
Nelson & Associates Fit Profile Of The “Perfect Rep”



In a hotel ballroom earlier this year one manufacturer publicly acknowledged a rep who was participating in an open forum that included manufacturers and their reps. “I’d like to shake this man’s hand. This is the kind of rep any manufacturer would like to go to market with.”

Those words provide the perfect segue to the first in a series of articles that *Agency Sales* magazine begins this month.

More than four years ago, Harry Abramson, a frequent contributor to these pages, authored an article entitled “The Perfect Rep in the Eyes of the Industry.” That was the latest in a series of articles that Abramson, Electronic Salesmasters, Inc., Beachwood, Ohio, bylined describing the elements that need to come into play in order to create a more perfect relationship between reps and manufacturers. Readers of *Agency Sales* will note that those articles served as the springboard for a more than two-year series of articles describing “Perfect Principals.” Now we shift our focus to the “Perfect Rep.”

The rep in the opening paragraph of this article who was publicly recognized at that industry meeting is MANA, NEMRA, ERA-member Nelson & Associates, Santa Fe Springs, California.

(Editor’s Note: Agency Sales is hardly the first publication to recognize this agency. Last year during NEMRA’s 35th Annual Conference Kurt and Todd Nelson were honored with Electrical Wholesaling magazine’s 2005 GEM Award for independent manufacturers’ reps. Ten years before, the two were the recipients of that magazine’s GEM Rising Star award. They are the only reps to ever win both the GEM Rising Star and the GEM awards.)

Established by Lee Nelson 32 years ago with its roots in the electrical industry, the agency has since been acquired by sons Kurt and Todd, both of whom are CPMRs (Certified Professional Manufacturers Representative). Since taking over the company in 1992,



Todd (top) and Kurt Nelson.

Endorsements for CSP

“If manufacturers’ representatives are to have any hope of keeping up with their good principals and distributors, they had better invest in the training and education of their salespeople. And that’s what Nelson & Associates, Inc., has done with its advocacy of the CSP program.”

That’s the view of Gary Brusacoram, CPMR, Andrews-Johnson-Brusacoram, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Brusacoram, president of MRERF, continues, “If you want to continue to be the best at what you do, it’s imperative that you make the investment in your people. That’s what Kurt and Todd Nelson have done.”

Noting that the two reps have shown their support for the CSP program by not only having their own salespeople complete the seminar, but also by hosting two sessions at their headquarters offices, he says, “It’s really a very simple concept. Someone trained in the CSP program knows how to deliver the principal’s and the rep’s message professionally in front of the customer. And what makes more sense:

- To avoid training someone and have them represent you poorly in the field for 20-30 years?
- Or to invest in the training of an individual, even though you might run the risk of losing them?

I know how I’d answer that.”

One rep who took advantage of the Nelson-hosted CSP session in Southern California was Kelly Boyd, CPMR, Electrorep, Inc., Sausalito, California. “We sent three of our salesmen through the program,” he says. “They brought varied levels of sales experience with them, and as a group they maintained it was the best training they had yet received in their careers. All of them agreed that the sessions caused them to focus on and improve their weaknesses and reevaluate the ways they approach their customers.”

And finally, Frank Foster, Frank Foster & Associates, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, who conducted the CSP session at Nelsons’ location, credits Nelson & Associates with “doing a great job of allowing their sales staff to stand out and be recognized for their professional achievements. The point is that they’re interested in creating sales professionals. You wouldn’t go out and hire an accountant or a plumber who wasn’t certified, would you? So too with sales professionals. The Nelsons recognize the importance of professionals, and they’ve done everything in their power to create an environment of professionalism.”

the sons have overseen the growth of the agency to the point where today it is viewed as one of the most successful manufacturers’ representative firms in Southern California. Currently the company, which joined MANA 12 years ago, serves the needs of manufacturers and customers in the electrical, electronic, datacom and lighting products markets.

The road to success that Nelson & Associates has traveled has been paved with a number of practices that other agencies would do well to emulate.

Belief in the Value of Constant Improvement

A discussion on this subject could take any number of directions, whether it’s the pride the organization shows in its spacious headquarters location in Southern California, the wall in its offices filled with awards and letters of commendation, or the high profile the agency has achieved in the industries it services. For the purposes of this article, however, consider a recent innovation entitled the *Vision and Values Forum*.

According to Kurt Nelson, “This is basically a lunch forum that evolved out of the Kaizen continuous productivity improvement process. It includes Todd, myself, and a mixed group of 10-14 of our personnel. It struck me that while as an agency we were experiencing success, I didn’t think we were truly reaching our potential. The idea behind the regularly scheduled forum meetings is that it would provide a time and place when employees would be able to get together with people from other departments and comment on:

- What we could do to make our jobs better.
- What could be done to make individuals' lives better.
- How we could become more profitable as an organization.

"It was also an opportunity for us to share our vision for the company with our warehouse people, inside and outside salespeople, and our office staff."

In getting the ball rolling on

the series of forum meetings, the agency had hired a new marketing director who also possessed skills in coaching individuals. "She coaches us and we, in turn, coach many of our direct reports," he explained. "To many, coaching seems like an easy process. The funny thing is that coaching is one of the hardest things I have gone through and do on a daily basis. To be coachable, I have to open

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The salespeople, both inside and outside, at Nelson & Associates.



