

FOUR AGENCIES PROVIDE FOUNDATION FOR MANA'S 60-YEAR HISTORY OF SERVICE

During the 60-year history of MANA, economic ups and downs, mergers/consolidations, retirements and any number of other variables have combined to alter the business landscape that the independent manufacturers' representative works in. However, over that period of time two constants that speak to the strength and continuity of the profession have remained:

- The very existence of the Manufacturers Agents National Association (MANA), which was founded in 1947.
- The continued membership of four rep firms that can count themselves among that pioneering group of businesses that recognized the importance of reps banding together to raise the bar of professional performance.

Today, the following firms are recognized as those that have not only maintained their membership in the association, but also have realized and benefited from the constant flow of products/services to themselves and their agencies:

- Edwards & Associates, Inc., Tyler, Texas.
- Phister Equipment Company, Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio.
- E.A. Wilcox Company, San Francisco, California.
- Henry M. Wood Company, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Providing What the Customer Needs

Anyone making a call to the Edwards & Assocs. agency in Tyler, Texas, should count himself among the fortunate if W.C. Edwards answers the phone. The 92-year-old Edwards is there just as he was 60 years ago when the 61-year-old firm joined MANA.

According to Edwards, when he began with the firm, "We covered a six-state territory on a six-week schedule. When I started as a rookie, I worked every town with a population of more than 40,000. We'd arrive in town, start with the best wholesale distributor there, and let them know that I'd be back again in six weeks.

"Since I was new to the business, it wasn't too unusual that a customer might respond to my sales efforts by saying, 'You've just got one line and you're new, there's not much you can do for me.' My response was always the same, 'Well you could be nice to me. Maybe there's something I can do for you, and I'll be back again in six weeks. Could be that I'll have something you need then.'"

Edwards notes that then, just as today, "the rep's business was built on service and continuity of calls."

Among the reasons he cites for the agency to join MANA those many years ago was the fact that "We were new and wanted to add lines that would be complementary to what we already had. We felt being a part of an association would be of assistance, and it certainly was." He adds that "while our needs from the association aren't too extensive, we appreciate MANA and all it's done for us over the years."

Surviving Change

Phister Equipment Company, Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio, was founded in that city in 1937 by Frank Miles. The company, originally known as Miles Equipment Co., was a manufacturers' representative selling electrical and technical equipment. Joe Phister joined the company in the early '50s, and later became the firm's second president, at which time the company name was changed to Phister Equipment Company. Charlie McDonald joined the company in 1974, and became the third company president in 1985. This is also the year in which the company moved its offices from downtown Cincinnati to a location in the northern suburbs of Cincinnati.

Even though the agency's officers and physical locations have changed over the years, the firm has



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Charlie McDonald



The team at Phister Equipment Company, Inc., left to right: Judy Sutter, Dave Lewis, Charlie McDonald and Chris Buttry.

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John Munson

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Jeff Wlitt



remained faithful to its roots as a manufacturers’ representative. “Generally, we haven’t changed all that much,” says McDonald. “We’re still a rep who represents industrial companies. If anything has changed, it’s the focus on what we sell, which has become much more diversified than it once was. When we make a call now, we can talk about multiple lines geared to better meet the needs of our customers.”

In terms of considering any other changes, he notes that technology has certainly had an impact on the firm. “At the beginning of my 34 years with the company, there were no computers, cell phones or PDAs. In those earlier days your communication was done mostly in person or on the phone. Now so much is done via e-mail and the cell phone. Your ability to communicate while in the car en route to your next appointment is incredible. On average, I’m in the car

about 10 hours a week. Since I can now work during that time, that’s 10 more hours I’m productive.”

He adds, however, that the increased productivity is a bit of a two-edged sword. “Since we’re now in touch 24/7, you really never get away from work. I sometimes think nostalgically about the time I used to be able to spend in the car with nothing other to do than listen to the radio and relax a bit.”

If technology has done much to improve productivity, it hasn’t had a similar impact in an area McDonald cites as one that provides the greatest challenge for the firm today. “If anything, I’d have to say that the market we serve is a great deal more competitive than it was years ago. Customer calls have changed in that it’s harder and harder to get appointments with decision-makers today. At the same time, I see a growing trend among manufacturers wanting more and more reports from us. In the old days, Joe Phister would maintain that the best form of sales report is a purchase order. Things have changed. Manufacturers who used to want quarterly reports, now want them monthly and some even want them on a weekly basis. I’m not sure what’s causing this; perhaps they’re receiving pressure from upper management to provide documentation for what’s happening in the field.”

While he wasn’t around when the agency first joined MANA, McDonald says, “I believe it’s significant that the agency was relatively new at that time. Joe Phister probably figured that by joining MANA, membership in the association would provide him with some advantage or leverage when it came to guiding the agency into the future.”

