
In The Middle — How To Create “Power” From The Middle

by JOHN HASKELL

All reps are “in the middle.” That’s what representing is all about. But, reps are also in the middle between various elements of the principal’s operations, personalities, policies and programs. How can reps handle this middle position better to add to their “3 R Power” — respect, reporting and remuneration?

Being in the middle is never easy, but by being constantly aware of this position, a rep can use the middle role to his or her advantage.

- **Do you know who is who?**

That sounds very simple, but as a rep you are always very busy. Often you really do not know who you are talking to at a principal.

Do you “know” the sales manager’s secretary/assistant? How about the woman who sits next to her and answers her phone when she is at lunch? Yes, it goes that far. It is easy to make a negative impression on someone. To play the middle role effectively, you have to know everyone.

- **Do you remember who is who?**

At a larger principal there are hundreds of people. How do you keep track? Simple — you keep track. For me, a spiral notebook (for you, it might be a Palm) is always in my hands or right next to my phone. When I have a chance encounter with someone like the woman who answered Charlie’s phone when Charlotte, his assistant, was at lunch, I write it down. When I review my running notes (those notes I make constantly while working with people, on the phone, thinking about “next steps,” I move Sarah’s name (Yes, that’s her name. How do I know? I asked!) to my file on ABC Company personnel.

And, I have trained myself, as you should, to remember everyone or know where I can find out who that person is.

Funny things happen. A year after Sarah answered the phone, Charlie retired and Charlotte moved to Florida. George, the new sales manager, took Sarah to be his assistant because he figured that she knew a lot because she sat next to Charlotte. Well, at least she knew that you asked her name when you talked to her and you were “nice.” A good start with a new sales manager for your biggest principal.

- **Do they know you?**

During the X-Ray of Principal Relations seminars we talked quite a bit about “the back-selling call,” which I recommend to every rep. That call is the once-a-year special call you make to present your ideas and get support from your key principals.

This is the time to spread the word. The most valuable thing you have when making a back-selling call is time. You should plan your time at the principal’s offices to be sure you have time for everyone.

You are in the middle between the principal and the customer on many, many levels. Customer service, credit, engineering, traffic and reception are the most basic. But, there may be others within the company. In one situation where I was helping a rep with his

The most valuable thing you have when making a back-selling call is time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

John Haskell, Dr. Revenue, is a professional speaker/seminar leader with more than 30 years' experience working with and managing reps. He has developed specific programs for rep marketing planning, principal relations management and rep profile development. His web site, www.DrRevenue.com, includes a special section exclusively for manufacturers' representatives. Contact him at DrRevenue@DrRevenue.com; phone: (800) 332-0258.



firm's principal relations, we learned that the regional manager's wife was an influencer.

It happened that Susie, the wife, answered the phone at the RM's home when my client and the other reps would call. The calls were all justified. There were important business matters to discuss. There was a lot of money involved. Not only was there a lot of commission, but the RM's bonus was very much tied to the deals my client called his home about.

Nonetheless, Susie hated the calls. She had three children under five. The calls seemed to always come at the end of the day when the RM just got home. The calls seemed to always mean that she had to take over for the RM with the kid's bath so that the rep could talk to him. She even began to call the rep the "anti-family rep."

While my client was making a back-selling call, one of the women in customer service made a re-

mark about "anti-family rep." Because we were listening to her carefully, because we had taken the time to make a short presentation and leave our profile along with a box of Sees candy in customer service, we were able to take the woman aside after the meeting to understand the remark.

She explained that the RM had jokingly mentioned the "anti-family rep" comment when they were all having pizza last week and talking about the reps.

Wow! Big trouble, but now we knew, and we could do something about it.

• **How do you get respect for your work and perceived value for your services?**

You are in the middle between the customer and the principal and you get paid for it. In many cases you get paid a heck of a lot more than the hard-working people who get your checks out to you.

Resentment of the rep's income is very common. Your middle position means that a lot of people know how much you make (notice I did not say "earn" from the principal).

The fact is that most of the people who judge you do not believe that you earn your money — really earn it! The back-selling call is a good time to review what happens to the commission dollars that come into your firm. A simple pie chart and some dialog can change perceptions.

The Bottom Line

It is the "bottom line" that you need to remember when you look at your "middle" position. You are lucky to be able to work on a straight commission, not have layers of bosses over you, and to be free to organize and manage your work the way you want to. To protect your way of life, you need to consciously manage your middle position.

Copyright © 2005, Manufacturers' Agents National Association

One Spectrum Pointe, Suite 150, Lake Forest, CA 92630-2283 • Phone: (949) 859-4040 • Toll-free: (877) 626-2776 • Fax: (949) 855-2973
E-mail: MANA@MANAonline.org • Web site: www.MANAonline.org • All rights reserved. Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited.