

# *Sustainability* *a half-century long*

## Successful Rep Relies on ‘Value-Added’ Solution Selling

EDITORIAL | JACK FOSTER

When asked how and why his agency has been able to sustain an enviable pattern of growth and success for half a century, **Dave Bartlemay** is quick to note that **Bartlemay & Associates, Inc.**, is hardly your typical rep agency. “There are a wealth of reasons for our success,” he maintains, “but high on the list is the fact we’re not like other rep firms; rather, we’re account managers and sales engineers. We do much more than just sell and market products and services.”

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Bartlemay, who heads the Richmond, Indiana-based firm, notes, “From the very beginning, our business hasn’t been so much about getting the order, but more about working with customers to ensure that they are fully served.”

He continues, “As a result of always working closely with purchasing and engineering people, we’ve been able to interact with customer personnel at all levels to develop valuable relationships over the years.”

Bartlemay, who looks back over 34 years of his own experience working in the business, explains that his father began the agency with a partner in 1958. “I began working there, drafting aluminum extrusions 34 years ago at the age of 13.” With that as a start, he went on the road selling for the agency. It wasn’t until a couple of years after graduating from college, however, that he began working full-time at his career with the agency. “All during my college career, my father asked me repeatedly if I wanted to work as a rep. While I did, I’ve always subscribed to a belief that experience in the real world is mandatory before settling down. That’s why I went to work for a principal for a couple of years before coming back to the agency at the end of 1986, and I’ve been here ever since.”

### A Change in the Rep Business

During the course of his career, Bartlemay says he’s noticed a lot of changes in the way reps conduct their business, not to mention the way Bartlemay leads the agency. “As I look back, I recall how it was expected of us to work closely with purchasing and sometimes engineering to get the order. Added to that was the expectation of having to entertain the customer. That’s not the case so much anymore. There’s not nearly as much entertaining. That’s due to a couple of factors, not the least of which is the fact that some companies have seriously downsized their operations. Once that happens, there’s a greater burden placed on the people who remain, and there’s certainly less time for entertainment opportunities — and with that, it’s more challenging to build relationships.”

Pointing to his agency’s success in building and maintaining such relationships, Bartlemay says, “One of the contributing factors to our longevity is the fact that we’ve grown over the years with many of our customers’ decision-makers. Long ago, we got to know people who were first-time buyers or young engineers. They have moved up the decision-making ladder over the years, and the relationships have been sustained.”

Couple that emphasis on relationship-building with a philosophy that espouses extreme customer service and you have the ingredients for a successful tenure in the territory. Speaking of the subject of customer service, Bartlemay relates the lengths to which his agency will go in order to ensure customer satisfaction. “I recall one customer that rep-

resented the first sale my father ever made in the aluminum extrusion industry,” he says. “We had an occasion where an electromechanical device proved to be faulty. After we were notified about the problem, we immediately flew to the manufacturer’s plant, reviewed the problem with the supplier and sorted out the problem. By the next day, we had the problem solved and the solution in place for the customer.”

Does this approach work? According to Bartlemay, “It’s paid off for us big time. I can recall one occasion when we traveled to a prospective principal with two of this customer’s senior buyers. They were more than willing to let this manufacturer know how well we have worked with them over the years.”

### Territory Tenure Builds Relationships

He adds that the agency’s tenure with this customer is indicative of the importance of relationship building: “I attribute the longevity of our relationship with these folks to our relationship and to the trust that has grown between us over a period of 50 years.”

If a drop in entertainment opportunities is one factor Bartlemay points to as a change in how relationships are forged, he goes on to note that the evolution in technology also has impacted the way a rep conducts business today. “I look back to the time when I was an early adopter of using a cell phone from my car, and things have just grown from there. Now it’s reached the point that through technology, you can be more available than you ever were before. You’re no longer locked into the traditional hours of business. You can work from any place at any time.”

He adds that the ability to communicate in this manner has also served as a springboard for international commerce — something that Bartlemay & Associates is involved with, as it does a considerable business that necessitates shipping products to foreign locations.

Bartlemay continues that changes in how business is conducted have been accompanied by a whole set of challenges that must be met. “Perhaps the greatest challenge we face is one that a number of reps talk about — that’s the tendency of principals to require their reps to do more in terms of shouldering the sales and marketing load. When this is done, it’s not always accompanied by an increase in commissions. “When that comes our way,” he says, “our first inclination is to enter into negotiations with the principal to ensure that we’re paid properly for our efforts.”

When these occasions arise, Bartlemay explains that he keeps in mind the fact that “I’m well aware that the number of reps is decreasing at the same time demand for good reps is increasing among manufacturers. It’s clear that there are a growing number of principals that recognize the efficiencies that come to bear by working with reps. I remind manufacturers of these facts and continue by reminding them that

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we've already contracted with them to be paid for certain services. They are now asking that additional services be performed. I'm happy to provide those services, but we've got to take a look at the accompanying compensation.”

He adds that, in general, manufacturers listen to and understand his point of view. “The important thing, however, is to keep the lines of communication open between yourself and the manufacturer.”

Receiving pay for services rendered isn't the only challenge this rep has to meet. “Then there's the question of where to find and attract people to sustain our agency's success.”

He continues, “People like my father came out of the Depression and World War II. They had that work ethic that they passed on to me. Younger people today are quite different and it's a challenge to attract them to the rep profession. I've been fairly lucky so far by looking for engineers rather than salespeople. I figure I can always teach them how to sell. But the challenge remains to be able to do that well into the future.”

If Bartlemay & Associates' past performance is any indication as to how they will perform in the future, chances are the agency will be there in another 50 years for **Agency Sales** to make a visit. 