
Rep And Principal Complement Each Other

Visitors to the web site for MANA-member Gilson Engineering Sales, Inc., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, will find the agency's mission statement: "Gilson Engineering will always treat their employees, principals and customers with the highest degree of honesty and integrity."



Gilbert Richards

It would appear from what Chris Gilson has to say that fulfilling that mission is a bit easier when you go to market with a principal such as Jordan Valve, a division of Richards Industries. The Cincinnati, Ohio-based company manufactures a variety of products including pressure regulators, back pressure regulators, temperature regulators, pneumatic and electric control valves, sanitary valves and accessories. Jordan Valve customers include leading companies in the chemical, petrochemical, pharmaceutical and food process industries. Other sectors include paper products, tire and rubber,

machinery and electrical equipment, transportation equipment and energy industries.

According to Gilson, "The executives of the privately-held company are inherently involved in the relations with their reps. Their chairman gets involved in everything and makes it a point to contact reps regularly with the goal of improving business and working more effectively with their outsourced sales force."

Employing an Effective Philosophy

Offering an illustration of how the company works with its reps, he explains that "any philosophy that a company adopts starts from the top and works its way down. That's the way it is with Jordan Valve. I'll have some form of contact from them on a day-to-day basis, and they always make time to meet with me and the heads of other rep agencies during industry shows. They support their

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communication to us via a regularly published newsletter, and they're always looking for input from us."

Gilson notes that his agency has worked with Jordan Valve for two decades, and the manufacturer only sells through reps.

If Chris Gilson is effusive in his praise for how Jordan Valve works so well with its reps, then Gilbert Richards, the manufacturer's chairman of the board, sounds an echo of the rep's views. According to Richards, "If you called me and asked that I identify the characteristics of the ideal manufacturers' representative, then I'd have to point directly at Chris Gilson and his agency. They are one of the real all-time professional rep firms."

According to Richards, his company's use of and relationships with reps goes back half a century. "When I first came to the company in 1955," he explains, "it was a tiny venture capital valve company that had been acquired by another company in town. They put me in charge of everything and everybody — and that included the six people we employed. It was obvious that we had to sell product, but the problem was I didn't know the first thing about selling. I began by going out and beating the bushes looking for business. We even went to all

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the large distributors and their response was 'Bring us some orders and then we'll decide whether we want to handle your line or not.' I looked into all the possible ways of bringing our products to market and realized immediately that employing a direct sales force is ineffective and much too costly."

He adds that when he took over the operation of the company, it had a track record of working with a few reps. "Because of the obvious cost restraints of going to market any other way, we decided to pursue that avenue."

In following that path, Richards emphasizes that something he realized from the very beginning in the manufacturer-rep relationship is that "you have to make a commitment to your reps. It's a little bit like a marriage — you have to learn to respect and rely on each other."

Praise for Reps

With that as his and his

company's foundation for the relationship, Richards continues, "If it hadn't been for the reps we worked with at the beginning, we wouldn't be in business today. At the beginning, we were just a tiny organization, with little to offer anyone. No one had heard of us and our major competitors already had years and years of experience in the market. The few reps we had showed faith in us. They went out and hustled and sold for us and kept us going. Today we're a company of more than 200 employees, and we've experienced growth every year. We've learned how important it is to show the same loyalty to our reps that they showed us from the beginning. We view them as a critical ingredient to our success. They are a group of people who have gambled their time, money and effort on us, and it has paid off for all of us."

While Jordan Valve's rep network is well-established throughout the country, Richards explains that on the few occasions when they have had to replace a rep or otherwise hire someone for a territory, he's developed a hiring process that has served his company well. "There are a couple of steps we follow," he explains. "Over the years, we've obviously built up files of correspondence from reps who have shown an interest in us, or those we've expressed an interest in. We'll check those files and contact the reps we're interested

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in. In addition, we make use of the MANA Online Directory, the directory from the Instrument Society of America (ISA), and we'll entertain recommendations from local customers and other companies that work with reps. Once we locate those we want to interview, we'll complete the process and eventually make our choice."

The Search for Rep Values

As the search for a rep takes place, Richards emphasize that, in general, the qualities he values in a rep are the same ones he would want a full-time employee of Jordan Valve to possess. For instance:

- "We ask the question, are we going to get along with each other? Is it going to be enjoyable working together?"
- "Does the prospective rep share the same values of honesty and integrity that we do?"
- "If we get past those two questions, then we want to be sure that the rep's lines are complementary to our product lines. Do they call on the people who would buy our product?"
- "Does the rep need us, or are

they just looking to add another line to their line card?"

Richards concludes that the decision of hiring a new rep often comes down to a gut feeling. "When you look the rep in the eye, are you sure this is your kind of guy? Are you sure they're giving you the straight story? Do you feel comfortable with him?"

He adds that "while it's easy to find a new rep, it's difficult to find the one who will work hard for you and be successful. That's where experience in the process comes in."

Meeting the Rep Challenge

Since the manufacturers' rep is an outsourced sales force, Richards admits there are some challenges to working with them. "Uppermost among the challenges is that of fighting for the rep's time. While we prefer agencies that carry fewer lines, you can find yourself with an agency that has anywhere from eight to 80 lines. How can you be sure you get your fair amount of time? You want to make sure you remain high on that rep's totem pole. When all is said and done, the rep

wants to maximize his time selling product. To that end, we have to convince him that spending time on our lines is worthwhile. How do we do that? What we've found to be effective is communication in the form of periodic visits, telephone and e-mail communication. We attempt to establish a strong personal relationship where they like us and believe in what we're trying to do."

He adds that an effective tool in building these relationships is Jordan Valve's regional sales managers and product managers. "In addition, we back up our reps with considerable advertising and promotional efforts. We provide them with qualified leads, attend trade shows with them and have an informative web site (www.jordanvalve.com). Periodically we also conduct factory-training sessions.

"The heart of the matter for us is strong personal contact. I tell our people that it's critical to establish regular personal contact with the rep and form personal friendships with the rep and his salespeople. If you can't build those relationships, it's not going to work."