
Getting The Right Fit And Making It Work



Ralph McAllister

A small and relatively young (four years old) technology company, Enfield Technologies was quick to answer the call when MANA and *Agency Sales* asked manufacturers to provide their thoughts on what constituted the “Perfect Rep.” The result is the second in our series of articles describing what many manufacturers are looking for in their marketing partners. This time the marketing partner is MANA member Prime Systems Network, Inc., Medina, Ohio.

According to Rich McDonnell, vice president of the Trumbull, Connecticut-based Enfield, a provider of advanced automation control solutions, “I think we may have a unique perspective on this subject.”

The manufacturer’s servo-pneumatic systems provide variable control of pneumatic devices such as air cylinders and pressure vessels. In addition, the company’s systems have become the choice of many designers in industrial automation, product testing and animatronics because of their ability to operate faster and smoother than alternative systems. Many of Enfield’s systems

are built into the processing, assembly, testing and packaging machinery for some of the best-known manufacturers in the world. In addition, its systems have helped animate live-motion characters that appear in major motion pictures and at theme parks.

McDonnell explains, "Before doing anything, we examined a number of different go-to-market strategies prior to selecting manufacturers' reps as our primary channel partner. Our decision ultimately was based on a variety of different attributes that we felt would differentiate us in the market. Included in those attributes was our need to execute a very focused sales effort. That desire led us to working with reps."

With that as his starting point, McDonnell continues:

- "First, we sought to identify rep firms that were well-known in our target markets. We approached our customers in a geographic area and asked them 'Who in your opinion would be a trusted source if and when you're searching out our type of product? Who would you depend upon to provide solutions to your problems?'"


"A typical response is 'Boy, that's a great question. I can tell you about this one rep in particular who regularly brings me the most intriguing products and technology. When I want to know something that's state-of-the-art, he's the one we call upon.'"

- McDonnell continues, "Quickly learning who knows the industry and who makes the calls, we then seek out those rep firms that had exhibited proven experience in taking a new technology to market."

- Proceeding with the winnow-

ing-out process, he notes, "We then seek out reps that understand that being first to market with an innovative technology grants them an entirely new level of access within their customer's organization. It's those reps that have the deep insight into a customer's plans and strategies. They know best how to take advantage of the opportunity to promote (cross sell) their other product lines."

- Finally, he continues, "Once we locate and partner with those reps (in this case, Prime Systems Network, Inc.), it has been our experience that the reps we work best with see themselves as our channel partner and not a channel filter. That's the way we like to approach the market."



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"I'd add that our entire rep network meets the criteria I've outlined. However, with organizations such as Prime Systems Network on our team, we can continue to raise the bar."

Marketing Partners Recognize the Value of MANA

Both Prime Systems Network and Enfield Technologies serve as test-tube examples of the benefits that rep firms and manufacturers realize via their membership in MANA. According to Prime's McAllister, his reasons for membership in the association read almost like a listing from a menu. "MANA has done so much just to elevate the reputation of reps in the minds of principals. In addition, I read every issue of *Agency Sales* and appreciate the regular e-mail notifications on matters of importance from the association. Then there are the issues of MANA's influence when it comes to state and federal laws affecting the profession. And finally, there are the association's activities when it comes to international commerce. We've seen a constant growth of international activity in our territory, and MANA's efforts in keeping us apprised on matters of importance are greatly appreciated."

While Enfield's McDonnell admits, "We should probably get more out of the association than we do; it's been a constant help to us. Of great importance has been MANA's communications to us regarding the cultures and norms that reps operate in. The information we've been provided allows our engineering and administrative people to gain a real sense of what reps are and the how they operate. I'd also point to the association's educational efforts as being very important to us."

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Raising the Bar

As he and his company continue to raise the bar, McDonnell went on to share additional thoughts on working so closely with reps. As to what he looks for when it comes to the attributes a rep must possess in order to be successful with his company's products/technology, McDonnell maintains, "First and foremost, a rep must possess an attitude whereby he's not just approaching the customer and saying, 'I sell stampings,' for instance, and asking, 'What kind of stampings do you want?' Rather, we're looking for the rep who is a solution provider and one who recognizes the value of truly learning the customer's business and becoming an advocate for the customer."

In general terms, McDonnell says he usually looks for a rep that is a multi-man organization that has extensive experience taking a new technology to market. "I also prefer that they be what I'd call a 'technical' agency vs. being simply a 'sales' agency."

Prior to deciding upon reps as the most efficient means of taking his company's technology to market, McDonnell explains, "At the beginning we sold direct and completed other sales over the Internet. We were able to maintain low-volume business as we went through a development process."

Now, backed with more than a year of working so closely with his company's network of manufacturers' representatives, McDonnell maintains that he views the role of the rep as one that is constantly going through an evolution. "Perhaps the greatest change I've seen among reps is that many of them have begun to focus on representing a smaller number of product lines. What they've done, in my experience, is to concentrate on some leading-edge products that are truly unique to their marketplace. They may also have some secondary and tertiary lines, but in general those lines are incidental to their main focus."

