



Manufacturer And Reps Working Together Hit The Mark

Visitors to Birchwood Casey's web site (www.birchwoodcasey.com) are treated to an electronic target-shooting game. Players are expected to quickly and accurately hit a target mounted on a barn.

While the manufacturer and its more than 40 reps may not be necessarily playing that game, both consistently hit the mark when it comes to building and strengthening their business relationships.

Since 1948, Birchwood Casey, located in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, has been providing a variety of gun-care products for professional gunsmiths, shooters and collectors. Among the products are gun-cleaning solvents, stock finish, bluing, lubricants and rust preventives. They also have a large line of targets such as steel spinners and "Shoot-N-C" paper targets which turn bright yellow when hit.

MANA member Max Robinson, Maximum Marketing, Inc., Bloomington, Minnesota, has been working with Birchwood Casey for close to two decades. According to Robinson, "We've always received excellent support from the company. We've been accepted as a valuable member of their team and they are 100 percent behind us."

He adds that the manufacturer totally supports its rep network. "They cooperate with us on all ventures and offer suggestions to help us build business. If a problem ever develops, there's never a blame game. Instead, they look for a solution. They pay excellent



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commissions, accurately and on time. Backing up all of that is the fact that they have a fine product line and the best product packaging available. Their catalog is beautiful and comes out on time every year. They're innovative and most important, they are very nice people.”

When presented with that list of positives, Mike Wenner, vice president of Birchwood Casey's sporting goods division, is hardly taken aback. He knows exactly how his company works with and treats its reps, and he's a believer in that way being the only way to do the job. Anyone doubting his word should understand that Birchwood Casey has used reps over the course of its more than 50-year history and, in fact, still works with at least one of its original reps.

Citing the Benefits of Reps

“Here's why we work with reps,” he explains. “They're a variable expense. If they sell a lot, they'll earn a large commission with the potential for a bonus. If they don't sell much, they won't earn that

much. At the same time, as a result of their affordability, we are able to have a lot more people in the field selling for a lot less money than if we used a direct sales force.” He adds that if the rep sales force has to be quickly mobilized for any reason, “I can send out a note, and within hours we'll have reps reaching every customer we're directing our efforts at.”

While he stresses his enjoyment with the length of tenure he shares with Maximum Marketing and

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the other agency he has been working with for close to half a century, Wenner notes that if and when there's a need to find a rep to replace one that's leaving or to cover a new territory, his first course of action is always to check with other non-competing manufacturers and learn whom they recommend. “If you depend upon your customer base for recommendations, you can fall into the trap that they'll usually recommend their favorites. We're not looking for their favorites; we want reps who will best fit our needs.”

If and when the manufacturer ever has to look for a new rep, Wenner explains what he values in a rep firm. “One of the greatest attributes an agency must possess is a detail-oriented principal. That's number one in my view. Since I work only with the agency's principal, it's also important that they have tremendous follow-up capability, drive and selfishness. By the latter, I mean it's important that the rep not like to share commissions with anyone else.” Before leaving the subject of desired rep attributes, Wenner adds drive and honesty to the list.

The Importance of Follow-Up

Throughout his tenure working with reps, Wenner has been able to identify his number-one challenge that exists in the relationship. “The challenge, and in all honesty it's one that works both ways, is that all of us in business are busy today. As a result, the challenge I'm referring to is the need to follow up. What I want are reps who will stay in touch and call me if there's anything they need or anything that I need to know about. Having said that, the reps we work with are great people and do a great job in this area.

“Perhaps second in the area of challenges is that of the need for training and education. I come out of a background where I almost became a high school teacher. I value the need for education, and one of our goals is to constantly teach our reps about our company and what we hope to accomplish. Then there's the need to communicate. Like most others, we make use of all the communication tools we can — cell phones, voice mail, faxes, catalogs, price sheets, etc.”

Something else that works to smooth the flow of communication, according to Wenner, is the fact that Birchwood Casey works without the aid of a sales manager. Instead, Wenner performs that task, and he

explains the set-up this way: “The reps we work with are professional salesmen. They know their jobs and are sharper than I am. By me working directly with the agency principal, we’ve always been able to achieve our goals.”

When Max Robinson put forward the name of Birchwood Casey as a company that ought to appear in the list of perfect principals, he concluded his remarks about the company by stating, “We would do anything for that company and I know they would do anything for us.” When he heard those words,

Wenner didn’t waste a second before he wholeheartedly agreed: “I’m not surprised at all to hear that. Many times over the years there have been occasions when in the course of wheeling and dealing, a customer has requested a special program or consideration. They tell us that the cost of such consideration can easily come out of the rep’s commission. We would never touch the rep’s commission. I would let a customer go before I’d let one of my reps go. I’m blessed with great reps. If they weren’t great, I’d have no one to blame but myself.” □

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