
Rep And Manufacturer Forge "Perfect" Relationship

Even though Greg McLaren and David Hickman were interviewed separately on the subject of rep-manufacturer relations, they're clearly on the same page as they echo each other when it comes to describing what constitutes a good partnership.



Greg McLaren (above) of Proline Sales, Inc. and David Hickman (right) of Legend Valve & Fittings, Inc.

McLaren, Proline Sales, Inc., Glenside, Pennsylvania, and president of AIM/R, offered an independent representative's perspective, while Hickman, president, Legend Valve & Fittings, Inc., Shelby Township, Michigan, provided a manufacturer's view.

"Legend Valve would be an ideal company to include in *Agency Sales*' series of articles on the perfect principal," says

McLaren. "I say that because what they've done is follow a philosophy originally espoused by the gentleman who founded the company. Their belief is that all barriers to moving the ball forward should be removed. What they do is look at the big picture and devote all their energies to helping the outsourced sales force increase sales."

While that's easy to say, it's just as easy to do when a "common sense" approach to business is practiced as it is by Legend Valve, according to McLaren.

Here are just a few of the practices Legend follows that make it all happen:

- All orders are shipped within 24 hours.
- Not only that, they're shipped complete with no back orders.
- They don't require orders to be "box quantified."
- Returned orders are accepted with no restocking fee.
- Plus, they guarantee that everything they say will be done.
- And, perhaps most important,



“they let us reps maximize our opportunities to sell rather than spending our time fixing mistakes.”

Dwelling for a moment on his final point — maximizing selling opportunities — McLaren adds, “Legend Valve gives you every opportunity to go out and execute their philosophy, which is to maximize the selling opportunity.” He explains that the manufacturer provides its sales force with laptop sales presentations, constant communication and plenty of literature that explains their products and product and service guarantees. All of that is coupled with inside people who “support our efforts. We’re allowed to make decisions and get the order without having to clear it with a sales manager.”

Everyone’s a Rep Champion

When asked if there is one person within the framework of Legend Valve who acts as a “rep champion,” serving as the go-to person when there’s a question or a problem, McLaren responds, “Everyone in the company is a rep champion. Everyone in the organization is empowered to make decisions and get things done. That’s what makes working with them so easy.”

He concludes that all he describes sounds very simple, and that’s the beauty of the relationship. “So many other companies talk about doing business this way, but Legend Valve really does it.”

For its part, Legend Valve comes by its simple, uncomplicated, common-sense method of going to market with outsourced field sales professionals after several years of practice. And, the company does a good job of cap-

turing its philosophy in its mission statement: “Legend is determined to set a new standard of service in our industry. We understand that your job is to turn inventory with products that will bring your customers back. We understand that our job is to help you do it.”

According to Legend Valve President David Hickman, “We’ve been working with reps ever since we opened our doors in 1988. We decided upon going to market with reps because we believe they possess the talent and the entrepreneurial business spirit that will make them — and us — successful. By and large, reps are far more motivated than are many direct salespeople. In addition, they have worked long and hard to establish long-term relationships with everyone involved in the buying decision, from purchasing agents to builders, architects, engineers and business owners. That includes all the people we strive to reach with our marketing efforts.”

While Legend Valve boasts long-term relationships with the majority of its outsourced professionals, on those relatively rare occasions when new reps are needed, Hickman explains that his company employs a number of methods to locate desired partners. “One of the first things we like to do is to check with AIM/R. Our feeling is that reps who are a part of a professional association are committed to the industry in which they work. They are also professionally run and strive to continue their professional education. Of course, we’ll also solicit recommendations from our existing rep sales force who may recommend someone with whom they share a line. Naturally, we highly value the recommenda-

tions of our existing reps.”

Unparalleled Service

Among those reps Hickman might consider for the Legend Valve line, there are a number of attributes that must be present. “We determined long ago,” he explains, “that Legend Valve differentiates itself from its competitors by its unparalleled levels of service. It’s that same level of unparalleled service that we look for in our reps. At the same time, I’m well aware that everyone says the same thing. I know that no one is going to go to the customer and say ‘I’m overpriced and offer an inferior product that I’ll deliver in six weeks with a 50% fill rate.’ That’s why we guarantee that everything we say we’ll do. We put the same pressure to deliver on ourselves that we do on our reps. We measure every aspect of our organization as it pertains to customer service. For instance, we’ll guarantee 24-hour order turnaround, air-free transactions, etc.

“In order to achieve those customer service levels, we view our reps as our external customers. We cultivate a true partnership with them and minimize the number of demands we place on them. Legend Valve achieves that goal by:

- Using electronic means of communication whenever possible;
- Keeping them focused on selling by freeing them from having to deal with problems;
- Understanding their challenges in the marketplace; and
- Devising methods for making their jobs easier.”

On that last point, Hickman notes that among the methods the company uses to make the rep’s job easier are:

“By and large, reps are far more motivated than are many direct salespeople. In addition, they have worked long and hard to establish long-term relationships with everyone involved in the buying decision....”

- Shipping all orders within 24 hours — or giving 5% off on the order.
 - Giving 5% off on any back orders.
 - Providing a highly qualified customer service organization to back up reps.
 - Relieving much of the burden from the rep by having someone from their organization call the customer if there is a back order.
 - Communicating confirmation of delivery information for all customers.
- Sending an electronic copy of the packing slip with a hyperlink to the company's web site so the UPS order may be traced.

In an additional step to ease the rep's business demands, Hickman notes that Legend Valve makes sure it pays commissions on time, all the time, via electronic transfer of funds. “I remember a dinner conversation a couple of years ago with Greg McLaren when he mentioned the problem he faces when checks from his manufacturers straggle in over the

course of the month. When this happens, he, like so many other reps, has to make several trips to the bank to complete deposits. I asked him if he would be receptive to automatic funds transfers. He naturally said yes, and that's something we've been doing with our reps ever since.”

While Hickman and Legend Valve include all these steps to make the reps' job easier, he notes that it remains a challenge to compete for the rep's time in the field. “We know that our reps represent other lines and it's part of our job to gain as much of the rep's time in front of the customer as we can. We do that by offering them unparalleled support, providing them with the best tools available in the industry and by convincing them that they will spend less time working on problems with us than they will with any other lines.” □

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