
Returning The Favor

The last time *Agency Sales* magazine visited with David Miller, Whit-Com Sales, more than two years ago, he was on one side of the desk recommending one of his principals for our “Perfect Principal” series of articles. Now we find the favor being returned to this Uniontown, Ohio-based manufacturers’ representative as one of his principals recommends him as a “Perfect Rep.”



David, president, and Katrina Miller, business manager of Whit-Com Sales, Inc.

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According to executives with Specialty Screw Corporation, Miller combines the best attributes that a rep can possess in order to know his principals, their products and to meet the needs of his customers at the same time. High on that list of attributes are skills in the areas of:

- **Synergy** — “Not only is Dave knowledgeable concerning screw machine parts, but all the other products that our customers will need,” explains Mike LiCausi, vice president of sales for the Rockford, Illinois, manufacturer. “As a result, his understanding of our products and the customer’s needs allow him to determine whether it’s a sales call that can truly benefit us. He’ll never play one company against another, it’s just a matter of knowing what’s the right fit.”

- **Communication** — “When you introduce the subjects of communication and Dave Miller to us, you’ll see smiles on two faces,” says Don Coffman, sales manager for Specialty Screw. “Dave communicates very well. He’s very detailed. He’ll go to

great lengths to obtain additional reference material for customers. When something comes up, we can always reference his communication and we know immediately that he’s aware of what’s going on. Dave performs so well in this area that we can use him as an example to others of the kind of communication we’d like, will react to and will follow up on. He provides us with so much information, we don’t have to ask him that many questions on a project.”

- **Training** — “We’ve had various sales meetings and training sessions that Dave has attended,” explains LiCausi. “Dave has taken that a step further by doing a lot of his training completely on his own. What results is that he’s always ready with questions for us that allow us all to do a better job. In addition, he’s anxious to take part in our plant visits that allow him to stay up to date with all of our activities.”

LiCausi continues, “Dave has become a very loyal and dependable representative for our company. He gets involved with all aspects of the business from sales,



quality control, engineering, and even accounting issues as they may arise. He is a very informative and thorough representative we can count on to know the companies in his area in great detail. He has taken what we thought was one of our top territories and more than doubled our sales in about five years. Dave has been a team player, including giving up territory to assist our company in focusing on key customers.”

In conclusion, LiCausi notes that Miller “prides himself in knowing his principals, their products and his customers’ needs. He is an avid member of MANA and plans on continuing his education as a rep through MANA programs.”

Embracing Change

When Miller is asked the reasons why the executives at Specialty Screw speak of him in such complimentary terms, he immediately points to the importance of being willing to change. As he related in the article that appeared in the June 2004 issue of *Agency Sales*, a restructuring of his busi-

ness was called for after some hard economic times. “I had to make some changes in a hurry if I was going to keep this business going.”

He continues, “The changes I undertook were simply a defensive strategy — they were for survival. Here’s how I viewed the role of the rep then and still do today: The rep should be working one-third of the time for his principals, one-third of the time for his customers and finally, one-third of the time for himself and his own business. Remember, I’m in this business for myself and my family. But, I was at a point where I was no longer liquid and wasn’t generating enough income to pay expenses, hence the pressing need for change.”

Some of those changes included:

- Cutting lines from 15-18 all the way down to five. On this subject of resigning a line, which was an important part of his survival strategy, Miller notes, “This is something that many principals have a difficult time coming to terms with. They don’t realize that the rep has goals of his own that must be met. Their belief is that the rep is there strictly to find

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He goes on to cite the example of a fairly recent line resignation “where it simply didn’t make any sense to hold on to the line just to hold on to it.

“Here was a very good company that I liked very much. As a matter of fact, any rep looking at the company would consider themselves fortunate to have such a line.” But as circumstances evolved, he explains, there was another line that was somewhat complementary that he wanted to take on. Ideally his goal was to



Russ Johansson (center), president, Don Coffman (left), sales manager and Mike LiCausi, vice president of sales for Specialty Screw Corporation.

represent both lines but the existing principals balked at the idea and said it was them or nothing.

“Luckily I had a lot of windshield time on the way home from that meeting, and I was able to think about my decision — which ultimately was to resign the line.”

- Terminating a salesman who was not covering his costs.
- Buying out a partner.
- Letting go of another person who decided that “with all the changes the agency was undergoing, he simply wanted to leave the rep business.”

That left Miller and his wife to run the business and work with the five principals he stayed on

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with. Speaking of those principals Miller explains, “I went to the principals, explained what I was doing in terms of refocusing on products and territory. The ones we stayed with — including Specialty Screw — agreed with my plan.”

