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# THE FINAL PHASE OF CONSTRUCTION

THE 10 TRAITS OF EFFECTIVE REPS · PART V

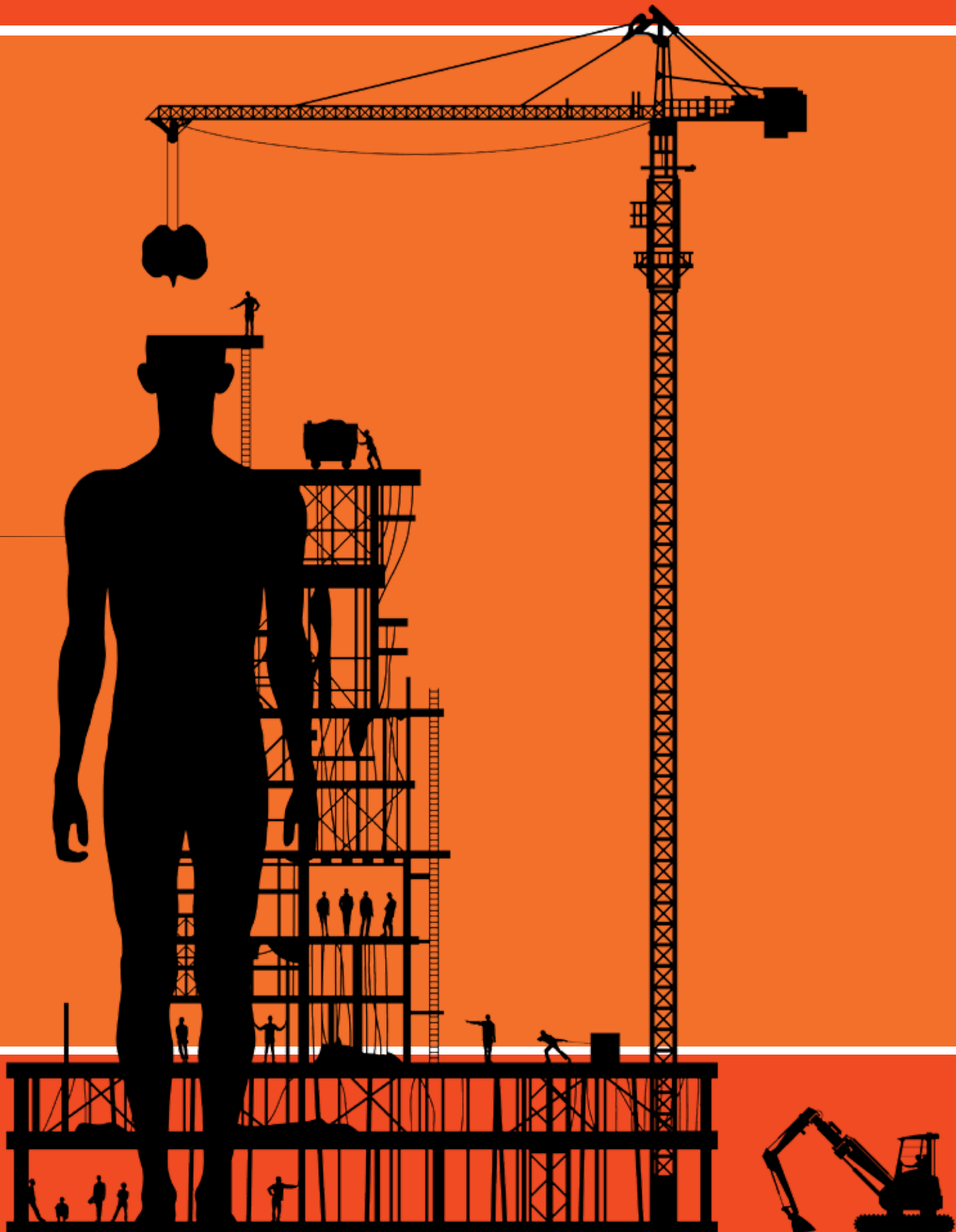
ADDING THE FINISHING TOUCHES FOR BECOMING  
AN ACTIVATOR AND A CHARACTER BUILDER

EDITORIAL | JACK FOSTER

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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, Educator, Contributor and Envisioner. This month we conclude the series by examining the need for the rep to be both an **Activator** and a **Character Builder**.





## 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](mailto:jfoster@MANAonline.org).

# THE ROLE OF THE REP AS AN ACTIVATOR

When asked about the need for the independent manufacturers' representative to serve as an activator, **Charley Cohon, CPMR**, makes an analogy with the process of mixing epoxy in order to stress the importance of this trait.

"When you mix epoxy," explains Cohon, President, **Prime Devices Corporation**, Glenview, Illinois, "you've got two tubes of ingredients — one for your glue and the other serving as a catalyst. Nothing happens without one ingredient working on the other. So too is it with the manufacturers' rep working as a catalyst with his customers and principals."

Cohon points to the manufacturer's warehouse full of products as a prime example of where the rep's ability to work as an activator is most evident. "It's all well and good that this warehouse is stocked and ready to meet customers' needs, but nothing is going to move until the rep does something — follows a lead developed during prospecting, responds to an inquiry, or otherwise works to find a solution to a customer problem. It's up to us to activate the process and we do that through our interaction with principals and customers. Integral to our interaction is our ability to communicate the value argument to the customer. Once that argument is made, via stressing quality, delivery, service, competitive price, etc., lo and behold you've got it — an order!"

