


THE AGENCY HEADMASTER

THE 10 TRAITS OF EFFECTIVE REPS • PART III



SHARPENING YOUR SKILLS TO BECOME AN
EFFECTIVE CHANGE MASTER AND EDUCATOR

EDITORIAL | JACK FOSTER

 In January, **Agency Sales** began a series of articles examining the traits needed for an independent manufacturers' representative to be successful. The traits are borrowed from a book entitled **Ten Traits of Highly Effective Principals: From Good to Great Performance**, by Elaine K. McEwan. The traits we examined in the January and February issues were Culture Builder, Communicator, Producer and Facilitator. This month we follow with a study of the rep as both a **Change Master** and an **Educator**.



REPRINTED FROM

agency sales[®] magazine

march 2009 • vol.39, no.03

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.

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.

BECOMING AN EFFECTIVE CHANGE MASTER

The timing and the times couldn't have been any more appropriate for MANA member **Larry Robinson, CPMR**, to talk about the importance of the manufacturers' rep filling the role as a change master.

Robinson, **Cleaves-Bessmer-Marietti**, Kansas City, Missouri, gets right to the point when he emphasizes how difficult it is for reps — and all people for that matter — to change. "People will ride their old ways of doing things right into the ground, because for them and their organizations, it can be too difficult or too emotional to change," he maintains.

"Think for a moment about the old story of the frog in the pot. You put him in there and gradually raise the temperature to boiling, and before he knows it, the frog is done for. So too is it with reps and their organizations. If they don't change, chances are they will perish."

Making a willingness to change a little too daunting, according to Robinson, is the fact that "The independent manufacturers' rep finds himself solidly positioned right between the manufacturer and the customer. What ultimately happens is that one side or the other is invariably going through some sort of change. It remains for the rep to accommodate one side or the other, and that is not an easy task."

He continues, "Usually the rep won't have much control over the customer's business practices. That's why it's so hard to effect a change there. What we can do there, however, is continually reinforce our message of value add or educate the customer to the fact that we can offer them a better way to solve a problem."

BE THERE BEFORE THE CUSTOMER

"Conversely, when it comes to the manufacturer, our job in trying to get them to change resides primarily in getting them to see where the customer is going, rather than where the customer has been. Too often the manufacturer is working to provide products that the customer has used in the past. As the customer develops new needs, new problems, the manufacturer had better be there when he's needed. That's our job — to get the manufacturer to change the way he sees things."

Changing the customer and the manufacturer aren't all that the rep has to do. He also has to change the way he does business. "To change is to survive. If the rep is conducting business today the same way he did 10 years ago, he's not

going to be here long-term. Our environment is changing and the social and economic challenges we're working under put tremendous pressure on us."

As a result, the question remains: If he's not already, how can the rep become an agent of change? Robinson maintains, "You've got to get their (the customer's and the principal's) attention. You have to have a story to tell and a solution for customer and manufacturer problems."

"This process begins with the rep being able to understand where manufacturers and customers are coming from. They've got to build relationships with them, know where they're coming from, and understand what their problems and challenges are. In addition, they must have an understanding of what these problems are costing them and how they result in lost business opportunities. Once done, the rep's job isn't complete until he can provide solutions to these problems."

CONDUCTING A THREE-STEP PROCESS

Simply stated, Robinson is detailing a three-step process to follow in order for the rep to be a change agent:

Understand the problem. "It must be something big enough to get their attention."

Identify a solution. "This must include an opportunity that accompanies the solution. More often than not, people will make a change if it means more money for them. As a result, the rep's solution should appeal to the customer and/or manufacturer this way: 'If I do this, it will mean this to me.' He's got to be able to see the return for his willingness to change."

Present a plan. "Tell the customer/manufacturer exactly what he has to do to change. Let him know what benefits will follow."


Robinson continues that the timing for a conversation of "change" with reps acting as the change agent couldn't be any better. "First of all, given our tough economic challenges right now, the opportunities for change are right here in front of us. For instance, we're talking to a manufacturer who is changing from a direct sales force. This is a chance of a lifetime for us as we are playing a major role in the way he goes to market."

"At the same time, we're dealing with another one of our long-time principals who is currently trying to navigate some rough business waters. Their sales have dropped off and their competitors are circling like sharks."

“To change is to survive.

If the rep is conducting business *today* the same way he did 10 years ago, he’s not going to be here long-term.”

