

“FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS AT LEAST, I SEE GREAT OPPORTUNITIES FOR REPS. I BELIEVE MANUFACTURERS WILL TURN TO REPS — AS THEY ALREADY ARE IN GREAT NUMBERS — BECAUSE REPS ARE SUCH A FLEXIBLE SALES FORCE. THOSE NUMBERS TURNING TO REPS WILL ONLY INCREASE WHEN THE FINANCIAL PEOPLE WHO OCCUPY SO MANY OF THE MANUFACTURERS’ DECISION-MAKING POSITIONS UNDERSTAND (WHAT REPS PROVIDE).”

IN SEARCH OF THE RIGHT SALESPEOPLE

HOW TO FIND THEM, HIRE THEM, TRAIN THEM AND KEEP THEM

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EDITORIAL | JACK FOSTER





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As **Mike Norton** considers how and where rep firms can find, train and retain salespeople for their organizations, **he echoes the words of others when he expresses optimism about the future of the rep profession**. Norton is a partner in **AxiomOne**, a company that provides diagnostic and evaluation tools to assist in the hiring process.

According to Norton, "For the next five years *at least*, I see great opportunities for reps. I believe manufacturers will turn to reps — as they already are in great numbers — because reps are such a flexible sales force. Those numbers turning to reps will only increase when the financial people who occupy so many of the manufacturers' decision-making positions understand the message that reps:

- ▣ Work on commission.
- ▣ Don't need the benefits and support the manufacturer commonly provides its direct sales force.
- ▣ Know the needs of their territories.
- ▣ Know who the customers are and have long-standing relationships with them.
- ▣ Tend to have deep roots in their territories.
- ▣ And, they work with 30-, 90- or 120-day contracts.

"So for manufacturers, the question remains, 'What better time than *now* to sign on with reps?'"

He continues that while this is the ideal opportunity for reps to shine, at the same time rep firm owners are faced with the challenge of growing their organizations by finding, hiring, training and retaining professional salespeople. The question then remains, "How does the rep accomplish those tasks?"

The timing for Norton to comment on this subject couldn't be any more appropriate as he is scheduled to speak on the subject of "I Want to Hire a Good Salesperson: Show Me How" at **MANAfest** later this month.

Finding the Right Fit

According to Norton, "As many manufacturers continue to downsize and the unemployment rate continues to increase, there's an exponential challenge for reps to choose from among the many available people to make sure they get the right fit. To achieve that correct fit, what should the rep firm owner be looking for? I'm not going to volunteer that there are blanket capabilities they should be seeking. What they should be seeking, however, are individuals that they can measure or affix a benchmark to. In other words,

they've got to be able to have someone in place that they can say 'Here's what I want you to be achieving in 90 days, 120 days, or a year.' In the absence of that kind of benchmark or goal setting, they're not going to be successful in finding what they need for their organizations."

Norton maintains that the obvious first step in the process he's talking about is recruiting. "In addressing that subject, I've got to give credit to **Tom Hayward of United Sales Associates**, Cincinnati, Ohio. He's formalized an approach that I've heard many other reps refer to, and that is simply staying alert to what he hears from others in the industry. Basically, when he learns of someone who's good at their job, he asks that the person be sent his way — *if they're available*."

In order to be effective in this process, the rep needs to have a clear picture of the exact *type* of person he's seeking to join his firm. What skills must they possess? What benchmarks are we looking to achieve? Where do we want to be in the future with this person? "Once you've accomplished that, the rest just falls into place," he maintains.

In addition to speaking with fellow reps, Norton urges reps to make use of the networking organizations they belong to. He cautions, however, on the practice of *taking* personnel from your rep peers. "That's something I'd definitely stay away from. However, if you learn from one of your manufacturers or distributors that there's someone very good *available*, there's nothing wrong with acting on that information." If networking efforts don't bring the desired results, don't be afraid to search various job boards for individuals who might meet your position requirements.

Commenting on the position requirements, Norton alludes to questions often posed by Bryan Shirley, MANA President and CEO: "When it comes to selling, is it an *art* or a *science*? Is effective selling innate, or can the individual be trained to be effective?"

Norton says: "I'm of the mindset that as you develop your job requirements, you keep in mind that if someone isn't from a specific industry but is a 'killer salesman' and pos-

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esses the drive and work ethic, they can be trained to be effective in your industry. I've seen some rep firms fall into a trap of sorts; they find someone from their industry, get all excited about them and the fact that they've made the right hire, and then as they approach various benchmarks, they realize they've made a serious hiring error."

'Selling' the Rep Firm

Once prospects are located, Norton maintains that rep firms have to go *above* and *beyond* the norm to attract the kinds of top-performing people needed. "In challenging times, such as we're in now, people tend to stick with the 'devil they know.' They're not as willing to make a change as they would be during boom times when they're much more willing to take a risk. As a result, to attract people, the rep firm has to communicate to prospects that the firm is going to be around for the next 10 years. They can point to their stability in the territory as an indication of their roots in the community and then work to convince candidates that their organization has what it takes to keep the doors open. Finally, show candidates that there are plenty of opportunities to make money when going to work with a rep firm."


If what Norton has just described constitutes the 'selling' job a firm owner needs to perform on a prospect, he cautions against over-selling in that area. "Be careful about selling yourself and your firm right out of the gate. Instead, save that till the very end when the prospect has already exhibited genuine interest in your organization."

Once the recruitment process has been completed and the firm owner is faced with the question of whom should he add to his sales team, Norton advises against comparing

and contrasting the final candidates. "Don't just sit there and look at who you have and compare and contrast them with each other. If you follow that practice, what you're ultimately going to do is go with the best of the worst. You're going to choose the one who's least offensive, the one with the fewest warts. Instead, refer to what I've already emphasized about the need to set measurements and benchmarks, and make your decision based upon which of the candidates is best able to meet those mutually established goals. Let each candidate stand alone, and if the answer is 'No' on all of them, then move on."

Limiting Expectations on Personal Chemistry

The consultant continues by maintaining that reps should also be cautious in the area of "personal chemistry." "I always warn my clients about the danger of 'falling in *like*' with a candidate. Certainly we're all aware of the fact that customers are more inclined to buy from someone they like, but that doesn't mean you have to have a close personal relationship with the person you hire. If you objectively assess their talents and determine they can excel at their jobs, then they should be a 'go.'"

In conclusion, Norton notes that as rep firm owners consider how they're going to grow and where they're going to find the people to work for them, "They should have concrete plans to serve them in the future. A number of firms were started and sustained on the sheer drive, energy and talent of their founders. Those attributes may have worked well when the firm had three to five people, but it's different as you continue to grow. You need a plan, a vision and mission to move forward. If you do and the new hire sees clearly where they can fit into that plan, you've unlocked the door to future growth and success." 

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