A Plan That Worked

As he looks back over the time when he was undertaking his restructuring, he says, “I’d say today that I’m looking at a pretty good year. The changes I planned and accomplished worked out quite well.”

When Miller is asked what skills or talents allowed him to make the changes he did that have allowed his agency to prosper today, he points to everything from fear, being a strategic planner, and having communication skills. But the one skill he notes above all others is that of being able to trust his instincts. “I’ve been in sales for more than 20 years and a rep for 16. In that time I’ve used up a lot of shoe leather and developed quite a bit of knowledge of how to run a business. I believe when it comes to making decisions that instincts can serve as your best guide. If anything, perhaps fear held me back from making some decisions (resigning certain lines) more than anything else. But in the end, everything worked out okay

— owing to my instincts. In all honesty, I’d say it might be a little more difficult for younger reps to rely as heavily on their instincts as I do. Perhaps that’s something that comes with experience.”

The Importance of Change

Staying with the subject of change and why being willing to embrace change is so important for a manufacturers’ representative, Miller explains that “even though I still have some key customers from the 1990s, over that period of time the whole world has changed — and I’ve had to change with it.” Part of that change has been to be constantly on the lookout for new and different opportunities.

“I was talking to a rep a short time ago with the idea of engaging him in a sub-rep arrangement. It didn’t work out, however, because our thinking was quite different. This rep maintained that if you’re doing quite well with your business and have reached a comfort level with your key accounts, there’s no way and no time for you to go out and prospect for new business. I totally disagree with that concept. I’m always out there prospecting — that’s the only way you can prepare yourself for the future.”

A result of that belief in the importance of continually pros-

pecting for business is seen in Miller's recent acquisition of a line quite different from what he's represented in the past.

"I've recently added a company that is largely in the business of manufacturing medical/surgical devices. They do some wire forming, which more closely fits what I do with my other lines, but here's a business that I'd normally be driving by each day. I was missing an entire market. This new line provides me with an opportunity to perform as a materials expert for my customers. In addition the new company does some plastic molding and screw machining that closely matches what I do. Since I know the process (they do some wire forming), I can talk the talk and gain them business in the territory."

Returning the Compliment

In speaking of the Specialty Screw executive who returned the favor by recommending him as the "Perfect Rep," Miller notes that LiCausi and Coffman "treat me as an equal. Mike LiCausi has been everywhere and the two of them have forgotten more than I'll ever know." More importantly, however, he explains how he and the two executives complement each other. "Here's a major reason why we work so well together. The two of them know everything about their products and the market on a 'macro' basis. They rely upon me to know all there is to know in my territory on a 'micro' basis. Having said that, there are times when we've had conversations with each other and disagree on matters, but at the end of the day, we'll leave a meeting as one — all pointed in the same direction."

Education and MANA

If synergy and communication skills are important ingredients for Miller's success, he's quick to add two other ingredients — education and membership in MANA.

Education

If the executives from Specialty Screw point to Miller's belief in training as a major attribute, the rep's belief in education, in general, couldn't be more obvious. "I believe in ongoing education — no matter what field you're in. While I've got more than two decades experience in selling, there are still some skills and talents I lack. Ongoing education will help fill those gaps. Currently I'm enrolled to begin MRERF's CPMR training in January. I'm also going back to get my MBA and am currently enrolled in an accounting class. I'm still going to work with an accountant, but at least now I'll be able to better understand what he's talking about as I make decisions."

Just as he holds education and training in such high esteem, Miller, who has been a member of MANA since 1990, remains adamant in the value of his membership in the association. When asked if MANA helps him in his daily business, in planning for the future and in relations with manufacturers, he offers a resounding "yes" on all accounts. "I use MANA as a reference. For instance, one of my principals came to me and let me know that they simply couldn't make use of a direct sales force in any part of the country. What they wanted to do was to go to an entirely rep force. The problem was they didn't

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know how to do it. I very quickly referred them to the MANA web site, the magazine, and to the schedule of MANA seminars — all of which could provide them with the type of information they needed to make the change.

"Interestingly, after one of my principals attended a MANA seminar their comment was 'On the one hand it was great to learn how much we were doing correctly; but on the other hand, I didn't realize how much we weren't doing for our reps. That session really opened our eyes.'"

He adds, "It's also important for principals to realize that MANA isn't just for reps. They work on behalf of both reps and their principals. What they advocate is the rep way of going to market — and that's something we all believe in.

"This belief in training and education comes from a realization that the whole business world has changed over the last couple of years. Business isn't conducted the way it once was and the tools we use today are so different than they were at one time. That's why reps have to do all that they can to stay trained and educated." □

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