Cohon likens the rep's ability to serve as an activator to other autonomic traits everyone is familiar with. "Acting as an activator is a little like driving a car," he explains. "You either do what it takes (e.g., accelerating, braking, working the windshield wipers, etc.) or you're going to learn in a hurry that you're not going to be successful. Translating that thinking into what the rep does, the good rep automatically assesses what needs to be done to help either the principal move his products or the customer find the solution to his problem."

Just as with any of the other traits examined in this series of articles, the rep either *has* the activating trait or he doesn't. According to Cohon, in order to determine how well he manifests this trait, the rep must constantly question himself. "Being able to question and evaluate yourself is an absolute requirement of the job. If an individual wakes up in the morning and says to himself 'Wow, I'm doing a great job and I'm

everything I should be; there's no room for improvement,' there's an individual who is waiting for a fall."

When he's asked if he regularly goes through this self-examination process, Cohon quickly responds, "I'm always having these conversations. Even if I have a commendable history of getting the order, I'm always asking myself 'did I get the customer?' In other words, I don't want my success to be a one-time occurrence. I want to be the solution provider, the go-to guy, the person who can answer customer questions, now *and* in the future."

He adds that as a result of constantly evaluating himself and his agency's performance, "I'm sure we're much better at our jobs and in meeting our principals' and customers' needs than we've ever been in the past. Wouldn't it be awful if we determined we had reached our peak of performance 15 years ago and never got any better? Now we look to continue our improvement well into the future."

In order to avoid that aforementioned fall, Cohon maintains, "...every hour, day and month the rep has to ask, 'Am I doing everything I can to become better at my job?' Sure, the professional salesperson should have a large measure of confidence, but at the same time, he should remain somewhat insecure. You can experience that level of insecurity by looking in your rearview mirror. Naturally, it's important to look and plan ahead, but you've got to be aware of what's happening behind you. Is anyone gaining on you?"

If these self-examinations come together with a lack of performance that indicates the rep is not working effectively as an activator, what has to happen? Cohon indicates that a couple of courses of action are called for. "First, if the rep lacks that ability as well as some of the other talents or traits that are needed to be an effective rep, I'd recommend that the individual leave the profession with due speed. On the other hand, if he can point a finger at a lack of sales training or product knowledge, then there are any number of professional continuing education programs he can avail himself of to shore up any shortcomings. If he follows such a course, he'll make up for any shortcomings and be able to perform that 'activator' function that is so important." AS

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## THE ROLE OF THE REP AS A CHARACTER BUILDER

“I’ve always maintained that great reps put their personal needs third — behind those of customers and principals.” That’s how **Bryan Shirley**, MANA President and CEO, begins a conversation on the importance of the rep possessing the character builder trait.

“It’s those reps who consider the needs of their customers and their principals — in that order — that will then have their own needs met. And, it’s the rep who possesses character and who fosters the building of character in others who will be able to meet those goals.”

While admitting that it’s of paramount importance for the rep to possess character even as he enters the profession, “Certainly as a salesperson, it’s incumbent upon you to develop this trait. And as you progress in your career, you develop a greater level of authenticity and credibility in your approach. You become more adept at learning the needs of the customer, rather than simply selling the goods that you represent. You become the customer’s solution provider as you genuinely exhibit a desire to understand him and his needs. Sometimes, however, it’s difficult for salespeople to communicate the fact that they are true professionals. It’s not unusual for there to be too much persuasion, too much selling, and not enough character,” he cautions.

If the rep doesn’t possess and communicate the character trait from day one of his career, he’ll face a long and difficult path to the top, maintains Shirley. Complicating the matter are a couple of challenges to character that any experienced rep will encounter.

“Instances where the rep has to deliver bad news, or performance problems can combine to cause the customer to question the rep’s character,” according to the association executive. “Manufacturers’ reps in general are reluctant to deliver bad news. The salesperson with strong character, however, doesn’t hesitate and, in fact, he’ll be the one to deliver bad news even faster than he would good news. A typical and effective approach for the rep in those instances is something like ‘Mr. Customer, we’ve got a matter of concern here and I would like to discuss it with you and come up with a solution as quickly as possible.’

“There’s no sense in sticking your head in the sand and hoping that the problem will go away. It doesn’t work that way. The communication you practice in such an instance and the rep’s ability to act as an effective go-between for customers and principals is a clear indication of the character that the individual possesses.”

Then there’s the matter of performance problems and how the rep with character reacts. “If you perform 99 tasks for your customer or principal in an outstanding manner and follow up with just one thing that isn’t outstanding, the 99 will quickly be forgotten,” maintains Shirley. “It’s when that happens, and it’s generally something related to product quality or delivery, that the rep’s character can truly shine. If you’ve built your reputation on a solid foundation of character with principals and customers, they’ll look to you at such times as the one who can solve a problem or make the situation right. And, when you fix it to their satisfaction, your reputation and character remain untouched.”

If the rep feels he has character issues that ought to be addressed, Shirley advises a couple of courses of action. “I think that at some point in the past, the level of professionalism among reps wasn’t as high as it is today. However, having said that, I’ve always made it a habit to seek out books that address the subject (e.g., *Good to Great* by Jim Collins or *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey). Then there are any number of personal development speakers that address the subject. And, finally there are rep association conferences such as MANAFest later this month that feature presentations that can assist in this area.”

Finally Shirley refers to one of Covey’s quotes when he notes that reps should certainly keep in mind the fact that “the most important ingredient we put into any relationship is not what we say or what we do, but what we are. And if our words and our actions come from superficial human relations techniques (the Personality Ethic) rather than from our own inner core (the Character Ethic), others will sense that duplicity. We simply won’t be able to create and sustain the foundation necessary for effective interdependence.” 🙏

— BEHIND THOSE OF CUSTOMERS AND PRINCIPALS.” **BRYAN SHIRLEY, MANA**