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# Training Principals To Work With Their Reps

“Some manufacturers operate under the premise, ‘If you build it, they will come.’” That sounds good, but the world and the marketplace don’t really work that way. That’s the view of consultant Paul Pease as he considers whether it’s important to train manufacturers in the intricacies of effectively working with their reps.

“**Y**ou can have the greatest invention in the world, but that means nothing if there’s no one there to buy the product,” Pease says. “It’s the job of the manufacturers’ representative to bring the customer and the product together. And it’s the manufacturer trained in effectively working with his reps that is going to enjoy the greatest level of success.”

Lending partial credence to his thesis, Pease cites the example of Nathan Stubblefield, a Kentucky farmer, who, it is claimed, patented the cell phone — in 1906. Now, we all know that not much happened between that year early in the 20th century until the cell phone explosion much later in the century. Whether Stubblefield should really be given credit for that invention might be cause for discussion, but the fact remains — build all you want, but no one is going to beat a path to your door until they know there’s a need for the product. It’s the manufacturer who has been trained in how to work effectively with his network of reps that is going to be there to serve that market.

Pease, a consultant who has conducted manufacturer seminars for MANA and is a regular



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contributor to the pages of *Agency Sales*, continues that one of the major reasons it's important for manufacturers to be trained in working with their reps is that "Reps work in an environment where the customer is always right. That's in contrast to the manufacturer whose environment says the product is always right. In order to bridge that apparent gap, it's necessary for the manufacturer to understand what customers are thinking. To do that, they've got to understand how their reps operate and what they face in their regular contacts with those customers. It's the rep who lets them know what the customer is thinking."

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### Rep Feedback

He maintains that this type of feedback from independent reps provides the manufacturers with a major advantage over those who work with a direct sales force. "Look at it this way — the rep is close to two things in the marketplace: the customer and the result. They're close to those two because they are compensated on a commission basis — the more they sell, the more they earn. As a result, the manufacturer can count on his reps to provide him with real and accurate information from the field. None of their information is going to be 'massaged' because the rep wants to look good in front of the boss. Typically, the direct salesperson wants to keep his job. To fulfill that desire, they'll often tell the boss what he wants to hear. Not so with the independent rep."

Among the major points that Pease communicates to manufacturers that attend his seminars is

that in addition to the differences between direct salespeople and reps that he's already cited, another major difference remains: Direct people are salespeople, while reps are businesspeople involved in sales. By definition, a businessperson conducts business strictly as a business transaction; a salesperson only wants the order. A businessperson wants much more. And in their search for more, they have to bring more value to the table while at the same time remaining profitable in their own businesses.

Pease explains, "I've probably conducted close to 30 seminars/workshops for manufacturers on this very subject. Those manufacturers that are experienced and knowledgeable about how to make the relationship work truly understand and value the rep's role. As I conduct the seminars, I find it's useful to depend upon them through networking and their interaction with others to deliver the message." Among the important elements in the relationship that he finds manufacturers are willing to share with their peers are the importance of:

- Methods and strategies for rewarding top performers.
- The importance of qualifying leads for their reps — even leads that are not necessarily for their own lines of products.



*Paul Pease*

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- Emphasizing the importance of synergistic sales.
  - The rep's ability to self-motivate. "There are plenty of direct salespeople who wind down around 4:30 on a Friday afternoon. That's a time when a motivated rep will say, 'I'm going to make a couple of extra calls. Who knows, maybe that will pay for my children's piano lessons.'"

Two manufacturers in particular heartily agree with Pease's words.

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*Paul Williams*

***“We’ve got to remember that we rent the rep’s time. We’re kidding ourselves if we believe we do anything else with them.”***

### **Valuable Time Spent as a Rep**

Perhaps it’s because Paul Williams was an independent manufacturers’ representative for 16 years before he crossed over to the manufacturing side that he has a keen appreciation for what the rep does. That experience, however, hasn’t dampened his desire to continue learning about reps.

Williams, vice president of sales & marketing for Basco Showers, Mason, Ohio, explains that even though his company has been working with reps for more than 40 years, “You can never know all there is to know about the challenges that reps face. They’ve got to be concerned with everything from getting the order, getting the product to the customer, getting high fill rates, etc.

“Even though I spent several years as a commissioned sales rep, the changes (e.g., industry consolidation) that have occurred in the last few years have dramatically affected the role of the rep and caused him to perform more functions than ever before. In addition, to succeed he’s got to offer more value than ever before to principals and customers.”

He continues, “In order for me to truly understand and appreciate what the rep is facing, I need a resource or some sort of training that will help me.”

One of the resources Williams tapped last fall was the MANA-sponsored *Advanced Sales Force Management* seminar. “It really helped me gain an understanding of the dynamics of the marketplace,” he says.

Among the major reminders that Williams took away from his training was this: “We’ve got to remember that we rent the rep’s time. We’re kidding ourselves if we believe we do anything else with them. As a result, I came

MANA associate members are reminded that the association continues to provide a variety of educational/training venues to allow them to learn more about the effectiveness of working with independent manufacturers’ representatives. For instance, in the past MANA has conducted the *Starting From Scratch — An Introduction to Creating an Interdependent Sales Force* sessions, and on June 1, in Irving, Texas, its *Effective Sales Force Management* training session will be conducted for companies that have been working with reps for more than two years and want to improve their level of performance.

