

[SOMETIMES A LITTLE GOOD ADVICE IMPROVES OUR VISION]



advice

GLEANING GOOD IDEAS FOR GREATER SUCCESS

EDITORIAL | JACK FOSTER





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The Good, The Bad and The Ugly is an apt way to describe the wisdom — or the lack thereof — in some of the "bon mots" that have been shared with these entrepreneurs.

The following two reps have learned the importance of keeping angry customers, or customer complaints, in perspective. As **Dave Bartlemay, Bartlemay & Associates, Inc.**, Richmond, Indiana, says, "My father, who founded the agency fifty years ago, stressed the importance of knowing how to deal with an angry customer. He used to drill into me, 'Remember, they're not necessarily mad at you — rather, they're upset with a situation. Fix that situation and everything will be okay.'"

Echoing that sentiment is **George Weismiller, G West Marketing**, Laguna Hills, California, who maintains, "Never take it (anger or criticism) personally when a customer gets mad at you. Listen to what they have to say and focus on solving their problems."

The importance of maintaining a positive frame of mind was something **Greg Reynolds, CPMR**, learned from the very beginning of his rep career. According to Reynolds, **Flynn & Reynolds Agency, Inc.**, Tewksbury, Massachusetts, "When I first opened the doors to my agency, Tom Preston, who was a founder of NEMRA, sought me out at the association's annual conference and stressed the importance of keeping a smile on your face. 'Do that while doing the best you can to meet the needs of your customers and principals and you can't help but be successful.'" Reynolds adds, "I've done my best to follow that course, and it couldn't be more accurate."

David Ice, Ice & Associates, Inc., Lawrence, Kansas, readily admits he didn't follow the best advice ever shared with him. "I remember back in 1992 when I was out of work and considering what was best for me to do. Someone suggested that I consider becoming a manufacturers' rep. I didn't do it because I didn't have this or that or was afraid of something or other. Eight years later, however, that's the course I took. As I look back, I should have done it sooner. It would have been the best move for me." Ice is MANA's District 6 Director.

No Overnight Success

Seconding Ice's words is Weismiller, who had a similar experience. "I've been a rep on my own for four years, and I wish I had done it 18 years ago."

Citing his fondness for immediate gratification when it comes to business, he recalls that if he decided to become a rep,

"I was told success wouldn't happen overnight. That's what caused me to hesitate. My feeling was that if I walked into someone's office, I'd be able to walk out with a new line or a customer order. That's just not the way it is. Once I understood that, working as a rep became a lot easier."

Christy Goss, Unity Electrical Sales, Inc., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, reflects that with just a little less than two years of rep experience under her belt, the most applicable advice she received going in was, "Work hard, know your products, respect your customers as well as your manufacturers, but above all have fun." I try to live by that mantra every day, even sometimes when it isn't so much fun. Before going into this business I had no idea how much sweat equity and pure hard work goes into a successfully run manufacturers' rep agency, but now I get it."

She adds humorously, "As far as bad advice, I haven't really received any, or I just haven't paid any attention to it. But I did get a chuckle out of the few distributors that now refer to me as a 'reptile.'"

The Wisdom in Building Relationships

The importance of developing and maintaining strong relationships with customers was the basis for some wise advice that has benefited two reps. **John Roba**, MANA's District 1 Director, recalls, "I was told long ago that sure it's a great idea to develop a relationship with the customer's purchasing agent. Even more important, however, is to get to know and develop a relationship with his boss. The purchasing agent will probably be gone after a couple of years, but the boss will more than likely be there forever." Roba, **John D. Roba and Associates**, Clarence Center, New York, says, "That's advice I've followed successfully for years."

Roger Ralston, MANA's District 3 Director, believes having strong customer relationships can forestall a number of problems. "If you've done your work to build those relationships, then when something goes wrong, the customer will be a lot more understanding." Ralston heads **Tri-State Components Inc.**, Newnan, Georgia.

A firm belief in going with your gut instinct has been a guiding force over the years for **Fran Pollart, Pollart Electrical Sales, Inc.**, Bensalem, Pennsylvania, maintains, "The best advice I ever received was to go with your first instinct. If you feel it, do it — don't over-think it. I've put this philosophy to work for me and my agency several times over the years whether it had to do with spending money, making a hire or taking on a new line. Sure, I've been bitten on the backside a few times by operating in that manner, but I figure since my judgement is the best, why not go with it?"

“When it comes to bad advice, I like to give it to others — especially competitors — rather than be on the receiving end.”

And here’s a bit of good advice everyone should follow: “Don’t spend your commission check before you receive it.” Those are the words of **Joel Casaubon**, CPMR, **Canner Associates, Inc.**, Oxford, Massachusetts, “How many times do you make the call, receive a promise for that huge order and think to yourself, ‘Now I can afford this or buy that’? It doesn’t work that way. Things change along the way, and six months down the line there may be no order, not to mention no commission check.”

No conversation related to good advice for reps would be complete without reference to the need for written contracts. One Southern California rep maintains “You should never enter into any type of arrangement with a principal unless or until you have a written contract. I’ve always used a version of the MANA recommended contract, and it’s served me well. However, the fact remains that a contract is only as good as the intentions of the people who sign it. If the principal doesn’t have any intention of honoring all the terms, then the rep has to make a determination as to how much time, money and effort he wants to expend to have him honor it.”

The Problem With “Trust Me”

Before relating some of the less-than-desirable advice they may have received over the years, many of the reps interviewed for this article had to stifle a laugh as they recalled how such advice was hardly designed to serve them well. High on the list of humorous recollections was “trust me” as uttered by a principal.

That Southern California rep we quoted earlier came back with his view of the “trust me” advice. “How about this,” he said. “A line you’ve been working on for years is sold to another company. The national sales manager for the new company says ‘Trust me. This won’t affect you at all.’

“How do you think this played out longer term? Sure enough, as soon as they had the opportunity, I was terminated.”

Something similar was related by Dave Bartlemay, who said: “What do you think my reaction was to the following? A principal comes to me and says ‘We have to ask you to take a commission cut. But don’t worry. Trust me, it won’t affect you all that much.’”

Trust, or the lack of it, isn’t the only ingredient in bad advice. Fran Pollart relates what happened when he forgot his best advice and listened to some other words. If you recall, Pollart maintains it’s best to always go with your first instinct. He recalls, “Earlier in my career I was considering taking on a fairly new line. Taking on that line would have necessitated terminating another line. Someone I trusted told me not to do it. I followed his advice and have regretted it ever since.”

Trust isn’t the only thing reps have to be concerned with. Dave Ice recalls some faulty words someone shared with him when it came to customer service. “When I was a bit younger, a sales veteran advised me that I didn’t have to call on or send in call reports on a specific account. Since I was younger, I foolishly listened to him, and I’m sure I paid a price longer term for doing so. He probably had some ulterior motive for telling me to do that, and I was at fault for listening to him.”

Then there’s the mistake Greg Reynolds made when it came to providing feedback to a principal. “I don’t know who it was that told me so,” he says, “but the advice was to never be afraid to speak up to your principals in a public or national forum. As a younger guy, I followed that advice. Thankfully, I learned very quickly that wasn’t the way to go. If you have any concerns or problems, communicate with your principal privately.”

Perhaps the wisest course of action to follow when it comes to bad advice is to listen to Joel Casaubon. According to the rep, “When it comes to bad advice, I like to give it to others — especially competitors — rather than be on the receiving end.” 