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synergy + sense = RELATIONSHIPS

BY JACK FOSTER

For one manufacturer, years of experience working with reps have shaped a successful formula for determining the right fit. **Synergy** and **CHEMISTRY** are the essential ingredients.

“Synergy” and “economic sense” are the words Karla Clem, president & COO of Polo Custom Products, uses to open a conversation as to why her company has successfully been using independent manufacturers’ representatives for close to 40 years.

The manufacturer, located in Topeka, Kansas, has more than 60 years experience in contract manufacturing. The company specializes in custom industrial sewing, RF welding and thermoforming using flexible, pliable materials such as vinyl, nylon, urethane, aramids, Teflon, leather and many other fabrics and films. Polo supplies custom sewn, RF welded and thermoformed products to several OEM

markets including medical, safety, outdoor, industrial and electronic. Typical applications include carrying cases, bags, holsters, pouches, dust covers, drainage bags and air bladders.

Considering all the products that her company markets and sells through independent reps, Clem quickly says, “Reps work wonderfully for us. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Many of the company’s reps feel the same way. While she admits she was not there when Polo first started working with reps, she points to several agencies that have “repped” the company for well over three decades.

On those rare occasions when

the company has to replace an agency or otherwise locate someone for a given territory, Clem explains, “We generally depend upon the recommendations of others. We regularly use MANA and *Agency Sales* for finding reps. In addition, we’ll ask our existing reps and customers whom they would recommend.”

As the search for a rep continues, she notes that the number-one ingredient that’s needed to provide the best chance of the right fit is chemistry. “When we interview and ultimately choose representation, we want to make sure that they possess the same business and personal values that we do. We’ll make every effort to learn what

we can about their personal lives. Most of the time, however, it can come right down to whether we like this person and their agency. Simply stated, do we understand and like the way they operate?”

Clem adds that this rep-search philosophy is a constant for the company and is employed even now as Polo seeks representation for some open territories in the United States.

If that describes general guidelines for what attracts Polo to a rep, Clem continues that once the manufacturer and rep partner up,

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“Perhaps the most challenging aspect of working with them is [resisting] the desire to control their time and performance. Thankfully, we understand the fact that if you work with the right people, they are going to do what has to be done to be successful. That’s the way it is with reps. We let them alone to do their job: sell.”

She adds, that in any manufacturer-rep relationship, the need for information is constant. “To meet that need, we do all we can to provide as many ways as possible for our reps to communicate with us. We have in-person conferences, teleconferences and a rep portal on our website. If none of those means of communication work, they can call us or simply drop us an e-mail.”

Supporting all of those communication/information efforts, Clem details some of the other support the company offers its reps:

- Product library: “Reps can easily access this, go in to find the product they’re interested in, get pictures and detailed information for their customers. This also provides them with what they need to spot product application opportunities in their territory.”

- PowerPoint presentations: “We will tailor presentations specifically to their needs. We know they attend numerous sales meetings. So by providing these presentations we allow them to stay right in the firing line... of the customer.”

- Factory visits: “We don’t have any set schedule for them to visit the factory, but they can come for tours with customers at any time.”

- Variety of sales tools, including a competitor database: “Our goal is to provide them with all that they need to do their jobs. Whatever works for them, works for us,” she maintains.

“As an addendum to how we communicate, we also avoid the temptation to ask them how they spend their time. It’s up to them to spend their time productively. We’re looking for results, not reports. In general, none of our reps balk at providing us with the information we need.”

Like-Minded Reps

Appreciation for Polo Custom Product’s finely tuned principal-rep relationship hardly flows in just one direction.

Scott Hackman, CPMR, Pak-oil Co., Glenmore, Pennsylvania, has been working with Polo since the early ‘90s. When he is asked why the relationship between the



manufacturer and its reps seems to work so well, the first word he says is “chemistry.”

“I know Karla frequently cites the importance of chemistry in the relationship, and that’s something I would second,” says Hackman. “It’s easy to speak about chemistry; however, its presence doesn’t happen overnight. The principal and rep will only achieve the desired chemistry over a period of time. Chemistry grows out of a history of the two working honestly together. You’ve got to be up front with everything you do and never work around your business partner.”

Polo practices honesty by being straightforward with its reps. Hackman says, “Consider a rare occurrence when a commission cut might be recommended in order to land an order. Polo recognizes that any cut represents a significant drop in the rep’s income. Instead of just saying ‘This is what we need,’ they’ll approach it on a ‘What can you do for us?’ basis.”

Hackman is quick to add the concept of integrity when describing the relationship he and other reps enjoy with Polo. “From the start, they let us know that our job is to get out there in the field and get the order. To that end, they provide us with everything we need to get the job done. They provide a rep portal on their website. If we’d rather communicate with them via e-mail, that’s fine for them. If there’s ever an occasion for them to work with us in the field, they’re always very careful not to displace the rep in front of the customer.

