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THE REP'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE MARKETING SANDWICH

BY JACK FOSTER

Peter Oppici, now VP of a rep agency, has worked for both manufacturers and distributors. He gives his well-rounded advice on **HOW TO BUILD** the perfect marketing “sandwich.”

It's not unusual for some observers to compare the rep's role in the marketing channel to one leg of a three-legged stool. If the rep occupies one leg, then the other two are occupied by the manufacturer and customer. It's a good analogy, since the absence of any one leg results in a lack of support that will cause the stool to fall over, rendering it unusable. Peter Oppici provides a better analogy as he envisions the rep as an essential ingredient in a marketing sandwich.

Oppici, vice president of Applied Motion Solutions, Brentwood, New Hampshire, sells motors, drives, controls, computers, mechanical and electrical products and systems.

Explaining his image of the sandwich, he views the rep as the essential ingredient between two pieces of bread, the manufacturer and the customer (in his case, the distributor).

“Here's the way I look at it,” Oppici says. “There's always going to be problems or tension in the channel. The only way to solve problems or neutralize tension is if each of us recognizes which piece of the sandwich we represent. What I'm talking about here is understanding the importance of relationships.”

In order to create the sandwich that Oppici believes will have customers and manufacturers coming back for seconds, the rep must take several forward-thinking steps. Oppici gives several suggestions regarding what a rep should do to improve his middle part of the sandwich.

“The rep is more than just a rep,” he offers. “In order

to establish and build relationships with manufacturers and ultimately their customers, the rep has to position himself to fill two roles. First, he obviously has to fill the role of the typical rep. On top of that, however, he's got to be seen as the manufacturer's district manager in the territory. An important part of his value-add is to serve as the customer's go-to guy with any problems, questions or concerns.”

Oppici stresses that he truly has a passion for this point. “Throughout my career, I've worked for manufacturers, distributors and am now a rep, and I'm puzzled that more reps don't professionally fill this role as district manager. All it can do is benefit them.”

Filling those two roles isn't all that the rep has to do in order to serve as an essential ingredient in a marketing sandwich. “Not only must the rep do his expected job, [but] in order to perform it well he must ensure that he has the right contacts or relationships, both with his principals and his customers.” He continues that this “contact” must be with a decision-maker and an individual who is an advocate for the rep's role in the channel.

Rather than just making calls and following up, Oppici maintains it's incumbent upon the rep to, among other things, provide sales/product training, follow sales leads and pursue promotion opportunities. He notes, “Some of these added duties may seem onerous and harsh for the rep to hear, but if he's to fill his role professionally, this is what he's got to do.”

An absolute key for the rep, according to Oppici,

is for him to consistently communicate with his principals and customers, and he must develop a sense of trust with the people with whom he does business. “It’s a little like doing the things necessary to build a strong marriage,” he insists. “You establish relationships and communicate honestly. That’s how you make it work.” He says that following this path has meant success for him and his agency so much so that “I have one distributor customer that has more than 100 product lines. He’s said to me that ‘I use you and your agency as an example for other reps as to how to work effectively with us.’”

To illustrate effective communications, Oppici says, “We schedule quarterly reviews and reports with our principals. In those reviews we detail our accomplishments, explain where we need help and describe our plans for the next 90 days.”

Separating himself from the competition – in this case the factory salesperson – is an important part of

nate conflicts in the market and allow you to command mind share among end-user customers. If you have two or three key distributors and you offer them exclusive business, you’ll get retention of the business and attention in the marketplace.”

This next point is hardly a surprise to today’s rep, and Oppici emphasizes its importance when he stresses relationships. “The rep has to do all in his power to develop and maintain relationships with his principals.” When he speaks of relationships, he’s not only talking about knowing who the president and sales manager are. “The rep has to know firsthand all personnel from the president to shipping, and all points in between. If he’s lazy about this part of the business and just goes through the motions, it’s not going to work for him. Because I’ve done the relationship building, I maintain my principals will do anything for me.”

Finally, Oppici stresses how important it is for the rep to “create an environment where the principal that

“You establish relationships and communicate honestly. That’s how you **MAKE IT WORK.**”

what the rep does. “We’ve made it a habit to do things that a direct salesperson would be challenged to do. Because I’m an independent businessman, I can do things that salespeople working for a larger company can’t do. For instance, if one of my customers places 50 or more orders in a month, I’ll pop for lunch for everyone at the branch. If there’s a need, I’ll buy an airline ticket for a customer to travel to one of my principal’s factories in order to meet everyone there. Some of these things work and others don’t, but over the years, I’ve figured out what’s best for me and my customers.”

Following up on the tactic of sending customers to factory locations, Oppici notes, “I’ve made it a habit of sponsoring these visits, and to say that my distributor customers appreciate it is an understatement. When I bring these customers in and they’re treated like royalty at the factory, they can’t wait to get back in the field to sell the principal’s products.”

Another tip for ensuring the rep’s success is to “Limit the number of key partners that he has in the sales channel. This is important because it will elimi-

you represent is viewed as the best supplier of the best product or service currently in the marketplace. The successful creation of this type of environment is really the culmination of all your relationship building with principals and customers. I maintain that it’s something I’ve done so well that my distributors can’t wait to sell the products I provide them.”

The Customers’ Role

Oppici doesn’t lack for advice for reps on how to be successful, and he goes on to offer tips for customers – in his case distributors – on how they can strengthen and maximize their relationships with reps and principals.

“Once the manufacturer and rep have performed their services, the customer must provide ample sales coverage and technical support to the people they sell to.” Emphasizing that a lot of people “miss the boat” on this function, Oppici stresses the importance of the distributor maintaining proper inventory levels in order to support their customer base. “Act as a regional ware-

house for them. I know this requires an investment on your part, but when your customers call, you had better be there to meet their needs. If you are, they'll return again and again."

“Don't add a line simply to add a line. Always have A PLAN OR A PURPOSE in mind when taking on a new product line.”

Be proactive when it comes to providing value-added services such as local programming, product modification, start-up services and 24-hour support. “Sure, just as warehousing, this will require an investment on your part, but you get a return on your investment with higher margins.”

“Here's an old-school practice that will come back to benefit distributors, not to mention their reps: be sure to copy your rep on all proposals or issues where special terms are required. You have to show that you're part of the sales team, and you do that by keeping open the lines of communication with your reps.”

Just as reps desire exclusive representation in their territories, Oppici urges customers (e.g. distributors) to follow the same path. “Limit the number of competing lines you carry. What will result are increased demand from customers and higher margins for sales.”

Here's something that most reps have long advocated: “Don't add a line simply to add a line. Always have a plan or a purpose in mind when taking on a new product line. Once you take on a line, invest your time and energy to promote that line. If you're not willing to do that, don't sign the agreement in the first place.”

Be committed to working

with reps. According to Oppici, “Steps should be taken to ensure that all personnel are comfortable working with reps. If you fail to do that, there's no way the relationship will work.”

“Use your local rep as the major conduit to the principal, and use him to communicate both good and bad news. Too many customers use the rep to communicate only bad news. I always hear ‘I just lost a major customer because the product quality was no good.’ I'd also like to learn about the major order you just landed because of the lead I provided you.”

Finally, Oppici emphasizes the need for the customer to “remember that you're an indirect customer of the principal. In that capacity you should be treated (by both the principal and the rep) as a key partner in the sales process.” He concludes by noting that if the customer follows these tenets and the rep does what he's supposed to do, all the ingredients are there for a tasty marketing sandwich. ⁸⁸

