





REP SUCCESS

A LONG RANGE VISION MAKES BOTH DOLLARS & SENSE

EDITORIAL | JACK FOSTER



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When it comes to long-term rep success, the rewards of going the extra mile are not *always* financial, as we find in our interviews with two seasoned reps. Their stories prove that a long range vision often makes both dollars *and* sense.

If you ask the relatively uninformed what manufacturers' reps do for a living, chances are the answer will be something along the lines of: make calls, take orders, follow up.

There's much more that comprises the rep's day, however, and much of what they do is often taken for granted if not totally unknown to customers and principals. Consider the efforts of the following two reps who spend countless hours on the road each year to communicate with and educate prospects and customers, as they go far beyond the "call-making" regimen.

**PART I
Making a Plan**

For close to three decades, **John D. Roba and Associates**, Rochester, New York, has hit the road as they carve out a 10-day period of conducting seminars designed to educate RV dealers about the latest and greatest products for their customers.

The following is typical of the schedule followed by the rep firm, and is actually this year's plan:

- **Monday** — Rochester, New York
- **Tuesday** — Albany, New York
- **Wednesday** — Manchester, New Hampshire
- **Thursday** — Bethlehem, Pennsylvania
- **Friday** — Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- **Saturday — Sunday** — travel
- **Monday** — Columbus, Ohio
- **Tuesday** — Detroit, Michigan
- **Wednesday** — Elkhart, Indiana

When **Agency Sales** caught up with **John Roba** on a Tuesday morning in Albany, New York, he and son **Brian Roba**, **CPMR**, were busy registering attendees for the second stop of their tour. Typically, each stop runs from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and includes lunch. On this day, the schedule is comprised of five sections:

- 1 **Brake controls products and training** — educates attendees on the differences between brake controls and installation techniques/troubleshooting.
- 2 **Broadcast television satellite systems for recreational use** — includes product overviews and a de-

scription of the installation, operation, troubleshooting, repair and maintenance of each system.

- 3 **Air conditioning** — includes the complete dismantling of an air conditioner unit along with a side-by-side comparison of competing brands.
- 4 **Water filtration systems** — discuss new profit opportunities with water filtration, some technical aspects of water filtration and how to offer customers the best possible water in their RV.
- 5 **A new products showcase** — provides dealers with insight into what's new in the market.

Attendees are provided breakfast, lunch and an eight-hour approved training certificate.

When asked about the value of following this expensive and physically taxing schedule year after year, John Roba agrees that it's challenging — "but the rewards far outweigh any negatives."

Focusing on Indirect Sales

"The recreational vehicle (RV) dealers who participate in the seminars," he explains, "represent indirect sales. Their knowledge of the products available to the market represents the difference between success or failure with the distributor and end-user customer. If the dealer doesn't know there are satellite television systems available for RV vehicles, they won't sell them. It's as simple as that."

A measure of whether dealers see value in the seminars can be seen in the fact that close to 230 dealers attended the sessions during this year's week-and-a-half schedule.

Roba adds that the type of group training espoused by the rep firm "is especially beneficial because it gets the dealer out of his shop and away from distractions. At the same time, there are great networking opportunities as they meet with other dealers and often end up finding solutions for shared problems."

If those are benefits for dealers and ultimately for customers, Roba adds, there are obvious paybacks for his firm. "Sure, we lose a lot of sleep. And there are the expenses and time. But what results is that our reputation now pre-

“Principals see how well we work as a team to get their products to market.”

PHOTO (RIGHT):
(LTO R) Brian and John Roba.



PHOTO (BELOW):
A John D. Roba and Associates presentation in Albany, NY.



cedes us. Because of the efforts we put forth, we’re now viewed by our customers and principals as the product experts and solution providers. Whenever a question comes up, they seek us out for answers.”

He adds that “through these and other efforts, principals see how well we work as a team to get their products to market.”

PART II On the Road Again

Fran Pollart, Pollart Electrical Sales, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is another rep who takes his products to market by “hitting the road.”

What Pollart has done is literally take his message on the road — just like Roba — but in this case he makes use of a 28-foot trailer populated with more than 35 Plexiglas panels, showcasing products from 19 different factories.

Pollart explains that his effort and the work done by EMS, which appeared in the February issue (PAGE 32) of **Agency Sales**, “serve as examples of the proactive steps that manufacturers’ reps will take when it comes to marketing their manufacturers’ products. Reps continue to exert this type of effort at the same time that many factories have drastically cut back the work of their marketing departments. We, as reps, have added the role of marketer to the traditional sales effort. We’ve done this at the same time that our commissions have been cut, or otherwise adjusted, to meet competitive situations.”

“Because of the efforts we put forth, we’re now viewed by our customers and principals as **the product experts and solution providers.**”



PHOTOS:
A peek inside Pollart Electrical Sales' 28-foot trailer.

FAR LEFT: Outside, looking in.
LEFT: View from the back.
ABOVE: Interior panel, detail.

The rep continues that his road show effort — which included 42 stops last year and 55 this year — was undertaken notwithstanding the considerable cost. “Sure, the trailer cost me \$40,000, not to mention the expenditure of personnel and time, but it’s something I felt would provide a long-term benefit.”

Branding the Agency

A major benefit — even if it can’t be seen right away — is the contribution the trailer makes to the agency’s ongoing branding effort. “I’ve had other reps ask me what my return on investment is,” he says. “My response is that it’s not just about dollars and cents. This effort lets me brand myself in the territory. Customers get to know who I am and can identify the products and services I provide. It’s all about branding.”

The trailer isn’t the only step Pollart took to build his brand. “Over the last few years it had been strongly hinted to me by several of my principals that a greater effort should be made to develop business among end-user customers (e.g., contractors). We have five salespeople who are constantly on the road dealing with distributors. To ask them to spend time with contractors could prove to be problematic and counter-

productive. I don’t know how wise it would be to take them so far out of their comfort zone. So, what we did was go out and hire an end-user salesman who promotes brand preference as he calls contractors.”

Pollart adds that hiring the contractor salesperson and purchasing the trailer were done with no financial backing from principals, “but what it shows principals is that we’re more than willing to do whatever it takes to develop the market for their products. At the same time, it shows customers we are here to meet their needs.”

He adds that the reaction from both principals and customers has been extremely positive. “The reaction to our efforts has been very gratifying. Whether the venue has been hospitals, refineries, schools or distributorships, people have been blown away.”

Pollart says that reactions among principals have been mixed. “Manufacturer personnel who are removed from the street don’t necessarily get it. Even if we send them pictures from one of our stops, they don’t grasp the concept. With regional sales and marketing people, it’s a different story. They understand the thinking behind the effort and appreciate how it benefits them.” ^{AS} _{III}

EDITOR’S NOTE: The sales and marketing efforts of these two rep firms are hardly unusual. A point made by several reps, however, is that principals either aren’t aware of the extra efforts reps expend on their behalf, or they don’t completely appreciate the effort. So that our readers might be made aware of extra efforts reps have taken to bolster the marketing efforts of their principals, please communicate details to **Agency Sales Magazine** editor, Jack Foster, at jack@fostercommunications.org. And, we’ll be sure to communicate your efforts to our readers.

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