

REPRINTED FROM

agency sales magazine

january 2009 • vol.39, no.01

16A Journey, Suite 200
Aliso Viejo, CA 92656-3317
toll-free 877-626-2776
local calls 949-859-4040
fax 949-855-2973

MANAonline.org

.....
COPYRIGHT ©2009, MANUFACTURERS' AGENTS NATIONAL ASSOCIATION (MANA)
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRODUCTION WITHOUT PERMISSION IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED.
.....



THE 10 TRAITS OF EFFECTIVE REPS

EDITORIAL | JACK FOSTER



JACK FOSTER

Jack Foster, president of Foster Communications, is the editor of **Agency Sales Magazine**. In addition to his duties in working with MANA, Jack writes for several other major marketing publications. His experience in publishing includes writing, editing, photography, production and printing. This, combined with Jack's understanding of the independent sales rep function, can provide the winning formula for your communication needs. Email: jfoster@manaonline.org.

As planning began for this issue of **Agency Sales**, a book published a few years ago presented the framework for a series of articles that would address attributes independent manufacturers' representatives must exhibit if they are to be successful. Admittedly, the book — entitled **Ten Traits of Highly Effective Principals: From Good to Great Performance**, by Elaine K. McEwan — is not aimed at the rep profession. In fact, its target audience is education. However, the title of the work and the “attributes” that are included provide a perfect fit for a series of articles.

The first two attributes — **Culture Builder** and **Communicator** — are addressed in this issue. Subsequent issues of **Agency Sales Magazine** will address the remaining attributes. For quick reference, the 10 traits listed in the book are:

- ✳ Culture Builder
- ✳ Communicator
- ✳ Producer
- ✳ Educator
- ✳ Envioner
- ✳ Facilitator
- ✳ Change Master
- ✳ Activator
- ✳ Character Builder
- ✳ Contributor

Considering the Rep as a Culture Builder

Consultant **Paul Pease** admits he's glad to have the opportunity to have first crack at this list. According to Pease, once the owner of a rep firm has established the agency's culture, all of the other attributes that comprise this list will flow naturally.

According to the consultant, “The function of culture builder is critically important in creating a foundation for the agency's success. I'm not talking about establishing a culture that will result in some sort of ‘Stepford Wives’ reps with everyone going through the motions by rote. What it's really about is laying the foundation for an organizational culture that goes a long way toward establishing the agency's brand in front of manufacturers and customers.”

To make his point, Pease, The Pease Group, Hermosa Beach, California, considers the importance of culture from the rep, principal and customer perspective.

“As we consider the importance of culture builder for the rep, let's use a sports analogy. How many examples have there been of a good coach working with a good team? If the culture or the philosophy of one doesn't mesh with the other, there's only failure. Whatever culture is decided upon, it must be driven throughout the organization.”

Pease, who has spoken at a number of rep conferences and conducted several MANA seminars, continues, “On

the rep side, an agency's culture is clearly visible in the behavior demonstrated at meetings with principals and customers. You can determine the culture by considering how the rep speaks about his relationships with his principals. Is the relationship an adversarial one? Is it complimentary? The more successful reps are the ones who build a shared culture with their principals. They work to ensure that what they do is an integral and complementary part of what both do as businesses. There are no struggles between rep and principal, and they both understand the nuances of their relationship and of the business that they are engaged in.”

Considering how an agency's culture is important to a principal, Pease maintains, “In the business world in which the rep operates, there must be an understanding from the principals' (the manufacturers') point of view. Is there a fit with the rep firm? Does the culture of the agency mesh with the culture of the manufacturer? Does the manufacturer believe that the rep sales force is an integral part of their business strategy? Does the manufacturer possess the internal and external support needed to make the relationship with the rep work?”

And finally, the rep's culture is important to the customer because “The culture that the rep establishes contributes to how they are viewed in the marketplace. In fact, it is their brand in the eyes of the customer.”

In stating that once the culture has been established and is firmly in place, Pease recommends looking at the additional attributes and determine how easily they follow. “Look at the rest of the list — all of them fall into place once the culture is established and the nuances of the business are understood. In a nutshell, building a culture allows the rep to communicate with principals and customers on the same wavelengths.”

Culture Promotes the Relationship

An important part of being on the same wavelength, Pease maintains, lies in ensuring that the rep's culture is made up

“The more successful reps are the ones who build a shared culture with their principals. They work to ensure that what they do is an integral and complementary part of what both do as businesses.”

of the same “stuff” as his principals and customers. “If the fundamental culture is one that begins as a solid business relationship, it is composed of ingredients such as honesty, integrity and an understanding that those involved are in a partnership. If all of that is in place, then chances are they can go to market successfully. Once the culture is in place and you’re both working off the same page, you can move on to other considerations. You may want to look at something as concrete as how many feet on the street are needed to be successful. What does the principal want in this area? What is the rep able to provide? If the principal needs many feet, does he have internal support for the rep sales force? These are all elements that have to be looked at.”

Another important consideration of a rep’s culture is personal behavior, according to Pease. “Personal behavior includes how you present yourself. What is your emotional

make up? Are you tenacious? Persistent? Is the emotional behavior that important? Or, if there is a culture in place where the substance of the message is more important than anything else, behavior really doesn’t get in the way. Behavior is a negative factor only when there is bad behavior.”

Changing the Culture

Once established, can a rep change his culture? Does the rep have to pay attention to the maintenance of his culture? “Yes on both counts,” according to the consultant.

“Remember that if a rep has 10 lines on his line card, he can’t change the culture of the manufacturers of those 10 lines. He can only change his own culture. That’s important to remember because not all manufacturers are the same and they all interact in different ways and want/need different levels of performance from their reps.



“The Rep is a businessman in sales, not a salesman in business.”

“One important thing I always tell reps is that if they have entered into a business relationship with a manufacturer, they have to believe that the relationship is going to go forward and be successful. At the same time, they have to be prepared for what happens when those manufacturers don’t remain with them. Unfortunately, some reps only want to work to a certain level so that they don’t get replaced. I believe the only way a rep should work his way out of a job is if he’s done either an excellent job or a poor job. And which looks best on your resume — the fact that you’ve done a great job, or a poor one?”

Although the job as educator appears farther down the list than culture builder, Pease pauses for a moment as he considers how important education is. To make his point, he considers the example of one rep currently dealing with a principal who is putting pressure on him to provide more time for the line. “Here is an example of a rep who has made education of the principal an important part of his culture. In these trying economic times, he’s dealing with a line whose performance

has been consistent over the years. Now, however, because there is economic pressure on the manufacturer, the manufacturer is putting pressure on the rep to spend more time to achieve what he hopes will be greater results.

“In his wisdom, the rep is looking at the line and realizing that if more effort is expended, the result won’t be commensurate with the effort. As a result, the line won’t be as profitable as it has been. The rep is in the midst of communicating this to the principal and if the worst case presents itself, the rep will resign the line.

“Because the rep has laid the foundation for his culture, he’s doing the right thing. He’s thinking just as a businessman should think. Remember, he’s a businessman in sales, not a salesman in business. He’s taking the right step to educate his principal accordingly. What will ultimately happen is that the relationship between the two will either get better or worse. In any event, culturally the rep has the correct business philosophy in place.”

“If a rep has 10 lines on his line card, he can’t change the culture of the manufacturers of those 10 lines. He can only change his own culture.”

