



by JAY OWNBY

Looking for reps? It may not be as easy as it appears.

Depending upon a manufacturer's level of experience in working with manufacturers' representatives (reps, agents, representatives, professional field sales companies, outsourced sales professionals), there are several options available to find prospects to sell products.

If the manufacturer already has an established rep network, existing representatives may be an excellent source for recommendations for candidates in new or open territories. Many professional representatives are well-acquainted with reps in other territories through sales meetings, rep councils, rep trade associations, and professional and technical conferences.

Even if the manufacturer hasn't established a rep network, but does have substantial ongoing business in a territory, existing customers and distributors can be good sources for recommendations for prospective reps.

However, if the manufacturer is new to working with manufacturers' representatives, or if the above-mentioned sources have not met stated needs, other options should be considered. These options can include:

- Consultants.
- Representative search services.
- Representative trade associations.

Consultants

The search for professional field sales companies may be outsourced using a knowledgeable and exper-

rienced marketing/sales consultant who understands your business and your needs. Consultants who provide such services have access to databases of manufacturers' representatives who specialize in selling products in your market. They understand how representatives operate, and they are skilled in identifying, contacting, interviewing and evaluating representatives for their clients. They can present you with qualified candidates for final interview and selection, much like an executive search firm researches, interviews and evaluates candidates for executive positions. And, just as executive recruiters, they can save you valuable time, but at a considerable cost. If you don't have the time or experience to conduct the necessary research and interview process and you do have the necessary financial resources, using a professional consultant can be a viable option with a high probability of satisfactory results.

If you are considering using a professional consultant, MANA can provide a list of qualified, experienced candidates.

Representative Search Firms

Large numbers of representatives register, at no cost, with Internet-based representative search firms. The representative search firms then provide a list of prospective agents from their database to the interested manufacturer, for a fee. The representative search firm's database may also include existing da-

tabases of representatives other than their own, and they can supply the manufacturer with large numbers of prospects for their outsourced field sales positions. The quality of the prospect lists provided by representative search firms can vary greatly. Some advertise their search criteria, sometimes even identify their client to their database of agents and provide their client with the names of the agents who respond positively. Others simply do a sort of their database based on selected criteria and provide the list to their client. The cost of the service varies according to the sophistication of the sort/selection process. Representative search firms can provide the supplier with relatively large numbers of prospects at a relatively low cost.

The downside for this option is that many startups and marginally successful representative firms register for free with these representative search firms. This can result in a list of prospects that contains a high percentage of less-than-successful rep firms. Using representative search firms is usually the lowest-cost alternative to finding manufacturers' representatives in terms of dollars spent, but can require the highest expenditure of time in qualifying the prospects, often with mixed results.

Representative Trade Associations

Member firms of manufacturers' representative trade associations represent the "cream of the crop" of the professional outsourced sales profession. They are the most experienced, most successful, most sought-after, best businesspeople in the profession. They are always on the lists of the professional search consultants; they are rarely in the database of the representative search firms. In a nutshell, they represent the highest-caliber potential prospects to represent your company and your products to your current and prospective customers. Usually you must qualify for admission and join the rep trade association as a manufacturer member to gain access to the rep members of the association.

There are essentially three types of representative trade associations:

- Regional/local — City- or region-based associations of reps who have a geographical territory or territories in common.
- Industry-specific — Associations of reps (and manufacturers) who have a specific industry or technology in common.

- Horizontal — An association of representatives and manufacturers involved in virtually all industries and technologies who have the promotion of their mutual success in common. This is MANA.

MANA

MANA is a worldwide association of more than 5,000 representative firms and manufacturers/suppliers. MANA is a member-owned, non-profit corporation that exists to serve its members. For manufacturer (Associate) members, MANA offers the following services:

- **Rep Location**
 - MANA's *Online Directory* contains detailed information on nearly 4,000 manufacturers' representative firms, classified under approximately 140 different product/technology/market classifications. Associate members have online access to this massive database to search by region and product classification for appropriate candidates to promote the sale of their products or services.

- MANA's monthly publication, *Agency Sales* magazine, reaches a readership of well over 10,000. Associate members can place targeted advertisements for reps in *Agency Sales* at discounted rates.

- Premium ads appear immediately on the MANA web site, and these are read by reps looking for lines. An e-mail message is sent to all MANA rep members who fall into the product classification that best represents the products of the advertising firm, alerting them to the existence of the new ad and including a clickable link that takes them directly to the Premium Ad page. The ad also appears in the next available issue of *Agency Sales* magazine.

- **Rep Selection**
 - Contact and Interview — For many manufacturers, especially those new to a market or new to a territory, getting a rep's attention can be a frustrating process. Our Search Assistant is an excellent tu-

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torial that describes how not to contact reps, as well as suggestions on the best ways to get your prospect's attention. We also have available at a discounted member price a MANA Special Report titled *Selecting the Best Channel Partner* that can improve the effectiveness of even the most experienced manufacturer's interview process.

— Contract — Few if any professional representative firms these days will agree to represent a supplier without a comprehensive, fair and balanced contract. You can spend hundreds, more likely thousands, of dollars to have a contract drawn up by your attorney, and unless your attorney is intimately familiar with the business of manufacturers' representatives, you will likely find no takers who will sign it. MANA's *Agreement Guidelines* are reviewed every few years by more than a dozen "rep-savvy" attorneys. Our *Agreement Guidelines* explain the rationale behind the recommended contract clauses, and they are intended to help the

manufacturer produce a final agreement that is fair, balanced, and serves the needs of both parties.

- **Results**

— Getting the best performance from a professional outsourced field sales force is far different from managing a factory-direct employee sales force. Manufacturers' representatives are motivated quite differently from employee salespeople; they truly "march to a different drummer." They are businesspeople operating a sales organization, and they perform best when they are perceived as equal partners in the success of the suppliers they represent.

— Working with manufacturers' representatives to produce the best results is not intuitive, unless you have been a rep yourself. In other words, if you attempt to use the same management techniques that have been successful with your employees, you will achieve less-than-optimum results with your manufacturers' representative sales force.

MANA Can Help

- **Education and Training**

— MANA conducts seminars for manufacturers eight times annually in multiple locations. These seminars have a single objective — to show manufacturers how to get the best results from their outsourced field sales force.

— *Agency Sales* magazine is a monthly publication that provides a continuing stream of articles on subjects of interest to both manufacturers and representatives. Virtually every article offers readers information on how to improve their business operations, or the effectiveness of their rep-principal relationship.

— As changes occur in the business of manufacturers' representatives and the suppliers who use their services, MANA produces special reports that explain the new developments and offer suggestions for dealing with them.

- **Consultation**

MANA is staffed with experienced businesspeople who have years of experience hiring, training, motivating, evaluating, and even terminating manufacturers' representatives, and years of experience operating their own manufacturers' representative companies. These executives, along with a Certified Professional Manufacturers' Representative, are available for telephone or even personal consultation on virtually any subject relevant to the rep-principal business as long as you maintain your membership. □

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Jay Ownby joined the executive staff at MANA in 2004 after almost 20 years in sales and marketing management in the electronics industry and as owner of a manufacturers' representative firm. Jay holds a BS degree in chemistry and an MBA in marketing and finance. As a rep, he was a MANA member for over 10 years, and served on both regional and national boards of directors of the Electronics Representatives Association. Jay serves as manager of strategic alliances at MANA.



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