

REPRINTED FROM

agency sales[®] magazine

september 2008 · vol.38, no.09

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EDITORIAL | JACK FOSTER



NO STONE LEFT UNTURNED

REPS GET ADVICE ON EVERY ASPECT OF THE BUSINESS

Networking opportunities and candid conversations were the hallmarks of this year's **AIM/R Management Conference**, just as they have been for well over three decades. This year's conference, the association's 36th, at the Hammock Beach Resort in Palm Coast, Florida, was highlighted by a wealth of rep, manufacturer and distributor panels that tackled everything from describing the attributes of the ideal rep to how to succeed in the face of a struggling economy.

During the various panel discussions, participants, which included reps, wholesalers and manufacturers, tackled a number of questions/topics that were generated by reps in attendance. Included in those discussions were:

When a panel composed of manufacturers and distributors was asked, "If there's one thing a rep could do for you, what would it be?" there was no shortage of responses. In addition to a desire for increased margins and product training, responses dwelled on the need for market intelligence and communication from reps in the field. For instance, consider the view of one manufacturer who said: "We need communication up and down the distribution chain. Factories have plenty to learn from their reps in the field, and if there's any one challenge I could issue to AIM/R it would be that they provide a standard one-page communication form that their reps could easily use to communicate to us."

On the subject of training, one wholesaler observed that "When manufacturers go to the time and effort to bring reps to the factory to learn about new products, we'd really appreciate the benefits of what they've learned. Products are now more complicated and the training involved in selling them is much more challenging. We definitely need the type of application training that they can provide."

In addition to product and application training, one rep offered that he's getting more and more requests from his wholesalers for assistance in sales training. According to the rep, "One distributor told me he's got a new salesperson who came armed for the job with a degree in marketing, but 'he couldn't sell meat to a hungry lion.' What this wholesaler needs is sales training."

Strengths and Weaknesses

Interesting comments were forthcoming when the subject of reps' strengths and weaknesses was introduced. Quick responses concerning a rep's strengths included:

- The rep will be in the territory long after the manufacturer's regional sales manager is gone.

- Relationship building.
- Vision.
- Being able to deliver on a plan.
- Possession of a succession plan for the agency.
- Being an effective strategist and business planner; a professional businessperson in sales.
- Being an ethical businessperson.
- Being a believer in partnerships.

When the subject turned to reps' weaknesses, there were several comments from manufacturers relative to the reps' tendency to avoid paperwork (e.g., call reports), but a lengthy discussion covered one manufacturer's desire to work with reps who are effective planners. According to the manufacturer, "I can quickly distinguish between a successful and an unsuccessful rep when I look at their ability to plan. For instance, I've had some reps that I call at the end of the year and they tell me they're going to grow the business by 16% next year. When I ask them how, they simply don't have a plan. I call that a hope, not a plan. Give me something in writing that shows how you're going to reach your goals — just two sentences, that's enough."

Wowing the Manufacturer

When manufacturers were asked "What have reps done lately that has wowed you?" one manufacturer returned to the subject of planning when he said: "I was blown away when my regional manager shared with me a pre-call planning folder one of our reps put together in anticipation of joint calls in the field. The report contained bullets on all the issues we should know about including the customers' entire buying history with our company. When someone presents a plan like that, it gives us a great feeling about what's happening in the territory."

Another manufacturer commented that in these trying economic times "When our reps have a complete lack of negativity, it makes me feel better. When he possesses a sense of optimism, I know he presents that to the customer. It's better for all of us."

Reps who apply a philosophy of optimal thinking to their profession don't need their principals to tell them that they're doing a good job. They'll know the quality of their work ahead of time.

Based on comments from reps in attendance at the conference, there is no shortage of challenges facing reps in their businesses today. That point was emphasized when the subject of the economy was raised. One rep put the subject in perspective when he offered, "When there's blood in the streets — and it's not ours — there is money to be made. And, we intend to be the one that makes it." He continued, however, that in order to be successful, it's going to take more support from manufacturers (e.g., continued new product development and increased product and application training) and greater effort on the rep's part to get the job done.

