
The Positive Side Of Being “Sucked In”



There’s no mistaking the resignation in the voice of Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* when he describes his involvement in the family crime business. In response to a question he says something to the effect of, “No matter how hard you try to get out, it just sucks you back in.”

Ask the same question of Brian Olson, CPMR, CSP, The Tandem Group, Inc., and you get a similar answer, but he’s a lot more positive in his response — and with good reason.

“I began working in the agency as far back as high school. It was just a matter of needing some cash so I could have some fun. I began by entering invoices, and in a short amount of time I began to learn all about the plastic products we represented. I soon learned that once you get involved in the plastics industry, you never get out. Even today, the customers I dealt with in one distributorship just bounce around to another one.”

After successfully traveling a learning curve while he was still in high school, Olson continued while in college. “I was a business major at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. During the cold winter months when I needed money, my father had me answer the phone and contact

him when anything important came up. Since that beginning, I’ve never left.”

Following college, Olson took advantage of his familiarity with the plastics industry and the family business by joining the agency full-time. Since its founding in 1980, the Muskego, Wisconsin-based Tandem Group has provided plastic supplies to some of the Midwest’s most successful businesses. Currently the agency comprises four people: Olson, his father Richard, brother Mark, both of whom are CPMRs, and one inside person.

Observations of the Profession

Armed with a business degree and several years’ experience gained during his formative years with the business, he hit the ground running nine years ago. In that relatively short period of time, he’s come up with a number of observations concerning the rep business:

- *The family experience* — Olson is hardly the first person to be faced with the challenges that accompany joining a family business. In explaining how those challenges have been met in his case, the words “change” and “adjustment” are part of the lexicon. “Since my brother and I were joining our father, it might seem a little like ‘trying to teach an old dog new tricks.’”

“There are several practices that took some adjustment to get used to. For instance, the days of calling in an order from a pay phone are long gone. Now it’s a matter of e-mailing it from the car before I drive to the next sales call. Then there’s the matter of making a financial investment for

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something (e.g., online marketing data) that doesn’t seem tangible at the time, but is critical for the future success of the agency.”

While he admits it might have been a little rough at the beginning to get some of the financial restraints lifted to be able to make changes, the necessary adjustments evolved. “For instance, at the beginning I’d say my father was wary of the computer and what it could do for us. Now, however, he can’t get along without it.”

- ***Principal relationships*** — One important component of the rep business that was drilled into Olson during his time in college was the importance of developing personal relationships with suppliers. “I don’t think it was always that way,” he says. “I think in the past it was more the practice to keep quiet, listen to your suppliers and conduct business. Now it’s very important to develop a personal relationship with them. Your suppliers are a terrific source of knowledge and experience. Believe me, I’ve worked hard to develop those relationships — and it’s paid off.”

- ***Relationships with customers*** — In the past, if the normal practice

for reps was to make calls on customers and follow up, that’s not the way it’s done any longer. According to Olson, the days of the handshake over lunch and dinner are long gone. “We go to market differently than the way it was done in years past,” he explains. “We not only call on our customers, we call on our customers’ customer. At the same time, we make sure our principals are involved in the process. I’ll be the first to admit that like other reps, I don’t like sales reports. But with the database we have, we can send reports as needed with as few as two clicks of the mouse. Some may say it’s crazy to perform as much reporting as we do, but we make it a practice to communicate what we should. By being proactive in our communications with principals, we can preempt any conversations. They’re being kept in the loop, there’s nothing they don’t know — as a result, they don’t have to ask for any information they don’t have.

“If that’s how we communicate with principals, our relations with customers are just as good. We go above and beyond anything they might expect. We even go so far as to perform functions for them that we’re not actually involved with. It’s even happened that when a customer has a problem with a line we don’t represent, they’ll ask us to get involved.”

- ***MANA and MRERF’s CPMR***

program — Olson offers high praise for both his membership in MANA and the experiences he’s enjoyed while completing the CPMR program.

“I’d have to say that our membership and the membership that others have in MANA are examples of how independent manufacturers’ reps have raised the bar of performance in their profession,” he explains. “The accessibility of the MANA personnel and the business referrals we’ve received from the association have been tremendous. In addition, the information contained in *Agency Sales* has always been helpful.”

Another area where the association has been of assistance has been in legal matters. “Prior to our membership, I’m not sure our contracts had been all that great. We’ve used the MANA recommended contract and feel that it has been quite fair to both the rep and the manufacturer. In addition, we’ve made use of the attorneys recommended by the association.”

In terms of MRERF and its CPMR program, he notes that in addition to what was learned during the various courses, “The networking benefits that evolved out of the program were very beneficial. In our study group, eight of us were under 35 years old. We’ve stayed in touch as we’ve grown in our profession. Whenever we encounter something we aren’t fa-

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miliar with or don't know how to handle, we'll call around the group to see if they've encountered something similar."

Anticipating the Future

If Olson and his team with the Tandem Group are confident they're doing all they can today to be successful, they're just as confident that they're ready for the future. "Sure, there are chal-

lenges that have to be met today. We're faced with the problems caused by consolidation and the difficulties of finding quality suppliers to represent in the United States. But to meet that challenge, we're active internationally trying to locate new principals.

"In addition, we know what's happening now in terms of a changing economy and we know what we're going to have to do to be successful tomorrow. If the fu-

ture requires us to have more feet on the street, that's exactly what we're going to do. We'll find the qualified people in the industry who can do the job for us."

Notwithstanding any problems or challenges now and in the future, Olson emphasizes he wouldn't trade what he's chosen as his profession "for the world."

"You learn more each day, you meet new people. There's absolutely no monotony." □

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