps were sought by a number of methods. "The most effective method we found to locate new reps was to use our current customer base as the major resource. Given that our market is specified construction products, we would ask the question of our customers, 'Who do you want to see walking through the door to represent Emseal — and why?' From

the answers we received, we got a real sense whether a potential rep had the appropriate work ethic, technical- and relationship-building skills."

Profiling an Effective Rep

Armed with the knowledge he gained from that early exercise, Hensley explains that the profile he's been able to put together of what makes a good rep looks something like this:

- "In order to be effective, a rep must possess an entrepreneurial drive. In my view, reps are independent businessmen because they have that drive. These are generally people who felt unfulfilled and couldn't reach personal goals while working under the constructs of rigidly-run larger businesses.
- "The entrepreneurial drive translates into a motivation to work hard, to work their networks and relationships from dawn to dusk, and to be motivated by the sales. They are professional salespeople and they have a gut feel and an affinity for the game of selling.
- "To be able to successfully sell for us, they must possess a certain technical ability — that is, an ability not only to sell products, but to take specialty products to customers and communicate in a technical fashion to designers, engineers and architects.

They've got to be able to interact at the technical, distributor and construction level. They must have all of those talents and skills."

Once the reps possessing those skills are located and signed on, how does Emseal bring them into the company culture? That was a simple question asked of Hensley, for which he offers a simple answer: "I don't."

He continues that in his view, manufacturers that make the effort to thoroughly bring the rep into the manufacturer's organization make a mistake. "I think that our corporate culture is as much affected by the needs of the rep as it is crafted by other values. What we at Emseal attempt to do is to create an organization whose culture embraces the needs of independent reps. In that way, we work together in a partnership."

Completely Committed to Reps

Part of the culture that has been crafted by the manufacturer is a commitment to the rep way of going to market. According to Hensley, "Whether you use direct salespeople or reps, you must be absolutely committed to conducting business in that manner. You can't go about it half way. If you're half in or half out, you'll constantly be at odds."

He adds that several companies in the industry Emseal serves have vacillated when it comes to using reps or direct salespeople. "They'll start out with reps, build up the market until a certain sales figure is reached, then they'll replace the rep with a direct person. Their goal obviously is to pocket the commission.

"We're regularly asked about our commitment to reps, and I don't blame them. My answer is that we are committed to effective, productive independent reps. No principal should tolerate anyone who takes a free ride. On the other hand, no respectable rep would take a free ride. A partnership such as we have with our reps respects the needs of the principal and

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the rep. If you start off the relationship on that basis, you ought to be able to address any problems that come your way."

The Changing Talents of Reps

Armed with a history of 14 years working with a network of independent reps, Hensley notes that the reps he works with have changed over the years. "One thing that has really changed in the way they work is technology," he says. "Effective reps have embraced the power of the Internet and e-mail in order to become more efficient and productive. Those reps who have been on the leading edge of technology started with a fax, cell phone and have now moved on to mobile computers. One piece of technology that has proven to be of great help in our business is the digital camera. These cameras have virtually transformed the way we work. In the inspection and restoration work that we're involved with, our reps will travel to the site and immediately send pictures back to our headquarters for review. In the past, we would have to send a technical rep out to the site. The cost savings to us, the rep and the customer is tremendous. Turnaround time has gone from weeks, to days and now hours."

Another change in reps that he notes is their ability to "handle multiple types of interpersonal relationships. Reps have evolved to the point where they can develop and maintain relationships across a broad spectrum in the industry."

When it comes to the type of communication Emseal requires of its reps, we come to another area where reps are obviously going to like the company's approach. "I don't know if we're unique in this area," says Hensley. "We don't require any formal reports of our reps. My understanding of reps and of how they like to work is that they don't necessarily appreciate hyper-regulated forms of communication between themselves and their principals. That's one of the reasons they left corporate life to begin with. They thrive

on being out on the road and they're not big paper-work guys.

"What we do and what we want is to track sales activity. We're interested in the telephone calls from them and their outgoing sales support materials. Is there a lot of product literature being sent to them? Are they using product samples, visiting our web site? Are our internal people regularly guiding the reps through the process of getting guide specs? Basically, what we want are updates for what's going on in their market. And, that's what we get from them."

If that's what Emseal wants from its reps, what type of communication and support does the company send the reps' way? According to Hensley, reps can regularly expect:

- Quality products, shipped in excellent lead times.
- An effective lead program.
- Prompt, competent, courteous and friendly customer and technical service people.
- An accurate, informative, up-to-date web site (www.emseal.com).
- An excellent series of presentations that are now in the form of six PowerPoint presentations.
- A commission system that pays them on time and explains monthly what they are paid for.

While all of these elements contribute to the relationship that Jim Harris describes at the beginning of this article, there is still something missing. When asked what really makes it work between Emseal and its reps, Hensley immediately responds, "It's really pretty simple. It's just a matter of common sense and doing what's right." Undoubtedly, he'll find plenty of people who agree with him. □

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