Other areas looked upon as challenges included line card management, buying groups, mergers/consolidations, the proliferation of private labels and the impact of "big box" stores in the territory.

As a suggestion on how to meet these challenges now and in the future, one rep bowed in the direction of continued involvement with AIM/R. "AIM/R is going to play a stronger role in influencing the people in our industry than it ever has before. We should all take advantage of the relationships we've established here. To a person, everyone I've ever contacted from this meeting has been responsive to whatever questions I've asked or the problems I've presented. Contact your fellow members during the year, take advantage of what they know, and don't be afraid to share your experiences with them. We're all going to be better for the experience."

Embracing Change

In addition to plenty of exchanges among attendees, the conference offered a wealth of scheduled presentations narrowing the focus on subjects of interest to AIM/R reps. Included in those presentations were:

The critical need to embrace and accept change was stressed by **Brian Moran**, founder and president of Strategic Breakthroughs.

Moran stated the obvious when he said "We all resist change; but if we continue in that direction, we're going to go out of business."

He continued, "Change is never easy, but if you're going to be great, you've got to make the sacrifices involved with change. And, the number-one sacrifice you've got to make to be great is to sacrifice your comfort — that's

what change is all about. Remember, you're either pushing ahead or you're falling behind. Change allows you to move ahead."

Describing what it takes to be great, Moran covered a number of tactics that must be employed:

- **Execution** — "Top performers implement more effectively than anyone else. They employ a system that allows them to embrace best ideas. They implement those ideas and become more profitable."
- **Periodization** — "Think of this term as it is employed by athletes. Athletes focus on one skill, master that skill and then move on to others. This has an applicability to business but to effectively use it, we need to accomplish a shift in the way we think and act."
- **Vision** — "Mentally create that which you want to accomplish."
- **Work from a plan** — "It's critical to work from a roadmap. Create a plan (e.g., weekly, monthly, annually) that captures the tactics you'll employ for a stated period of time."
- **Process control** — "This provides you with the focus you need to accomplish your goals. Process control includes your plan."
- **Scorekeeping** — You can't win if you don't keep score. "By scorekeeping you determine how effectively you are executing the tactics in your period plan. Once you start keeping score, you determine that there are plenty of areas where you learn you can improve."
- **Effective time use** — "If you're not in control of your time, you're not in control of the process." To emphasize this point, Moran quoted Ben Franklin, who said: "Take care of the minutes, the years take care of themselves."

According to the consultant, "It's imperative that you carve out time for what matters most. If you're under the illusion you can get it all done, however, you're mistaken. That's why it's important to focus on what's important."

To aid in the area of ensuring effective use of time, Moran suggested a couple of strategies:

- **Performance time, time blocking** — He described this as a strategic blocking of time, e.g., three hours, in the week when you focus on what matters the most. "You're

“When someone presents a plan like that, it gives us a great feeling about what’s happening in the territory.”

working on the planned items that are building your future. This is a simple tactic, but it’s powerful. Simply close your door for three hours — yes, you can. Other activities aren’t as important as those low-level activities that drag you down.”

- **A second block of time, a ‘buffer block’** — “This could be half to a full hour to work with all the interruptions that impact your day. It’s not that you’re saying ‘no,’ it’s just that you’re making the time to get something done later. This includes checking voice or email.”

Moran concluded his presentation by describing what he called the “Principles of High Performance”:

- **Accountability** — “Don’t equate accountability with consequences. They’re not one and the same. What this means is that in the end I account for what I’ve done. It means taking ownership and realizing that I control the response for my actions. In the end I always have a choice for that which I do. It’s not about blame, but taking ownership of choices.
- **Commitment** — “This is powerful. If we’re committed, we do things we wouldn’t normally do. It’s all about working toward our goals, building trust and relationships. It’s an underlying fundamental of success.”
- **Greatness in the moment** — “Life is lived in the moment. The difference between mediocre and great is very narrow — maybe it’s the difference between a few more phone calls each day. Maybe it’s just one item or a strategic item per week. Everyone here is capable of more than what they’re currently doing.”

