

Rep And Manufacturer Trade Compliments

Joseph Sarkees, vice president of sales for Niagara Cutter, Amherst, New York, started his career as a factory-direct salesman. While he's still sitting on the manufacturer's side of the desk, the years have shown him that working with 13 manufacturers' representatives agencies across the country gives him the best chance for having the best person in the field to meet the needs of the marketplace.



One of those 13 agencies is Mack W. Sorrells Company, Inc., Rockwell, Texas. And if Sarkees thinks highly of reps such as Mack Sorrells, CPMR, it takes only a few seconds of conversation with Sorrells to learn that the feeling is reciprocal. As a matter of fact, the first words out of Sorrells' mouth are compliments, and the compliments never end.

According to Sorrells, "I've represented Niagara Cutter for more than 30 years, 27 of which have been with my own agency. They have shown by their consistent performance that they are an industry leader in their product field. The company today has a 100 percent rep sales force that is the best in our industry. Their success is at least in part because

"The company today has a 100 percent rep sales force that is the best in our industry. Their success is at least in part because of their commitment to their reps."

Mack W. Sorrells

of their commitment to their reps.” That’s just the beginning. He continues:

- “Their loyalty to their reps is phenomenal. They’ve got the longest-tenured reps in our industry with the average being about 15 years.”

- “When it comes to supporting us in the field, there’s no one like them. They invest heavily in new products and productivity, and it shows in the products that we sell.”

- “When it comes to communication from us to them, they place no demands on us. They don’t bother us with minimum orders or drop-ship penalties. What they’re interested in are the figures at the end of the month. Since they are not demanding, whenever a request for information or assistance comes our way, we go out of our way to accommodate them.”

- “We’ll visit them at the plant once or twice a year and they make visits in the field whenever there’s a need, or better said, they come when we want them to come.”

Sorrells’ continued interest and enthusiasm for working with Niagara Cutter are mirrored by the manufacturer’s vice president of sales. Sarkees maintains that the company’s philosophy of working exclusively with reps “allows us to have the best man in front of our customers at all times.” He explains that by contracting with 13 agencies, Niagara Cutter is able to have 50 salesmen in the field at all times.

Finding New Reps

While he seconds Sorrells’ view that reps’ length of service with the company are very long, he notes that on the relatively rare occasion when the company needs to find representation, “I’ve

“Since they are not demanding, whenever a request for information or assistance comes our way, we go out of our way to accommodate them.”

generally covered an area temporarily just to see what floats to the top. During that time, however, we’ve found that interest in our line throughout the industry is extremely high. It’s not unusual for us to receive up to 30 resumes or rep informational packages. We can quickly eliminate about 20 of them because they’re not industrial. Among the remaining firms, we can fairly easily make a judgment. Being in the business as long as we’ve been, we’re familiar with reps’ reputations.”

He adds that another source for locating prospective reps is recommendations from distributors. “After all, it’s the distributor who is being called upon so they know who the good reps are.” He adds, however, that it’s important to take the distributor’s recommendation with a grain of salt because “they’re quick to recommend their friends, and that might not always be the best way for us to go.”

When he does go looking for reps, here are some of the attributes he’s looking for:

- Technical ability — “Our reps spend up to 80 percent of their time with the end user and the

rest of the time with distributors. Since they’re face-to-face with the customer, they had better be up to speed with everything concerning our products and the markets we serve.”

He goes on to note that today’s rep is much more technically-oriented than the rep of yesterday. “Older reps were what I’d call catalog givers. They called on distributors, gave out our literature and made up to 10 calls a day. Today they’re much more focused and make fewer, but much more detailed sales calls. That’s the way our product has gone; i.e., more technical, and the successful reps have followed suit.”

- Adequate coverage of the territory — “We have a couple of territories that are covered by one-man agencies, and several other locations where we find a two-man operation works just fine. An agency can operate ‘thin,’ but we have to be sure the needs of the territory are met.”

- Self starters — “Because the rep only gets paid when he sells, they’re not afraid to get out of bed in the morning. That’s the beauty of manufacturers’ reps.”

- Ethics — “If the customer and

“What it comes down to is that we’re paying a lot less while getting better performance in the field.”

the distributor don't trust the rep, they're not going to work with him. They've got to prove themselves every day through their behavior, and that's exactly what our reps do."

If there's any challenge to working exclusively with reps, Sarkees points a finger firmly at the responsibility his company has to give each of the reps sufficient attention. "We're all spread pretty thin these days. As a result, it's tough to devote enough time to your reps. Having said that, however, our reps continue to do a heck of a job. Owing to the fact that we're the largest line that many of our reps carry, I'd say they give us plenty of attention, and believe me, it shows up in their monthly figures."

As-Needed Communication

Just as Sorrells related, Niagara

Cutter doesn't have any real communication requirements for its reps. "Most of them, including Mack, are excellent at keeping us informed on anything important that's happening. These days e-mail and the phone make communication very easy. One thing I do ask of them is to make an effort to touch base with our company president, Sherwood Bolier. I don't want them to waste his time, but if there's something going on that would interest him, by all means give him a call. He doesn't screen his calls, and he finds it very useful to hear from the reps."

In addition to phone and e-mail, Sarkees notes that various industry conventions and trade shows serve the purpose of keeping the manufacturer in touch with its reps.

When all is said and done, Sarkees explains that he's got nothing but a satisfying feeling

after working all these years with reps. "I know there are a lot of manufacturers out there who ask themselves at the end of each month, 'Why am I sending our reps these big checks? Why can't I put my own guy out there and save some money?' The fact is, you can replace the rep with a direct salesman who may roll out of bed at eight every morning and make it a habit to stop for coffee before his first appointment. What it comes down to is that we're paying a lot less while getting better performance in the field. Plus, we don't have to pay any expenses, and we have the figures to show that the rep is really working for us.

"It's not just us looking at it this way. I see a movement that's been picking up steam over the last couple of years to move more and more toward reps vs. the direct sales force."

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.