



One Rep's **TRAVELS AND TRAVAILS** Through The **HIGH-TECH WORLD**

BY JACK FOSTER

This isn't your grandfather's profession. As a matter of fact, given the way technology has altered the way the independent rep performs his job, this isn't even your father's profession.

With even the most cursory view, everything from the (now out-dated) fax machine, cell phone and its various "I" iterations, the Internet, video conferencing and rapidly evolving PCs and laptops, the grandfather of today's rep would probably think the rep's job can now only be performed from the deck of the Starship Enterprise. While that's not exactly the case, the fact remains, today's rep's job has evolved — and continues to evolve — to the point where it's a little bit like trying to board a fast-moving train. If there is any doubt to those words, consider the career experience of one long-time rep who has done his best to jump on that train before it builds up a full head of steam.

When asked what it was like for a rep “way back when” before the rep had all these modern high-tech tools to work with, Gary Brusacoram, CSP, CPMR, recalls that “When it came to selling in the 1970s, it was a little like Selling 101. What you’d have to do is make your plan, and then work the plan. Any interruptions to your plan were fairly negligible because everyone didn’t have instant access to your time like they do today.”

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Gary Brusacoram (standing) and Pete Moravec, Director of Purchasing, Industrial, at 2nd Wind Exercise.

Where Has All the Time Gone?

Time, or the lack thereof, is one of the key talking points Brusacoram, Brusacoram USA, LLC, Eden Prairie, Minnesota, drops into the conversation. “Back then folks would ask how much time we put in to get the job done. I’d tell them I was down to half days and six days a week. They’d respond: ‘Man I wish I would have had a job like yours just working half days.’ What I meant to explain was the last time I looked, 12 hours was half a day, and that’s what it took to do the job properly.

“The professional agency salesperson, working in either the city or country, regularly made their phone call appointments, scheduled the time, sampled for the trip and the individual customer and hit the market. Some of us that ran up as many as 45,000 to 50,000 miles annually knew where every pie shop and roadside telephone or the best customer lobby was located. Once there, we just got in line — there were folks ahead of you waiting for that phone. We were *talking* to the office regularly.”

He recalls that factory communications were easier years ago because “The managers were — to a greater extent — company owners. They understood their products and their industry, not to mention the value of your (the rep’s) time and relationships. Call reports were not asked for, because we — the salesperson — spoke with the factory managers regularly as part of doing business. Stock orders were written on Thursday and Friday. If you were there, they were yours — except for the bulb, gear, lighting and control lines. There were very few franchised products lines. The KISS (Keep It Simple Stupid) concept began to disappear with the advent of the fax machine and the first computer. KISS was replaced with ADAPT!”

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Challenge Or No Challenge?

Given the fact that fax machines, computers and everything else high tech is so common today, is the reps’ job now more or less challenging?

According to this veteran rep, “The challenge is much greater; expectations are greater. For instance, immediate response time is demanded. But it isn’t the technology that has brought this about, it’s the total misuse of these

great tools. In the 'CYA' world in which we operate, the e-mail forwards and replies stack up like spaghetti when the appointed decision makers are not capable or refusing to make decisions. We can pick on technology all day — the over use of the PowerPoint presentations, land lines (still), marginal face-to-face, person-to-person communications. And that's not all. There are the processes that we have to contend with: the account that sends a daily programmed expedite on different orders (time lost); there's the account that still doesn't do EDI (time lost). And, then there's the 'Time Bomb' such as 'enhanced, new, computer pricing formats.' The warehousing agents have a whole set of processes they could expound upon. The sales function and the dollars earned and needed to bring the expected sales are being exponentially strained by the need for inside agency staffing to manage the business."

What's a rep like Brusacoram — or any rep for that matter — to do to get up to speed so he can jump on that fast-moving technological train?

"Depending upon your technological acumen," he maintains, "it's not as tough as it might appear. Actually, it's just a business budget item each year. Sure it's expensive, but that's just being in business. It doesn't matter if you are the one- or two-person agency with the office in the car, or the 20-50 person agency. You have to accept that you are in a time-demanding business. It's up to the rep to run it like one or suffer the consequences. The latest technology is a boon if properly initiated. One thing is for sure, if the decision maker within the agency or business isn't convinced of the need to stay ahead technologically, the rest of the agency falls way behind."

There comes a time, however, when the rep must



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take proactive steps in order to get up to speed with today’s tools. The question remains, where does the rep in need go for assistance?

“I’d maintain that help is literally just around the corner,” offers Brusacoram.

“Just ask another businessperson whom they use for their technological assistance.

“Or, how about joining a rep association (e.g., MANA, NEMRA, ERA). Go to their meetings or join a Best Practices Group.

“Go to a business school like CPMR at ASU

“Become an industry advocate, get involved with your peers and get your brain in gear — you should know what you have to do to stay in tune.

“Finally, an involved and better manufacturer will willingly assist their rep sales force with ideas, maybe even dollars for developing a technological process that can help both in their daily business.”

While it might be difficult to identify any real drawbacks to the technological world in which we operate, Brusacoram offers one warning: “The greatest potential drawback a changing/growing technology presents to the rep is the temptation to sit in front of the computer screen too much. Falling prey to that temptation results in the benefits of the high tech that we’re referencing being sacrificed. At the same time, we wind up accommodating the lowest-common denominator in the daily processes — the outfit with the slowest computer. On top of that there are far too many fiefdoms within an industry, and many insist on doing things their way and their way only. This

might not apply to a direct sales force but it sure does in the agency business. There are agencies accommodating two or more systems — we adapt — we comply — we make it work.”

High Tech = High Touch

Finally the question remains “Does high-tech allow the rep to maintain the high-touch he needs to do his job well?” Brusacoram answers that question when he says: “Do ‘techie’ love high tech? At the same time, high touch remains almost what it used to be. Manufacturers have relegated what they call their ‘High Touch’ with their key accounts to a Marketing Group or Association conference, once a year.

“I’d advise this to the manufacturer and the rep: Clearly identify the customer. Get out from behind that screen and go see that who — that somebody who’s in your business loop. I am dismayed by all the managers I see sitting behind their screens and then complaining about business. Go find a new prospect, sell something, make a call with your personnel, pump them up. Get an attitude for success.

A sixth grader can read sales totals and we already know there is a ‘New Normal.’ Yes, the professional rep is in the high-touch business. That high-touch ability remains just one of many elements that are their strengths and that’s why they remain the most efficient, productive way to go to market.” 