Avoiding Human Resource Pitfalls

Over the course of two sessions human resources consultant **Gretchen Magee**, president, GSM-Human Resources Consulting, LLC, took attendees through the intricacies of managing productivity and the pitfalls created by top human resource errors.

On the subject of effectively managing productivity, Magee emphasized that one of the key practices is to “provide a vision that engages your people.”

According to the consultant, “Employees need to be energized — to feel that they are a part of something great. In order to do that, it’s important to define the large goals of your enterprise and enroll employees in making it happen.”

One way to achieve that goal is to serve as a “coach” for your employees, she maintained. “A coach knows that if the team is to be successful, we need to work together. A coach manages the players, not the scoreboard. A coach is a motivator and knows how to recognize/reward talent and will make cuts as necessary for the good of the team.”

In her second session, Magee described top human resource management mistakes. Included in those mistakes were:

- **Hiring a problem** — “Always hire talent over experience and devote the necessary time and energy to train the individual you hire.”
- **Knowledge of the laws** — “Train all your managers in the proper application of employment laws. In addition,



PHOTO, OPPOSITE PAGE:

Attendees of the 36th Annual AIM/R Management Conference held at the Hammock Beach Resort in Palm Coast, Florida.

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Panel participants include (L to R): **Mike Parham**, AIM/R Conference Chairman; **Bill Godwin**, AIM/R President-Elect; **Rick Banner**, AIM/R Chairman of the Board; **Frank Parks**, AIM/R President; and **Bryan Shirley**, AIM/R Executive Director. **Al Guidish** moderated this Townhall discussion of topics from the prior day.

it's critical that you monitor what goes on in your place of business. Be vigilant — if you knew or should have known, you have liability.”

- **No policies and/or inconsistent practices** — “Be sure to adopt a set of fair policies and operations. And, be sure to communicate and ensure that there is understanding among all employees.”
- **No ethical code of conduct** — “Be sure to understand the liability issues surrounding business ethics.”
- **Ineffective leadership** — “Recognize the critical role that leadership plays in the retention of high-performing people.”

What Bankruptcy Can Mean

The subject of bankruptcy was thoroughly analyzed by AIM/R Counsel **Dan Beederman** in his session devoted to “What Happens When a Principal or Customer Goes Bankrupt and How to Minimize its Impact on You.”

Beederman, a senior partner in the law firm of Schoenberg, Finkel, Newman & Rosenberg, Ltd., began his session by noting, “Bankruptcy gives to the honest but unfortunate debtor a new opportunity in life and a clear field for future effort, unhampered by the pressure and discouragement of preexisting debt.” With that as a start he defined the differences between Chapter 7 (liquidation) and Chapter 11 (reorganization) and the impact each has on principals, and most importantly, on reps.

He advised that if and when a bankruptcy occurs and lawsuits follow, it's important that the rep “not act like a deer caught in the headlights. Remember that they (those pressing the suits) are as much of a deer as you are. Keep in mind that 98% of all suits settle before reaching court.”

Finally he recommended that sound fiscal management can head off any number of problems that could result from bankruptcies.

Reps who apply a philosophy of optimal thinking to their profession don't need their principals to tell them that they're doing a good job. They'll know the quality of their work ahead of time. That was part of the message proffered by **Rosalene Glickman** in her keynote address to AIM/R Conference attendees. “If reps choose to be the best, regardless of the circumstance, they won't need praise from others,” Glickman maintained. “The vehicle behind this type of philosophy is ‘optimal thinking,’” according to Glickman, of the World Academy of Personal Development.

While employing optimal thinking, the consultant said, “You should strive to make a difference. Those words should serve as your motto.”

Glickman continued by explaining that while “you don't want negative people in the sales force out in the field, if you train them properly to maximize their abilities, they can be excellent quality control people — that is, once they've been trained in optimal thinking.” 