Starting in September, the association will be conducting a series of 14 seminars at various locations for reps and their principals covering *Successfully Managing Conflicts in the Rep-Manufacturer Relationship*. This program is an interactive, candid panel discussion on the topics that are critical to the success or failure of an agency-manufacturer business relationship. Panelists comprising agency owners and manufacturing executives will discuss their successful experiences managing and growing the business relationship between the agency and manufacturer. They will also discuss the major areas of conflict in the relationship and how they work successfully to mitigate these potentially damaging conflicts. The seminars are specifically geared to the interests of agency owners, partners and management, manufacturer senior sales management, executives and owners.

For complete information concerning this and other MANA educational programs, be sure to visit [www.MANAonline.org](http://www.MANAonline.org).

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away with an appreciation for the fact that I've got to do all I can to provide the rep with what he needs to do his job. That includes the latest in sales collateral, current sales reports and the latest and best in technology."

Another thing he took away from his training session was some advice to pass along to other manufacturers. "Remember that sales is the alpha and omega for everything we do. If we don't have sales uppermost in our minds, we're not going to be in business for long. I'm sure that the time I spent during my career on the rep's side of the desk is very helpful in what I'm doing today. But it's important to constantly appreciate and understand their day-to-day challenges and to do all I can to foster a good revenue stream for their side of the business."

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### Pushing Synergistic Sales

An appreciation for the synergistic sales effort of the manufacturers' rep was something that Paul Tessier, Prosoco, Inc., took away from his attendance at a manufacturer training session. The Lawrence, Kansas-based Prosoco is a custom formulator

of specialty cleaners and protective treatments for masonry and concrete.

According to Tessier, "Ours is a very time-consuming product line. As a result, we require a large portion of the rep's time. Concurrently we recognize the fact that a good number of Prosoco reps make use of our product line to get their foot in the door for the other product lines they represent. It seems to us that since we recognize that fact, we should do all we can to develop not only our own product sales leads, but also those of the other product lines the rep carries. What we accomplish by this effort is to encourage their overall business growth at the same time we're encouraging the sales of our products. And down the road I'm going to be sure to remind the rep of all I've done for him in this regard for building his business. That's the foundation for establishing a sound business relationship with our reps.

"All this does is tell the rep that we appreciate the fact that there's an expense connected to their sales calls. When he makes a call only on our behalf, he may not be making money. We want him to maxi-

mize the effectiveness of those sales calls, and we help him in that direction by providing leads. It's just another effort on our part to take away some of the superfluous tasks they have to perform that cut into their sales time."

Just as Williams touts the benefits of manufacturer training in working more effectively with their reps, so too does Tessier. "If I took nothing else away from the manufacturer seminar I attended last fall, it's an appreciation for the fact that the rep is an independent businessman. Our relationship with him should be all business and focused on establishing a concrete business plan and establishing a level of accountability for both of us."

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### Including Reps in Sales Meetings

Another manufacturer who recognizes the benefits of training personnel in how to work more effectively with reps is Larry Fisher. Fisher, electrical division manager for Erico, Inc., Solon, Ohio, believes in not only having his own people properly trained in this area, he also spends considerable time making presentations and conducting sessions on the subject for MRERF and NEMRA, for whom he serves as the primary instructor for the NEMRA Representative Productivity Maximization (RPM) program.

According to Fisher, "Just considering what we do with Erico, whenever we have a sales meeting we're sure to include a portion — maybe a couple of hours or even an all-day session — that will address facets of rep management. We've actually invited reps in to participate. That allows us

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to get a perspective from them that normally would be absent. They provide us with direction on market conditions and provide advice on how to better communicate with them.”

Commenting on his work with both MRERF and NEMRA, Fisher notes, “Basically what we try to do in our training is to ad-

dress any misconceptions that manufacturers may have concerning their relationships with reps. Among those misconceptions or myths are:

- “Reps are short-term thinkers and they’re only here for the short-term sale — We address that belief by reminding manufacturers that the average tenure of a manufacturer’s regional manager is in the area of two years. Compare and contrast that with the average of seven years we maintain a rep carries a line. Reps are anything but short-term.

- “Manufacturers can’t control the rep — The question here is, does the manufacturer really want to micro-manage all of their reps’ actions, thereby controlling the sales process? I would maintain that the manufacturer has greater ‘control’ over his reps than his direct salespeople because he has a contract in place between himself and his reps.

- “Reps are too independent to manage properly — Here’s where we cite the fact that the manufacturer and his reps are ‘interdependent’ organizations. Reps have businesses to run, and they can only run them properly if they are operating efficiently and effectively. It’s not up to the manufacturer to run the rep’s business.

“Rather than even attempting to run the rep’s business, what we’ve found that reps want from their manufacturers is leadership. The better the manufacturer operates as a leader, the better the rep becomes.”

Fisher, who made a presentation on “How Representatives Choose and Evaluate Manufacturers” during NEMRA’s Annual Conference in February, continues with his RPM presentations for NEMRA. Manufacturers interested in the sessions should feel free to contact him directly or through NEMRA. □

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