Robinson explains that this situation was long in the making, and Cleaves-Bessmer-Marietti had, in fact, drawn up a plan for change a couple of years ago. “Now, however, since times are a lot tougher, [manufacturers] are much more receptive to a message of change. This is great for us, and it

will allow us to turn the situation around.” Accepting change is a little bit like the process of natural selection, maintains Robinson. “To be successful now and in the future, it’s going to take a different breed of horse. Those who are going to survive will be true decision makers and change agents.” 

BECOMING AN EFFECTIVE EDUCATOR

When **Kurt Nelson, CPMR**, speaks on the topic of the rep filling the role as educator, he immediately points to the constituencies the rep is charged with educating.

“When it comes to education, the place for the rep to start is with his own people,” maintains Nelson, who heads MANA Member **Nelson & Associates**, Santa Fe Springs, California.

“From what I’ve seen during 25 years in the business, the message that has been drilled into rep sales personnel is all about pure selling. By concentrating on features and benefits, however, a huge mistake is made. There’s so much more to the job — and that’s where the education comes in. The education role that the rep fills today is so much more involved than just building relationships and getting the order. Today, the rep is charged with seeking that conversation where he looks for problems that customers are facing. Then naturally, the goal of the rep is to come up with solutions to those problems.”

Having said that, however, Nelson is quick to add that there’s certainly nothing wrong with achieving those goals via a round of golf, or any of the other traditional ways in which reps have operated in the past. He takes it a step further when he describes how his agency has sought out and participated in those important conversations. “Our agency — specifically the datacom division — has invested in the Miller Heiman sales training that allows us to identify customer issues and work in tandem with them to solve those problems. It was Miller Heiman that introduced me to the concept, and from that beginning, I’ve become somewhat of a John the Baptist in terms of spreading the word to our market. Speaking strictly from the educational standpoint, that training allowed me to identify a need in the marketplace, and I’ve hopefully met that need by training more than 250 salespeople over the years. Bottom line, it has helped all of us to find ways to sell better.”

Nelson doesn’t stop with educating just the agency personnel. “Everyone in our channel needs to be trained, including the distributor, the contractor, the customer — and even the manufacturer.”

He stops for a moment when the manufacturer is mentioned and emphasizes, “We probably haven’t done a very good job when it comes to educating the manufacturer. What the manufacturer has to be educated about is the role of the rep in the channel.

“What that includes is explaining how you as the rep are going to market and why you’re approaching the market the way you do. The truth is, we all live and work in a world where it is easier to guess, presume and assume what others are doing instead of *asking* what they are doing. If Nelson isn’t clearly announcing what we’re doing, then our efforts can be interpreted improperly. For instance, what if we’re offering special promotions to our customer base? That might be interpreted by distributors or manufacturers as an effort to steal their customers. If we explain what we’re doing, however, they’ll understand that we’re simply trying to work as a team.

“That’s why it’s so important to have those conversations. But *how* do you have them? That’s why education and communication are the keys, and doing neither doesn’t do anyone any good.”

What if the rep wasn’t born with that “gene” that guarantees he’s going to be an effective educator? Is there anything he can do to make up for that deficiency? Is there any place he can go to get an infusion of what it takes to be effective in that discipline?

Nelson points immediately to the wealth of resources that independent manufacturers’ representatives can avail themselves of in this area. “There’s the full spectrum of educational

selves of in this area. "There's the full spectrum of educational programs available from MANA, NEMRA, MRERF (which includes the CPMR and CSP programs). But a lot of what you need to learn in order to be an effective educator grows out of your own organization's internal processes. For instance, in addition to the Miller Heiman training that I mentioned earlier, our agency makes use of a company-wide coaching process where, on a monthly basis, every employee is coached by someone else. During these coaching sessions, we always have two-way communication on tough issues." (To read more about Nelson's coaching program, see the June 2007 issue of Agency Sales Magazine, p.32.)

Nelson continues that reps are probably more fortunate than other professionals in that there are so many avenues they can follow in order to become adept at education. "But just as it is with so many other disciplines, you can lead a horse to water, but it's another matter to get him to drink. It's entirely up to the rep to take advantage of these opportunities to become better at educating others."

In emphasizing his last point, Nelson says, "It's amazing when you look around at the attendees in a seminar. Probably only half of the people there are taking notes. After the seminar is over, I'd be willing to bet that maybe 10 percent of those people take out their notes and review them after the session. And probably only 5 percent of the people ever take *any* action based on what they were exposed to. Once again, they're simply not taking full advantage of the opportunity."

Nelson maintains that the measure of success his agency has achieved with educating others is based primarily on the fact that "I'm so anal about it. I wasn't born that way, but over the years, I've learned how important it is. A bonus for me is that I find I'm in a better spirit when I'm teaching others — and that's something I try to pass on." 