
Nurturing A Natural Relationship

- “They always exceed what they promise to do for us.”
- “We’ve never lost a customer as a result of poor quality. As a matter of fact, we’ve never lost a customer.”
- “While they’re not the cheapest guy on the block, they always get fair price for their products. If there’s any question of price, they more than make up for it by providing quality products and service.”

All of those comments were just for starters, and Gary Hubbert wasn’t done yet when he brought his nomination for “Perfect Principal” to our attention.

Hubbert explains that “We’re reps who cover the Western United States for the woodwork-



Gary Hubbert

ing, cabinet and furniture trades. We represent 10 manufacturers of products such as adhesives, hinges, edgebanding, fasteners, moldings, etc. For 18 years now we’ve been representing National Products Company, Louisville, Kentucky. They are manufacturers of tambour (wood strips on canvas that create the “rolltop” of rolltop desks, etc.), kitchen convenience products and other components for our trade. They’re an excellent candidate for the designation ‘Perfect Principal’ for a number of reasons, including the professionalism of all the people in the organization.”

Hubbert, who heads Hub Marketing West, Palm Springs, California, notes that over the years he’s worked with National Products, “We’ve had the pleasure of working with some great people. It’s obvious that there’s a lengthy tenure among their employees. That’s something you can tell be-



Mike Feusner

cause there’s a continuity in the way they do things, and you always know you’re dealing with someone knowledgeable. During the time we’ve represented them, we’ve never once had to correct an invoice. Their product literature and field sales support are superior, and they go out of their way to show appreciation for what we do.”

The Value of a Phone Call

Hubbert provides an example of the latter when he describes a phone call he received about eight or nine years ago from the company's CEO. "After about five minutes of polite chitchat," he explains, "I finally asked him why he called. His answer was, 'I really just called to let you know what a great job you've been doing for us and to thank you for everything.' That's the only time in my life when I've had a principal do that, and it's made a lasting impression on me."

Other than the tenure of employees, when Hubbert is asked what he could attribute the manufacturer's business culture to, he hesitates for a moment before venturing "I'm not sure I can really pinpoint it other than to say it's natural. Maybe it's a case, as it is with some companies, that they take on the personality of their CEO — I don't know, but whatever it is, it works. It's a delight to deal with all of their people, and whenever you call, you're never interrupting them. They let you know that they are there to help and serve you and your customers. It's an attitude that they show at all times."

The Feeling Is Mutual

If Hubbert likes working with National Products Company, Mike Feusner, the company's vice president of sales, voices the same sentiments when it comes to going to market with independent manufacturers' representatives. According to Feusner, the manufacturer works with 17 agencies

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covering the United States. He explains that "With a company our size, it simply isn't financially feasible to be working with a direct sales force."

While he explains that the occasions when he has to replace a rep firm are few and far between, whenever the occasion does arise, "We generally follow two courses of action. We'll get recommendations from our existing customers, or since most of our reps know each other, we'll get recommendations from them as to who should fill the vacant territory."

On those rare occasions when a new firm has to be located, Feusner has a list of attributes in mind that help paint a picture of the ideal rep. "Because of our size, we're probably not a top-tier company when it comes to generating income for a rep. As a result, whenever we make a choice, we're sure to pick an agency that isn't already carrying too many lines. We want to align ourselves with someone that doesn't already have too much on his plate. We want to make sure that we get our time in front of the customer. The rep also has to be sure to exhibit a professional attitude and show us that he knows something about us and our market. Very good follow-up skills are important. That includes showing us that he's going to be out there in front of all the customers — not just the best customers."

Variety of Communication

Once the rep with those characteristics is aligned with the company, Feusner describes the kinds of communication that will generally take place both from the manufacturer to the rep, and vice versa. Just as so many other manufacturers that have been featured in this series of articles, Feusner is a firm believer in no formal communication. "However, it's a good idea if the proactive rep takes the initiative himself and stays in regular communication with us via personal visits, phone, e-mail or even fax. Communication in the other direction is just as important, and we use the normal channels as well as visits in the field with our reps."

According to Feusner, if there's any challenge at all to dealing with independent manufacturers' representatives, perhaps it resides in that first word, "independent." "I've heard other manufacturers complain that you can't tell a rep what to do. If you did, they might be viewed as direct employees. But

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while we can't control what they do, if you communicate with them and treat them well, you're going to get all you want from your rep sales force. That works for us. Maybe it's because of our size as a company, but all of our reps have been with us for so long and they know all of our people so

well, that real friendships have developed. As a result, there's never been a concern with having to 'tell' them what to do."

Just as Hubbert was asked why relations between National Products and their reps are so smooth, Feusner is asked the same question. Similar to Hubbert, he hesi-

tates for a moment before he answers: "It all comes down to the way you treat people. We're a growing company and we have our expectations of our reps. We've always treated them well and they've done the job for us. I don't know what else to say other than that's just the way it is."

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