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THE NEVER-ENDING SEARCH FOR SALESPEOPLE

EDITORIAL | JACK FOSTER

When rep firms today find themselves in need of attracting, hiring and retaining productive salespeople, they can face a daunting task. In years past, filling sales slots was the fairly simple act of promoting a family member, or attracting someone from a competitor (or principal), training them in the needs of your market, and sitting back to watch the results. **But now, how times have changed!**



JACK FOSTER

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A number of trends are at work, today, to drastically impact how and where agencies can satisfy their sales staffing needs.

- ✓ Attitudinal differences between older generations of reps vs. the new crop of outsourced salespeople.
- ✓ Differences in how the job is performed today vs. yesterday.
- ✓ Lack of teaching and knowledge in academic circles concerning who and what reps are.

Not Your Grandfather's Rep Firm

The fact that manufacturers' representatives are no longer toiling in their grandfather's work environment is identified as one of the rep profession's major challenges, acknowledges **Robert W. Wendover** (pictured, below).

Wendover, director of the **The Center for Generational Studies** (www.gentrends.com) in Aurora, Colorado, maintains that if agency owners want to experience success in populating their agencies with trained professionals in the future, "They had better come to terms with the impact of this sea change."



The Center for Generational Studies conducts research, produces seminars and publishes resources on how the generations relate to one another in American society.

Here are some of the major differences in today's vs. yesterday's workforce, according to Wendover: "Today's younger workers believe that it doesn't matter how I work as long as I achieve the desired results. They also subscribe to a philosophy that 'I work to live; I don't live to work.'"

He adds that an important part of the equation needed to attract top-flight talent to the rep profession is to make sure "your agency provides ongoing training and education for new hires, not to mention having available the latest in technological tools."

Embracing Change

Wendover's advice on the critical need to embrace change as it pertains to rep salespeople is echoed by **Charley Cohon, CPMR, Prime Devices, Inc., Morton Grove, Illinois** (pictured, below).

"Every day I experience the different means of communication employed by younger people engaged in our marketing channel," he explains. "I've got any number of customers and principals that you can only communicate with via email. No matter how many notes or voice messages you leave, you're not going to receive an answer. But pose a question via email regarding a quote or a delivery and they get right back to you. It's a little bit like asking yourself what's the best way to communicate with a Frenchman? In French, naturally. It's the same with younger people. If you want to get their attention and communicate with them efficiently, communicate with them via the latest technology."



Cohon notes that means of communication aren't the only differences in the older and younger work force. Those differences, whether being reflected in work attitudes, use of technology or communication, have to be considered when seeking new salespeople for rep firms.

Also keeping an eye on generational considerations when it comes to how agencies should be filling sales positions is **Rick Johnson, CPMR, Andrews-Johnson-Brusacoram, Minneapolis, Minnesota**. According to Johnson, "How you populate the sales positions of your agency is important especially when you consider the age of the agency. For example, look at our agency for a moment. We deal with distributors and we started in the business about the same time many of the distributor decision-makers started. We grew into our positions together. At the same time, it ought to be important that if there are younger people making decisions for your customers, that you have younger people in place to work with them.

"So sure it's important to have some form of generational diversity, especially now that many Baby Boomers are leaving the profession. But the most important consider-

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ation always has to be to choose the most qualified person for the position.”

It’s on that last point that **Mike Norton** (pictured, right) weighs in. In his capacity as partner of **AxiomOne, Fountain Hills, Arizona**, Norton is closely attuned to the process of selecting the right person for the right position.

Using targeted interviews and survey information from more than 16,000 management and human resource personnel, AxiomOne (www.axiomone.com) identifies 33 job-critical behaviors vital for meeting hiring and team development needs. The company then provides a sophisticated online assessment tool that analyzes and identifies a series of behaviors common to everyone.



Norton explains that from his perspective, the difficulty that rep firm owners may be experiencing when it comes to attracting salespeople is explainable for a number of reasons. “At the outset is the consideration that reps don’t necessarily face this problem until it faces them. In other words, they’re not necessarily ready to locate and hire new people until the problem presents itself. Then they’re finding that the pool from which prospects were pulled in the past is going in another direction. Potential hires haven’t really been educated concerning the prospects that exist within the rep profession.”

That’s understandable, he maintains, because if you look at the business curricula in colleges and universities, if you find one page devoted to who and what reps are, then you’re lucky.

To rectify this situation, Norton emphasizes, “Reps have to continually be on the lookout for good sales prospects — they’ve got to be on the hunt constantly. Keep in touch with local schools, speak to local associations, groups and industrial organizations. Let them know about the benefits of the rep profession. Part of the message should be that just because someone is an engineer, that doesn’t mean that’s all they can do with their lives. Why not apply those engineering talents to the sales profession?”

