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# Supporting The Reps Who Walk The Tightrope



Appreciation — in both words and actions — is what sets PIAB USA Inc. apart from many manufacturers that work with manufacturers' representatives. Here's how Brian Wilson, that company's national products manager, describes his company's philosophy when he speaks of the 25 agencies he works with nationwide: "We're keenly aware of the fact that our reps serve as our reserves on the front lines. It's not unheard of that they'll frequently find themselves placed in a difficult position. And when they occupy that position, they'll have to make the decision whether to come down on the side of the customer or our side. They constantly walk a tightrope in that regard, and we've learned to appreciate how difficult that can be. To say they have to take the heat for us is an understatement."

It seems natural that any manufacturer espousing that view of what reps do in the field would be included in our list of perfect principals, and that that's exactly what's happened.

When MANA-member Wayne Bond, Process Technology Assocs., Inc., Nazareth, Pennsylvania, contacted *Agency Sales* to let us know why he and other reps think

so highly of PIAB, here's what he had to say: "Above all else, PIAB is a customer-oriented company. Whenever a problem occurs, they don't look for a way to get out of it. Instead they resolve the problem first, then they'll worry whether it's their fault or not."

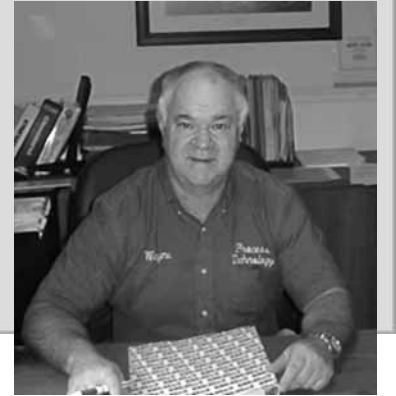
The Hingham, Massachusetts-headquartered PIAB USA was established in 1951. The first product developed by the company was a drawing compass that simplified the work for designers and draftsmen, therefore the company name Pi (3.14) AB. Later, a series of instruments for measuring tensile forces were designed. At the end of the 1960s, the first vacuum product was invented — pneumatic vacuum tweezers. Today PIAB's vacuum products are marketed throughout the world, and the latest addition to the product range is the P3010 vacuum pump, which is a development in the fields of vacuum technique and material handling.

Bond, who has carried the PIAB line since 1999, goes on to list some attributes that PIAB possesses, that any rep would love to have in their principals:

- **Communication** — "They are always communicating with us on matters of importance. We constantly receive online notifications of important matters. We

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**Wayne Bond**



have a rep web site that they devote entirely to our needs. And they're always providing us with weekly sales leads, the majority of which are qualified."

- **A Rep Champion** — "While I've got a specific contact person at their factory location, I've found that there are any number of other people always available to help me. It's a true team effort."

- **Service-Oriented** — "Whenever I've had a question or a problem, the response is as fast as possible. In addition, I've found that their service people are available to us after business has closed for the day."

- **Commissions** — "We don't get just one monthly check. Instead, we'll receive checks from them throughout the month. That's great for our cash flow."

### **Cost Savings and Synergy**

PIAB's Brian Wilson explains that the company has been working with manufacturers' representatives for more than 13 years. "Our rationale for working with reps vs. a direct factory sales force rests primarily on the costs involved and the synergy that reps provide in the field. I don't take issue with some estimates that it can cost upwards of \$160,000 annually to keep a direct salesperson in the field.

"Considering the second matter — synergy — we've found that whenever we've had occasion to look for representation, that's the first thing we look for. Before we make any decisions, we have to be sure that the rep we're going to market with is already carrying lines that are synergistic to our own, and that they're already calling on the customers that we want our products in front of."

Cost savings and synergy aren't the only things Wilson and his company are on the lookout for, however. "Here are just a couple of the things we look for in a rep," he explains.

- "They can't be afraid to show

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and tell when it comes to our product line.”

- “We want our reps to be somewhat aggressive. I say ‘somewhat’ because when a rep is too eager, he can talk too much and not listen enough to the customer. My experience is that the more the rep listens to the needs of the customer, the better he is able to provide solutions to his problem.”

- “We’re always on the lookout for agencies that have shown a willingness to invest in themselves. That investment can be shown in a number of ways including technology and up-to-date technological tools. If the rep isn’t tapped into current best practices in this area, he won’t be able to perform at the expected level.”

Wilson and his company have been able to locate these attributes in the 25 agencies they work with and they’ve enjoyed mutually beneficial partnerships with those firms for several years. To cement the relationships, he explains that the manufacturer does its best to support the efforts of its reps in the field. “We’ve made every effort to supply the rep with all the tools he’ll need to get the job done. That means we provide them with all the literature and documentation they need to properly show our products. In addition we have a web site devoted exclusively to our reps. Everything we have for them is provided electronically. In addition, we provide them with regular training, either having

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them come here to train with us on site or we have them take advantage of web-based training programs.”

### **Finding the Time**

Despite the best-laid plans of the manufacturer and its reps, Wilson maintains that there’s still one challenge that remains when it comes to making the relationship perfect — time. “By that I mean it’s difficult for us to put aside enough time to work effectively with our reps. Concurrently, time is an issue for our reps when it comes to devoting enough time to our product line. To partially lessen that challenge, we make every effort to supply them with qualified sales leads, conduct field visits with them, participate in trade shows and, in general, make every effort to ‘sweeten the pot’ when it comes to our product line.”

Notwithstanding the ongoing effort to sweeten the pot, Wilson notes that what really makes the relationship work between PIAB and its reps is the manufacturer’s commitment to the rep way of going to market. “If you as a

manufacturer have determined that you’re going to market with reps, you have to buy into the program full time. You don’t just dabble when it comes to using reps — you make the commitment and you follow through. That’s what we’ve done, and that’s why it works for us.” □



*PIAB USA Inc.’s testing facility at its vacuum conveyor laboratory, Hingham, Massachusetts, allows customers to test the process in which they will move their powder, granule or fluid samples.*

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