Nelson & Associates's warehouse workers.

myself for constructive criticism and be willing to change. To coach, I need to spend time preparing for every coaching session as if that person is the most important person I can spend time with and help build as an individual.”

That coaching process spills over during the lunchtime forums. Typically an invitation to participate in a forum would include the following:

“You have been invited to be part of a small group discussion with associates.... There are many objectives of this forum:

- To listen to each associate as they speak about their perspectives, insights and ideas about their role, the department and the company.
- To solicit ideas for process im-

provement in their role, their department and corporate-wide.

- To help develop a better understanding of what people do in other departments and how each person working together enables the company to develop customer loyalty and exceed our sales goals.
- To help build personal relationships with people who might not ever talk to each other.

“Come prepared to talk. Come prepared to share what you do on a daily basis at Nelson. Come prepared to share ideas for improvements in your department or company-wide.”

Nelson explains that the forums, combined with a process called “coaching,” have resulted in positive change within the organization, but their success hasn’t been limited to that.

“We’ve also experienced an impact in our relations with manufacturers and customers. For instance, we used our coaching template in our recent ‘One-on-One’ meetings at the NEMRA annual conference to document the actions from the meeting and hold each party accountable. With a few principals, we encountered a little bit of shock when we gave a carbon copy of the coaching form to them. But when they read the plans, actions and dates on the form, they understood that we were applying our coaching process to these meetings as well.”

The agency has taken adding value to the next level. Nelson discovered a need that was not being met in any of the industries they serve by providing sales training to its distributor base. Nelson offers training on subjects including customer-centric selling, strategic selling and a course on business ethics. “It was surprising to see how little sales training is offered anymore. We have been able to provide our training courses to more than 125 outside salespeople in distribution.”

Third-Party Accreditation

The proliferation of letters such as CPMR, CSP and RCDD* after the names of Nelson & Associates personnel is no acci-

* The third set of initials — RCDD — found after the names of two of Nelson’s associates represents the Registered Communications Distribution Designer designation that is awarded to those who have demonstrated their knowledge in the design, implementation and integration of information transport systems and related infrastructure.

dent or some sort of random alphabet soup.

The CPMR designation that Kurt and Todd Nelson proudly display after their names is probably the most recognized designation in the manufacturers' representative community. CPMR is the MRERF-administered program created exclusively to address the professional advancement needs of already well-established independent manufacturers' representatives.

According to Nelson, "We were among the early adopters of this program. I look back to the early 1990s when Todd and I were walking past a MRERF booth at a NEMRA conference and saw information pertaining to CPMR. At our father's urging, we completed the program and thought enough of it to make sure we sent many more of our people." A direct outgrowth of the CPMR program led to the agency's promotion of the Certified Sales Professional (CSP) accreditation.

"After completing CPMR," Nelson said, "it occurred to us that there ought to be some sort of professional training available for salespeople in the street. CSP fit the bill in meeting that need. We saw that accreditation as another means whereby we could differentiate our company from the competition." Nelson has

hosted two of the CSP training programs on site and its entire 25 outside salespeople have completed the program.

Completion of the CSP program marks a sales professional as possessing expert sales competencies and a thorough commitment to professional development and self-improvement. Companies with CSP-certified sales personnel maintain that they enjoy a measurable performance benchmark, set a hiring standard for new staff, increase their credibility with customers and principals, differentiate themselves from competition, and decrease sales staff turnover.

While acknowledging that pulling his salespeople out of the field for four days spent in the classroom plus nightly homework assignments was quite an investment, Nelson admits it was worth the effort. "The true cost was pulling the salespeople out of the field and away from the customers — not the cost of the tuition. But looking at what was accomplished, it worked for the customers and for the salespeople."

Commenting on the cost of the program, Nelson notes some may find it expensive, "but I look at it this way: I equate the cost with about 10 lunches a year with a customer. In order to improve yourself and your ability to per-

form for that customer, it was well worth the investment."

The emphasis in achieving their accreditations is just a part of what Nelson & Associates does to "maintain the bragging rights," as Nelson puts it. "When our principals and distributors speak about us, we want them always to consider us the best. When we interview for new lines, we want our prospective principals to know how much we've done and how hard we've worked to have a third party acknowledge our level of professionalism. So too when our competitors refer to us — we want them to recognize how hard we work to become what we have."

Dual-Rep Association Membership

As reported in the 2005 issue

- AEE — The Association of Energy Engineers
- APEM — Association of Professional Energy Managers
- BICSI — Building Industry Consulting Services, International
- ERA — Electronic Representatives Association
- IET — Institution of Engineering & Technology
- MRERF — Manufacturers' Representatives Educational Research Foundation
- NAED — National Association of Electrical Distributors
- NEDA — National Electronic Distributors Association
- NEMRA — National Electrical Manufacturers Representatives Association

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of *Agency Sales*, here's how Nelson & Associates view their membership/participation in a number of associations: "Our commitment to work with leading-edge companies serving leading-edge customers means that

we have to stay at the leading edge ourselves. One way we do this is through membership and active participation in the associations serving each of our market areas: AEE, APEM, BICSI, ERA, IET and NEMRA, as well

as MANA...Not only that, but we also interface with NAED and NEDA, the distributor association serving our industries. The formal and informal education we derive is key to our drive to keep 'pushing the envelope.'" □

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