He also advocates keeping eyes and ears open whenever making sales calls and asking customers if they’ve encountered anyone that they would recommend as candidates for the rep profession.

Keeping Them Once They’re Hired

Once reps have been fortunate enough to hire what they hope are professional salespeople, then they face the challenging task of keeping them — especially those who have proven themselves to be especially apt at sales.

According to Norton, there are two important ingredients when it comes to retaining individuals: succession planning and continued education/training. “A key here,” he says, “is that to attract top salespeople you’ve got to give them something as an incentive to stay. That’s where succession planning comes in. They’ve got to know that there’s something in it for them long-term. A problem can occur, however, after you explained to someone that somewhere down the line a percentage of the business is theirs for the taking, then some

seem to wallow in obscurity or even relish mediocre performance. That’s where education/training comes in. When you look at younger generations, there are many among them who never seem to want to leave college to start their professional lives. That’s why continual education on the job is imperative. Luckily for reps there is a clear-cut path for education, and that’s MRERF’s CPMR program. Add to that desire to be educated the comfort and familiarity that younger people have with technology. Pander to that need, and make sure they have at their disposal the requisite technological tools to not only do their jobs better, but also to keep their interest in the job at a high level.”

Immersed in the Process

Contacted right in the middle of the search process — looking to fill two sales positions for his agency — MANA District Director **Richard Sinclair, CPMR, Applied Process Equipment, Inc., Scottsdale, Arizona**, has opted to follow the least expensive, albeit most time-consuming, solution to his problem. “Any place I go, anybody I’m speaking to, I ask them if they know of anyone they could recommend for the positions I’m looking to fill. I ask if they’ve run into any ‘one-man armies’ that can really get the job done,” he explains.

Sinclair continues that while he’s been loath to place ads in newspapers because that hardly ever works to his satisfaction, he has dabbled a bit with some Arizona-based job websites. However, he finds that the asking-everybody approach works best.

If you have younger people making decisions for your customers, it is important that you have younger people in place to work with them.

As he considers the comments of other reps concerning how difficult it is for agencies to fill sales slots, Sinclair maintains that there are a couple of formidable hurdles that the typical agency has to overcome when it comes to attracting first-class talent. "First there's the concern with being able to offer the type of salary an experienced salesperson would desire. Next is the ability, or rather the inability, for many agencies — especially small firms — to provide adequate insurance and retirement plans."

Then there's perhaps the bigger question of whether people today are attracted to sales as a profession, and more specifically to being a manufacturers' rep. According to Sinclair, "I'm not sure people are all that attracted to simply being a salesman. But if we can affix the title of 'sales engineer' — or for our purposes, 'independent manufacturers' representative' — then we have more to offer. There are too many people today that hate the idea of being chained to a desk. That's why 'sales engineer' or 'rep' — someone who's out in the field working with customers — is a lot more attractive."

When it comes to getting the word out concerning how attractive and rewarding a career as a manufacturers' rep can be, Sinclair maintains, "It's the job of every rep, who wants to have a future for his agency, to be out there educating others concerning our value equation. Likewise, our associations (such as MANA) ought to be taking the lead when it comes to this educational process."

He adds that MANA is on more than the right track when it handles phone queries from individuals who say they have an interest in becoming a rep. The association has about

20 questions it will pose to a caller, all geared to determine whether they are a viable prospect for being a rep.

He adds that there are any number of viable prospects out there. "There are people who grew weary of corporate America, are being phased out of a job, or finally realized they're never going to attain their dream of becoming the national sales manager. They leave their positions — often well-off financially — and they'll wind up doing something like opening a Quiznos sandwich shop instead of following the profession that they're really prepared for. Why does this happen? They just haven't been informed concerning who and what reps are and how rewarding the profession can be. It's our and our association's job to communicate to those people."

As rep firm principals consider the various hurdles they face when it comes to attracting salespeople to the rep profession and to their agencies, it's remarkable how optimistic many of them remain as they consider the future:

Charley Cohon is blessed owing to the long tenure he enjoys with most of his staff. As he looks to the future, he notes, "The major reason I'm optimistic is that I never planned for myself to be a rep. I was on an entirely different career path. That's why I think we'll be able to attract others like ourselves because there are plenty of entrepreneurial opportunities for all of us."

Likewise, Rick Johnson maintains, "The fact that manufacturers work with reps to efficiently go to market will always serve as an attraction to the rep profession. That, coupled with the entrepreneurial spirit that remains alive and well in this country, will always allow us to find the right people for our agency." 