“In summation, Polo is a great manufacturer who truly understands what reps do and knows how to work with them. This all grows out of the chemistry, full communication and integrity they possess.”

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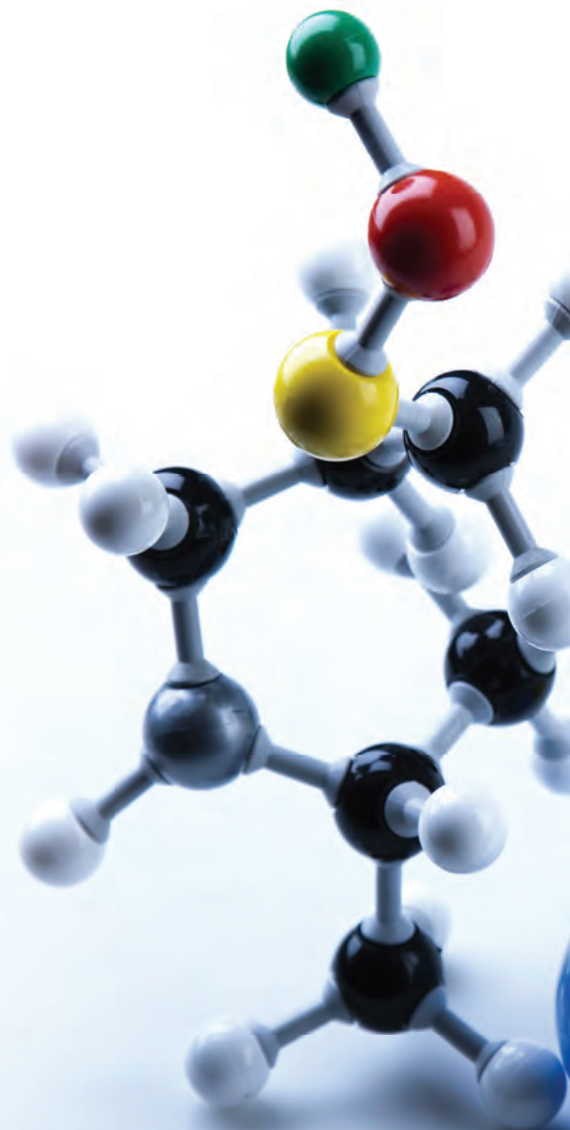
Business Partners

“Polo understands that we do more than just ‘rep’ them. We’re their business partners, and they acknowledge that fact every day.” That’s how Bryant Callaghan, CPMR, describes his relationship with Polo Custom Products.

Callaghan, of Tri-State Marketing, Inc. in Cincinnati, Ohio, is a former Chairman of the Board of MANA. He states that the manufacturer has all the qualities that a principal should:

- Product quality is excellent;
- Deliveries are on time;
- Commissions are accurate and on time;
- There are no house accounts;
- If there is a problem, they take ownership and solve it;
- They’re always asking their reps what they can do better.

With all of those practices in place, any rep will tell you the relationship thrives and survives. And, that’s exactly what Callaghan does. “In short, Polo has hit the nail on the head when it comes to maintaining good principal-rep



relations. We receive all the support from them that we need. Our commissions arrive like clockwork. If we ever have a question or a problem, we're confident they'll take care of it.

"On top of that, they're active MANA members, have attended the manufacturer seminar and are looking forward to attending another. What this all results in is our agency constantly growing their business."

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Callaghan, just as Hackman before him, couldn't leave the conversation about Polo without invoking the subject of chemistry. "When we first jumped on board with Polo about 12 years ago, one of the first people I met and spoke with was Karla Clem, who was then a regional sales manager. Something just clicked between us and that chemistry we discovered on the first day has lasted [through] today when Karla is Polo's president and COO."

Respecting the Rep

Roger Ralston, MANA's District 3 Director, Tri-State Components, Inc., Newnan, Georgia, de-

scribes how Polo values its rep sales force: "Over the last few months, it hasn't been unusual for us to experience some of our principals [laying] off their sales managers and subsequently [pushing] the work they did onto our shoulders. As an example of how Polo Custom Products values their reps and the work they do, that's a move they would never make.

"When a manufacturer makes that move, inevitably it results in additional paperwork and reporting for the rep to complete. The predictable result is that it takes away from our selling time. That's not what Polo wants us to be doing."

To counter the moves that many other manufacturers have taken, Ralston notes that Polo "remains proactive in doing everything it can to ensure we spend our time in front of customers. They are constantly providing us with qualified leads. Since we know it's qualified, we regularly follow up in fewer than 24 hours. Their marketing people are excellent in all that they do with and for us. They understand our business and what we do."

Once all these efforts are combined, Ralston maintains, "We're going to do all we can to support them. In fact, they've become one of our emotional favorites. Here's a company that really 'gets it' when it comes to working with reps. We're not simply a 'hired gun'; rather, we recognize the fact that we're partners with them in all their efforts. As such, we're able to work with all levels of the company all the way up the executive offices." 