
Rep's Belief In Service Paves "Perfect" Business Path



Among the many attributes that Compton Sales, Inc. possesses that attracts the attention of its customers and principals is the agency's belief in a service philosophy. That means the firm sets an example for others when it comes to:

- Making the calls that have to be made.
- Constantly selling its customers' customers.
- Staying in constant touch with its principals and customers.

At least that's the view of one of that firm's principals. Novatech Glass Group, Inc. thought so highly of the Duluth, Georgia, agency that it recommended we include the rep firm in our growing list of "Perfect Reps."

According to Michael Prendergast, national sales manager, Novatech Glass Group, Inc., Quebec, Canada, "After making contact with the agency through MANA, Compton Sales has been representing our company for three years. Keith Compton and his father, Nick, founded the business more than 20 years ago, and they've built it to the successful level they enjoy today. Keith, president of the agency, has got to be one of the most professional businessmen I have met in my more than 15 years in manufacturing. Their success is a testament to their performance. They are phenomenal."

Novatech, which works exclusively with 42 rep firms in the United States, is a manufacturer of a wide range of doors and doorlights.

As if Prendergast already hasn't provided enough of an endorsement for Compton Sales, he continues, "Among reps, Compton Sales enjoys one of the most diverse and strong presences in the southeast United States. Keith has a group of sales personnel that lives and works in each of their respective territories. In setting up his business this way, Compton Sales possesses an extensive territory knowledge. In addition, the firm has an extremely successful succession planning process in place."

Prendergast is hardly done with his praise for the rep firm. "I have never met a group that exhibits a willingness to invest in their business the way Compton Sales does. For example, a couple of years ago Keith rolled the dice with a product line other than ours and positioned one of his agents in the group to specifically set out and spend his time to get that product line specified by architects. It took two years, but this effort has paid him back with extremely high dividends. What this showed was a willingness on the part of the firm to undertake a huge effort on the front end, and it's an effort that has paid off for them."

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Then there's the communication between agency and principal — a subject that always gets the attention of marketing partners. According to Prendergast, "As far as being an effective communicator, you will never meet a more even-keeled person than Keith."

Communication as Needed

The manufacturing executive continues that among the means of communication used by the rep firm is everything from personal meetings, the written word, phone and e-mail. "I don't necessarily hear from Keith once a month or even once a quarter; I hear from him or one of his salespeople whenever there's something noteworthy happening in the field — something that he feels I have to know about."

He continues that over the years of working with reps — and that naturally includes Compton Sales — "We've clearly recognized the value of the relationships that they have established in the field. I can hardly get off a plane anywhere without establishing or realizing the benefits of the relationships that Compton

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When speaking of reps in general terms, Prendergast notes, “Among our concerns at the end of the day is: Where do I fit in with the other lines the agency represents? Am I number one or number five? How much attention do we generate from the agency and their customers? After all is said and done, however, the responsibility for getting attention rests on our shoulders. It’s our job to get our products sold and we do that by supporting our reps in the field. If what we’re doing is not to their liking, they can go elsewhere.”

Agency Staying Put

Judging from Prendergast’s words and Keith Compton’s reactions to those words, Compton Sales isn’t going anywhere anytime soon.

While quick to acknowledge the compliment being paid to him and his agency by one of his principals, Keith Compton’s enthusiasm for the rep business serves as the best advertisement for the quality and professionalism of his operation.

Compton explains that he and his father started the firm in 1983 while Keith was still attending college at night. While neither he nor his father had a previous history in the rep profession, “My

father had spent some time working with manufacturers’ representatives. That’s what attracted him to this as a career.

“As far as what attracted me to the rep profession, I think a big part of it was the prospect of enjoying myself while I worked with my father. Keep in mind that there is no asset base — all you have is your investment in terms of personal time and your travel expenses.

“Then there was the opportunity to grow our business in whatever direction we chose while developing relationships with a variety of manufacturers and customers. We’ve never been locked into following one direction; rather, we’ve been able to seek out the areas where our talents are best suited. I love the lack of limitations and the unlimited opportunity to grow.”

MANA Membership

It’s at this point that Compton pays a compliment to MANA in terms of what the association has offered the agency over the years. “We’ve been members of MANA for more than 20 years. Over that time, we’ve benefited by the contacts with principals that have

grown out of our members. In addition, the association provides us with valuable benchmarking information that allows to us to judge how we perform vs. other reps.”

Compton continues, “Just as so many other rep firms, we started with just one line and were fortunate that through the years we’ve been able to add people and grow the business.”

The growth that Compton speaks of has taken the agency to the point where today it is an 11-person operation serving the southeast United States with building material products serving as its core offering. He explains that while the size of the agency is one of the major changes that has occurred over the years, so too has its customer base changed. “We began the business serving independent lumber dealers. Today as the market has changed, we serve a much broader base.”

Changing With the Territory

He admits that at one time Compton Sales served the home centers, but “We came to the conclusion that continuing with that emphasis was a matter of doing

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that and nothing else. Ultimately we decided we were better at dealing with the owners of companies. Our focus now is on calling on builders and generating the 'pull-through' from architects and specifiers."

In generating that all-important "pull-through," Compton explains, "The most important thing we can do in terms of bringing in business is to sell our customers' customers. We'll do that, for instance, by making the effort to call on the architect. The business may be a ways down the road, but this is just how we operate — we dig deeper than others do."

Just as Prendergast recognizes the value of relationships when it comes to what reps can provide in the field, Compton notes, "Our business is relationship driven. I'll admit that we may not be the

smartest reps or offer the deepest selection of products, but we have a lot of people, and we develop relationships. And the only way to strengthen those relationships is to get in your truck, go out in the field and call on your customers. I don't think there's any magic formula to what we do. We simply make the calls. We're there. We can even make a mistake and still get the order — because we're there. I seriously wonder about the guys [competitors] we don't see out there making calls."

As he looks back over what he, his father and the whole Compton Sales team have been able to accomplish over the years, Compton notes, "I'd have to say that this is a great career — if you're able to work your way through the first 35 years.

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"And when all is said and done, I believe the key to our success, and perhaps one of the reasons we've been nominated for this series of articles, has been our ability to communicate. What we do may not always be in written form, but we always respond. Our customers and the factories we deal with always know what we're doing. That shows that we're good at understanding what our principals are trying to accomplish and we're aware of what's happening in the territory." ■

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One Spectrum Pointe, Suite 150, Lake Forest, CA 92630-2283 • Phone: (949) 859-4040 • Toll-free: (877) 626-2776 • Fax: (949) 855-2973
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