As to how this "evolution" fits in the relationship between Enfield and its reps, McDonnell uses the analogy of a marriage. "We're looking for the rep firm that exhibits a willingness to stick with us as the business develops and we open up new markets."

When it comes to any type of challenge to overcome when dealing with manufacturers' reps, McDonnell puts the onus on his own shoulders when he says, "It's our job to communicate to the rep that we are an organization that offers them a unique business opportunity. We bring an exclusive relationship to them, and we're interested in a long-term commitment. We're not interested in having the rep develop the territory and then replacing him with a factory salesperson. That's not the way we conduct business."

The Enfield Technologies way of conducting business has obviously struck a chord and resulted in a mutually beneficial relationship with Prime Systems Network, Inc. "We contacted Enfield as the result of an ad in *Agency Sales* magazine," explains Ralph

McAllister, president of Prime Systems Network, Inc. "It's been a good fit from the very beginning. They are very innovative and enjoy a great reputation in the marketplace."

In business for more than 16 years, Prime describes itself on its web page (www.primesystemsnetwork.com) as:

- An Automation Services and Solutions Provider
- A Sales and Marketing Services Provider

According to McAllister, "Previously I was the national sales manager for an automated welding equipment company. In that position I first became acquainted with the concept of manufacturers' representatives. I gradually became interested in the structure of the sales representative business and how they engaged with manufacturing companies that required the skill sets that a representative could apply for producing sales."

McAllister founded the company in 1990. Today it boasts a staff of five, four of whom are full-time in the field and one serving as an administrative assistant in the office. The agency covers a territory that includes all of Ohio, western Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Indiana and West Virginia.

As to how the agency got to the point where one of its principals recommends it as a "Perfect Rep," McAllister explains, "We function from a simple philosophy. The Prime Team associates with the best people and the best companies ... delivers innovation, ... practices continuous improvement and builds confidence every day by delivering predictable and dependable performance. The best companies base their business decisions and serve their

markets on the same or a similar philosophy. Enfield Technologies is a great company and a great example of a company that operates this way.”

Identifying Growth Platforms

“From the start, we established ourselves around growth platforms that compared with the business growth initiatives of our principals. Our relationship with Enfield is typical of this approach. Enfield is an innovator and is well-recognized in the market for improved and more cost-effective methods to control pneumatic powered motions. It was a good fit for us and the several market sectors we routinely serve.”

In his relationship with Enfield — and all of the agency’s principals for that matter — McAllister notes that “all of our principals are diligent in their efforts to respond to change in the marketplace. Our current and prospective customers constantly desire to engage with principals who are reliable and contribute increased value with proven innovative solutions. That’s part of our challenge as a rep — to bring manufacturers and customers together with high-quality products and services that are real value-added solutions to existing manufacturing problems at an accelerated rate of engagement.

Our customers want to know the principals that we bring them as solution providers are constantly working on their businesses in order to anticipate and develop solutions to new problems. In addition to our goal to work with the best principals and customers, one of my personal goals is to work with the best people at Prime. I can proudly say the Prime Team consists of the best people I have ever worked with as a manufacturers’ representative. Without their commitment to professional results-oriented performance, we most certainly would not have been considered for the honor and recognition in this article.”

As the agency continues to meet that goal, there are certain attributes that the Perfect Rep, in this case Prime, needs to keep in mind when it assesses its principals. According to McAllister, “Here’s what we look for in a principal:

- “We’ve got to be compatible in our views on the factors that contribute to a strong business partnership. For instance, there has to be mutual agreement on the importance of meeting the needs of the customers. To accomplish that there also must be mutual agreement that proactive customer support and service are all-the-time functions. It isn’t something that is to be done only after the sale.”
- “Customer retention is impor-

tant for the principal and sales agent. This requires a great deal of predictable performance as it applies to meeting the needs of the end user. The best principal is one that will be predictable and consistent when it comes to communication, flexibility, making sound business decisions, and recognizing and responding to the needs of the rep.

- “Principals must have and work from a formal business plan, and be willing to share this information with the representative.
- “They must understand the role of the rep and the accelerated pace at which the rep works.
- “The principal must consistently invest in their people, their facilities, branding, sales and marketing tools, and their own technology.
- “They must have a presence on the Internet — not using it simply as an advertising platform.”

Finally, and perhaps this is the key to the relationship that Prime and Enfield enjoy with each other, McAllister maintains, “The two major elements for any successful relationship remain expectation and performance. Our relationship is built around both. The best principal measures the performance of his reps, and the best reps measure the performance of their principals. When mutual expectations are met, confidence and trust are built between the two organizations. Our customers are served best and most consistently when the principal and manufacturers’ representative work together operating from a high-confidence and high-trust relationship. Even though the typical manufacturers’ representative market is regionally focused, it is important that both market partners operate according to world-class practices.” □

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