
HIRA Serves Reps In The Healthcare Field

Independent manufacturers' representatives involved in the health care industry face the same "good news-bad news" scenario that reps in other industries encounter. The obvious good news is that the health care industry is always going to be with us — it's not going anywhere. As a matter of fact, it will probably grow in importance in this country.

The bad — or at least challenging — news is that just as reps in other industries used to "own" the buying influence, the landscape has changed as the pace of mergers/consolidations and growth of group purchasing organizations (GPO) has picked up. Accompanying that trend is the expected impact of offshore products that reps in all industries appear to be facing.

Returning to the "good news," as he faces innumerable challenges, there's help for the rep in the presence of the Health Industry Representatives Association (HIRA). The 27-year-old, Denver, Colorado-based HIRA focuses on promoting the manufacturers' rep function within the health care industry. Its members are independent sales agencies located across the nation who offer manufacturers a professional, highly qualified sales force. Additionally, allied members are manufacturers who support the continuing use of independent sales agencies to market their products.

According to Karen Hone, HIRA's executive director, the association is composed of 170 rep agencies and 127 manufacturers. "One of our most important ongoing efforts," says Hone, "is to reach reps who are potential members of the association." To that end, HIRA executes a two-pronged effort using their current rep and manufacturer members.

According to Hone, "We haven't always known the best way to locate and interact with reps that are non-members. Now we'll ask our rep members to contact their fellow reps, even if they are competitors, to let them know about the association and the benefits of membership. Also, our manufacturer members often will work with upwards of 35 reps, and perhaps only eight are HIRA members. It's natural that they communicate with those non-members and let them know about the association."

Creating Critical Mass

Hone emphasizes the value of these recruitment efforts as a means of creating a greater critical mass for the association that, in turn, will allow HIRA to better meet the challenges facing reps in the health care market. "It's probably accurate to say," she says, "that the challenges facing our reps are similar to those in other industries. Historically, the rep in the health care industry had all the purchasing contacts right in the hospital that he needed. Now, with the

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advent of GPOs, those traditional relationships have been swallowed up. In many cases it's difficult for the rep to make the inroads he needs to establish in order to do his job efficiently. On top of that trend is the difficulty that accompanies the myriad regulations with the various Medicare and Medicaid programs. While the aforementioned might be considered difficult enough by themselves, the good news remains that the health care industry and its purchasing needs will always be here and they'll always need reps."

As stated in the HIRA Mission Statement, it's the association's job to provide the education reps need to enhance their professionalism. A visit to the association's web site (www.hira.org) will show some of the products/services and other efforts the organization makes to that end:

- Information on the association's membership directory.
- Emphasis on the value of networking opportunities that are provided.
- Information and reports on the association's annual management conference.
- HIRA's strategic plan.
- Information on seminars and other professional educational opportunities.
- HIRA's newsletter is easily downloadable and keeps members up-to-date on association and industry activities.

And finally, there's an obvious emphasis by HIRA and its members on the benefits of their membership attaining the MRERF CPMR designation. It can't be missed that several members of HIRA's current Board of Directors have earned that designation. Speaking to that point, Tom Vollmer, Provision Associates,

The HIRA File

Health Industry Representatives Association (HIRA)
Denver, Colorado
Karen Hone, Executive Director
Web site: www.hira.org

HIRA Mission Statement: The Health Industry Representatives Association is a trade association of manufacturers' sales representatives, allied manufacturers, and service providers in the healthcare industry organized to:

- Create and foster a spirit of mutual respect and esteem among members and others within the healthcare industry and industries related to or affected by healthcare products.
- Educate the healthcare industry and other industries to the advantages of doing business through independent contractor sales representatives.
- Promote the continued growth of members and the improvement of their sales and/or management abilities.

Minneapolis, Minnesota, HIRA president 2004-2005, explains, "CPMR is just one indication of our professionalism. Something like that hopefully increases our value to the manufacturer. Historically, I think the perception of the rep in the marketplace was one of a 'middle man,' and nothing more. CPMR and other efforts HIRA has put forth have dispelled that notion. Now we're perceived more as the catalyst for business in the territory. As the catalyst we're able to expand the client's business and we're recognized as professionals in sales rather than just salesmen."

Speaking further on the value of HIRA to its constituents, Vollmer maintains that "Every profession, particularly the sales profession, needs such an organization to represent its views and interests. As independent manufacturers' representatives, we spend the majority of our time completing the regular day-to-day tasks that accompany running a business. It's HIRA that provides us with a voice. If there was no HIRA, someone would have to invent it." □