

THE SEEDS OF REP SUCCESS

THE 10 TRAITS OF EFFECTIVE REPS • PART IV

CULTIVATING YOUR SKILLS TO BECOME AN
EFFECTIVE CONTRIBUTOR AND ENVISIONER

EDITORIAL | JACK FOSTER

IV 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 that have been examined thus far are: Culture Builder, Communicator, Producer, Facilitator, Change Master and Educator. This month we follow with a study of the rep as both a **Contributor** and an **Envisioner**.



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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

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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.

CONTRIBUTING IN TIME OF TURMOIL

As he considers the state of the economy and the role that the independent manufacturers' representative plays in the marketplace, **Kendrick Reaves** observes, "When there is turmoil, there is opportunity." Having said that, he readily admits there's plenty of opportunity out there — but only for the rep who fulfills his role as contributor.

Reaves, national sales marketing manager for Cash Acme, Cullman, Alabama, maintains that reps who recognize the fact that they are going to "eat what they kill are especially adept at being contributors."

To accurately identify reps who can contribute is a two-step process for the manufacturer of water control products and thermostatic technology. "One of the first things we'll do when we begin speaking with a rep is to ask them if they're a member of AIM/R. If the rep is then, in my opinion, he already understands the necessity and the challenge of being a contributor. I'm well aware of the fact there is no placebo within AIM/R — or any other rep association — that will cure all ills, but in my experience, reps who are participants in their associations know what it takes to be better reps."

How a Rep Can Contribute

He continued, "I was just on the phone with a rep this morning who was doing his best to contribute. He's been on the road for two straight days and is telling me he's getting a 100% hit rate with his customers. At the same time, some of his people back in the office aren't doing all they can with a promotional effort. He says, 'I'm tired of all their excuses for why it's not working. We're having a conference call first thing Monday morning and we're going to sort all of this out.' And after that, he goes on to another marketing concern and goes through an entire litany of things involving training and merchandising.

"That's exactly what I want in a rep. That shows me his ability to contribute.

Conversely, a rep who doesn't contribute is sure to get Reaves' attention — but not in a positive manner."

According to the manufacturer, "I can recall one instance where I was as displeased with a rep as I've ever been. He was in the car with some other factory guys when he


called me to alert me to a problem with one of our very important customers. His solution to the problem was to have me call the customer to learn what the problem was. That's a little like giving someone a gun minus the bullets. Basically he was saying, 'I don't want to carry bad news to the customer.'"

In the end, Reaves admits he finally called the customer and got voice mail. "Now I'm really getting hot because I don't want to walk in cold with this customer without being properly prepared ahead of time. That's what the rep was supposed to do for me — prepare me. Finally, I emailed the rep and told him that based on the information I had in this matter, here was what I thought the consequences would be. Then I let him know that since he contributed nothing in this matter, we should both have to share any pain that resulted."

While the latter was an isolated instance of a rep not carrying his weight as a contributor, Reaves remains adamant in his belief in working with reps. "Working with reps is more desirable now than it has ever been. My belief is that the rep remains the constant in the territory. Manufacturers can change their regional managers three times in a six-year period. What remains constant, however, is the rep. He's always there, always building and maintaining relationships with customers and providing us with the information we need to better serve the marketplace.

"As he does that, there are plenty of times when he's expected to contribute. Maybe the contribution is seen in his merchandising efforts, pricing, providing quotes. Whatever it is, he's the one helping me back in the factory to understand the key stress points for the customer."

If that's how the rep contributes for the manufacturer, Reaves is just as ready to admit he fills the role as contributor for the customer. "There are plenty of times when the rep is representing the interests of the customer. Maybe the customer has a need to have product shipped to his location — or five separate locations. I need the rep to be there to explain that need to me.

"Believe me when I say that we at Cash Acme don't have a cavalier attitude toward our reps. They are hardly human capital. We view them as our business partners." 

"[REPS] ARE HARDLY HUMAN CAPITAL. WE VIEW THEM AS OUR BUSINESS PARTNERS."

“The rep has always been the industry pro and his services are needed now more than ever.”

ENVISIONING THE SUCCESS OF OTHERS

As **Gary Brusacoram**, CPMR, CSP, considers the importance of the manufacturers' rep being an envisioner, he quickly calls up a sports analogy. “When I think about what it takes for the rep to envision everything from his own success to his ability to anticipate and meet the needs of his principals and customers, I look at how valuable NBA players like Rajon Rondo and Steve Nash are to the Celtics and Suns, respectively.

“Neither player scores all that many points, but where they really shine is in the assist category. They're constantly in a position where they help their teammates score. That's exactly what the rep does when he envisions the demands of the territory and the needs of the manufacturers he partners with and the customers he serves.”

He continues that a part of envisioning is not necessarily seeing or predicting “my own success. Rather I concentrate on guaranteeing the success of my principals and customers. When I achieve that goal, then I do in fact guarantee my own success. It's a very positive byproduct of what I do.”

Brusacoram, Andrews-Johnson-Brusacoram, Minneapolis, Minnesota, maintains that there's no big secret when it comes to attaining the ability to envision. “What it takes,” he says, “is having a passion for what you do. If you couple that with the entrepreneurial spirit, the ability to develop relationships and the willingness to take calculated risks, then you're halfway home.”

When asked to define what he means by the rep being able to envision something, Brusacoram says, “The rep really has to have a vision of not only his own business, but of the industry he works in and the companies he works with. You really can't be involved unless you see all aspects of the industry. Having said that, I'm not going to tell a manufacturer how to run his business, or a distributor — or other customer — how to run his. What I will do, however, since it's my job to envision everything, is to put the two together to the benefit of all three of us. In order to be able to do that effectively, I've got to be able to understand their needs and offer solutions to their problems. If I can do that effectively, then my value is evident.”

What does Brusacoram envision for the future for the independent manufacturers' representative? He's quick to offer a positive opinion. “The future for the rep looks better today than it ever has before. Remember, the rep has always been the industry pro and his services are needed now more than ever. At the same time, I'm finding that our principals are recognizing our value more than they ever have. I expect that to continue well into the future.

No conversation about the rep as an envisioner can end without Brusacoram citing the value of association membership and the contribution MRERF and its CPMR (Certified Professional Manufacturers' Representative) program make in fostering that trait in reps.

Considering the former, he emphasizes that “Membership and participation in rep associations like MANA and NEMRA are critical in fostering the envisioning trait. There is no better place to benefit from the input of your peers than your rep association. When you network and learn from your fellow professionals, you're able to discard the ‘bad stuff’ and walk away with a lot of the ‘good stuff.’ I maintain that the top performers in your profession are members and participants in your rep and end-user or distributor associations. They are the true doers and they are the ones you can learn from. When you surround yourself with these ‘doers’ you'll find yourself well ahead of the competition.”

Brusacoram is the chairman of MRERF and the seven letters (CPMR, CSP) following his name indicate that he successfully completed the educational foundation's executive certification programs. “As an individual and an agency,” he maintains, “the lessons learned at CPMR have cleared a path for us to envision and achieve substantial growth over the years. Through CPMR we've been able to benefit from the industry-savvy instructors and the curriculum which addresses every business nuance a rep needs to be successful. On top of that, we've met with reps from other industries and been able to share their vision of what it takes to be successful.”

He adds that the CSP (Certified Sales Professional) program was a great generator of enthusiasm not only for himself but also for the entire AJB sales force. Many manufacturers and distributors have also endorsed CSP sales training as their vehicle for their sales personnel. 