If that was the initial rationale for joining the association, Phister Equipment has gained much more over the years. According to McDonald, “Our needs have changed little over time. We receive and read *Agency Sales* monthly. We’ve also advertised in the magazine, and I’m sure some of the lines we represent today were gained as a result of those ads. Also, the financial information that MANA has provided has been very beneficial.”

With a number of years of membership under his belt, McDonald notes, “If I had any advice to offer another rep, it would be to join MANA. I’ve hardly taken advantage of all that the association has to offer, but I’ve really benefited from membership. I’m positive there are a number of manufacturers who are looking for reps that start their search with the association. And, if nothing else, there’s strength for reps in their membership in MANA.”

Staying Plugged In to the Profession

John Munson points to the networking benefits of continued membership in MANA as a major reason why his company has maintained its membership since day one. Munson, E.A. Wilcox Company, San Francisco, California, explains, "I'll never say that you can't learn something new, and that's the case with us. Individuals, manufacturers and even other reps who are starting in the business have been able to locate us through our membership in the association. As a result, we're constantly in touch with what's happening in the field. Our membership has been a great tool in allowing us to keep abreast with what's happening with the profession."

Munson notes that it was his great uncle Ed Wilcox who founded the agency, and he's been with the agency throughout his professional life. From his perspective as a veteran rep, Munson says that the way they operate today is quite a bit different from how E.A. Wilcox conducted business in 1921. "Back then the impetus obviously was on making calls and establishing relationships. Today we find ourselves as a resource for engineers and specifiers of products. We do a lot of the work today that allows the ball to continue to move forward."

He adds that he, like so many other rep firms, has to face a major challenge today in terms of finding people who want to be involved in the profession. "In the past our greatest challenge might have been keeping lines. Now it's attracting and keeping people who want to be reps."

The E.A. Wilcox Company is a third-generation family-owned, sales engineering firm founded in 1921, involved in the sales and distribution of engineered equipment and materials. Operating out of offices and warehouses in San Francisco and Los Angeles, the firm covers the West Coast and supports customers throughout the 11 western states.

Founded in 1921 by Edgar A. Wilcox, the company grew up supporting the steel and foundry business in the western United States and has evolved by moving into new products and markets as the face of industry has changed. Through it all, the central theme has been to provide the agency's clients and customers with the highest levels of service, whether it be just-in-time delivery through its distribution activities, helping with design work through sales engineering activities or helping a customer solve a problem through applications support personnel in inside sales.

Citing the Benefits of Membership

Jeff Witt, of the Henry M. Wood Company, Cincinnati, Ohio, points to a number of reasons for his company's long-standing membership in MANA. In rapid succession, he'll mention the benefits of *Agency Sales* magazine, the work the association has done in promoting the passage of commission protection acts on a state-by-state basis, and the overall support the association has provided reps that have needed information to survive litigation. "There's great safety in numbers," he maintains, "and that's what MANA provides. So many of the firms that are members of the association are one- and two-man agencies, and they have to face all the same challenges the larger firms do. Consider the problem of commission protection. If these firms were all alone, chances are they'd just walk away from commission problems. Now, they have someone to depend upon and support them. As a result, they can concentrate their efforts on selling — which is what they're supposed to be doing in the first place."

Commenting on *Agency Sales* magazine, Witt notes, "The articles in the publication keep agents up-to-date on the thinking in the field. As a result of the job the magazine does, reps don't have to feel like they're all alone out there. Also, the magazine has done a lot to encourage downstream customers to be able to get in contact with reps."

A visit to the web site of the Henry M. Wood Co., Cincinnati, Ohio, presents visitors with a brief history of the company: "Our business is dedicated to your business. Since 1928, we have been working to satisfy our customers' industrial equipment needs in a reliable, friendly, professional and efficient manner. The products we represent are manufactured by companies in the forefront of their fields in terms of product design, quality, financial stability and growth. We sell a broad spectrum of products in the areas of:

- Pneumatic fluid power.
- Machine control safety.
- Leak testing.
- Low pressure fluid handling.
- Ergonomic manufacturing solutions.

Our intent is for this web site to be helpful in introducing you to our product lines and capabilities. We offer links to several manufacturers' web sites that can provide you more specific details on their products. We encourage you to contact us for additional information and application assistance. Many times

we can offer a custom, innovative solution drawing upon our experience and knowledge in our fields of expertise.

“With sales offices conveniently located in major cities in Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky, we are posi-

tioned to serve you and maintain our reputation for quality and dependability. Our outside sales staff is complemented by an inside sales department and stock inventory warehoused centrally in the Cincinnati area.” □

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