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NEW TRICKS?! HA!

WHO SAYS YOU CAN'T TEACH AN OLD REP NEW TRICKS

EDITORIAL | JACK FOSTER





JACK FOSTER

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When **Dan McQuiston** speaks to the need for constant education and training for independent manufacturers' reps, his words carry the same weight as those of Tom Friedman in his best-selling book *Hot, Flat and Crowded*. Where the Pulitzer Prize-winning Friedman warns that societies had better change the way they live if they want to inhabit a hospitable world in the future, McQuiston, Ph.D., CSP, says reps had better recognize that their profession has undergone a veritable sea change.

On the one hand, Friedman maintains people who don't recognize that the world has become too hot, too flat and too crowded to accommodate present growth rates are doomed to come to terms with what it's going to be like living in an inhospitable world. On the other hand, says McQuiston, reps who fail to recognize the importance of embracing education as a means of gearing up for future demands are going to find themselves "sorely out of step in a whole new marketing world."

McQuiston, a marketing professor at Butler University, Indianapolis, Indiana, is the education director for the Manufacturers Representatives Educational Research Foundation (MRERF). Because he's been an instructor in MRERF's Certified Professional Manufacturers Representative (CPMR) program since it began 20 years ago, he is well situated to share his thoughts on the pressing need for reps to keep up to speed with what's going on with their profession.

The Rep's World Has Changed

"In the last 30 years alone," he maintains, "the world in which the rep operates has changed considerably. At one time, if the customer was in need of information on a new product/service, the rep was the primary conveyor of information. Sure the buyer could avail himself of a trade journal or a manufacturer's brochure if he wanted something, but that was time-consuming. For all intents and purposes, the rep was needed.

"Today, the buyer can go to any number of websites and in a matter of minutes can learn as much about a product as the rep does. The scary part of this is that sometimes the customer knows *more* than the rep does."

"The rep who fails to realize the importance of this change and continues to operate as he always has is at a distinct disadvantage," McQuiston says. "Here's why some reps fail to grasp the importance of what I'm talking about. I call

it the 'Law of First Knowledge.' What that means is that people simply continue to believe what they learned from their first day on the job — despite all the evidence against their belief."

"Reps who follow that Law of First Knowledge cling to what they first learned as gospel, and there is real danger in that belief," he says. "Consider an extreme example of a doctor who is 55 years old. He went to medical school 25 years and continues to practice medicine the same way he did a quarter of a century ago. How much confidence would anyone have in that individual? The world of the rep isn't quite that extreme, but it's the same concept. Your customers expect you to be a cutting edge, state-of-the-art practitioner. If you're not, then the guy who comes into the customer's office right after you is. You have to change. You have to stay current. Not changing is simply not an option."

McQuiston continues by saying that "In the good old days, the rep was compensated for his product knowledge and selling skills. Now, however, the good rep is compensated for his product knowledge and application insights. Today's rep has to be able to separate what the customer can glean from the internet, and from what the rep — and no one but the rep — can provide. That's how reps are going to survive and thrive."

The Search for Value

He continues that not everything the rep does, or is expected to do, has changed. "For instance, of paramount importance is the rep's ability to build relationships. That's something that has always been critical. But now, in addition to that, the rep has to be able to anticipate and solve the customer's problems. That's something that wasn't necessarily expected a few years ago. Today the customer not only wants a product and knowledge about the product, he also wants to know how this product solves his problems and how it is going to create value for him and his people."

"...sometimes the customer knows more than the rep does."

“Your customers expect you to be a cutting edge, state-of-the-art practitioner. You have to stay current. Not changing is simply not an option.”

Is it necessary for the rep to undergo some sort of epiphany before he realizes how important education is to the future success of his agency? According to McQuiston, not necessarily. If a rep hasn't already embraced the concept of education as integral to his personal and professional success, McQuiston maintains “it's not really as simple as a light going on over his head. More practically, the rep will start to see some little things beginning to happen all around the edges. Business that the rep has had for a long time begins to disappear. You don't get the quotes you used to or you're not able to get in to see the decision makers the way you could in the past.

“Once you see that happening, you better get proactive in a hurry. What's becoming more evident is that you can't continue to operate your business the way you always have in the past. What is that quote that's attributed to Einstein? *'The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.'*”

Options for Education

Reps are fortunate, according to McQuiston, because there's much available that allows them to continually educate themselves in their profession and thereby avoid the pitfalls contained in that insanity definition. “For instance, consider the benefits of CPMR. MRERF's CPMR program offers what we refer to as a mini MBA for the rep professional. And once on campus for the scheduled sessions, attendees are able to learn not only from the instructors but also from reps working in other industries. Time and again our graduates have reported to us that while they may sell electrical components, the benefits they gain by networking with reps from the food service, electronics and other industries are absolutely invaluable. While one industry may not have faced a given issue, chances are that same issue is going to affect them in the near future. By networking with other reps, they leave the program already prepared to face the challenge.

“But that's not all. There are plenty of educational opportunities provided by MANA, not to mention the industry-specific rep associations such as NEMRA, ERA, MAFSI, AIM/R and PTR.”

While there's a wealth of educational opportunities available to the rep today, not every rep is going to take advantage of those opportunities. And what happens to them?

According to McQuiston, “Those reps aren't going to go away because there is always going to be a place for the

‘intermediary’ in the marketplace. But the rep who doesn't embrace the educational opportunities is going to find himself working harder and harder and making less and less. Bottom line, the rep has to make up his own mind. Is it worth his time, effort and investment to get better educated in his profession? If he decides to forego the opportunity, I'd refer him once again to Einstein's insanity definition.”

McQuiston concluded by covering some of the educational subject matter reps are going to find, if and when they decide to pursue an educational path.

“Of primary importance is learning how to communicate your value proposition to customers and manufacturers. At the end of the day, the manufacturer is going to ask ‘What's the most efficient way for me to go to market?’ At the same time, the customer is asking ‘What's in it for me? What's more important price or cost?’ The educated rep is the one who is there first with the right answer.”


In addition to thoroughly understanding the value proposition of reps, McQuiston maintains reps also need to be brought up to date on:

The importance of working with and managing a multi-generational work force. McQuiston related his experience at a conference where during a question-and-answer session one attendee said, “I recently hired a 24-year-old man and took him to see my best customer. He showed up for work that day wearing a polo shirt and flip-flops. When he met the customer, he bumped fists with him and said, ‘Yo, dude.’ That's another indication of the changing landscape we're working in today. As a result, we've put together a three-hour course for CPMR which addresses generational changes like that.”

Using technology efficiently. This is another area that's been included in the CPMR curriculum. “Consider all the tools that are available to reps today that allow them to do their jobs better and more efficiently. Like learning to work with a multi-generational work force, learning how to harness the power of these tools is critical.”

Look to the Future

Just as Tom Friedman urges readers of *Hot Flat and Crowded* to address what appear to be unmanageable environmental problems today, McQuiston follows suit with his comments about the need for manufacturers' reps to constantly be thinking of the future. “What the rep has to

do is to concentrate on the issues that their customers run into on a daily basis. Then they've got to answer the question, 'What am I hearing and how can I use my expertise to solve these problems for my customers — before the next guy comes in and does it for them?' Education will guarantee that the rep isn't just throwing product expertise at the problem. Then, when you've solved the problem for that customer, you can step back and consider how what you learned in that instance will help you work more effectively with the next customer." 



BY THE WAY, WHO ARE YOU CALLING OLD?

'The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a **different result.**' — ALBERT EINSTEIN

EDUCATION FOR THE REP

Dan McQuiston notes that reps are fortunate that there are any number of educational venues available to them. Chief among these opportunities are:

MRERF's Certified Professional Manufacturers Representative (CPMR). The CPMR designation was developed exclusively to address the professional advancement needs of already well-established independent manufacturers' representatives. The program involves multi-level coursework taught by a team of instructors from the business and academic communities. Individual classes address a range of topics including sales, management, financial, planning, communication, marketing, productivity, strategic planning, ethics and technology.

The program is aimed at seasoned representative firm principals or managers. Candidates for certification spend one week on the Arizona State University campus each year for three years taking coursework and passing examinations designed to make them more productive and effective in their own firms and on behalf of customers and principals. After certification has been granted, annual continuing education credits must be earned to maintain the designation.

Certified Sales Professional (CSP). An intensive four-day sales training program aimed at improving sales skills, CSP is the result of a partnership established between MRERF and the Canadian Professional Sales Association to bring the CSP sales designation — established in Canada in 1994 — to the United States. To qualify for certification, candi-

dates must have completed the program. There is a requirement for two years of practical work experience, and the candidate must agree to abide by the CSP Code of Ethics. All candidates must pass a written and oral examination.

Detailed program information for both CPMR and CSP can be found by visiting the MRERF website, mrerf.org.

MANA. A visit to the MANA website, manaonline.org, provides information concerning the association's schedule of seminars, special reports and other products and services. In addition, this year MANA is sponsoring the first **MANAfest Conference**, May 31 to June 3, 2009, at the Green Valley Ranch Resort in Las Vegas, Nevada. This All-Rep conference will feature a full complement of educational and networking opportunities. Visit MANAfestConference.org.

Industry-Specific Rep Associations. Visits to the websites of any of the industry-specific rep associations will result in a wealth of information concerning the educational products and services that are available. [SEE PAGE 61 FOR A COMPLETE LISTING](#)

