

The perfect regional sales manager in the eyes of a rep

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Do you wake up with kissing-sweet breath and singing a happy tune? Guess what—neither does your regional sales manager. Do you really care for whom Bill Clinton is lusting? Guess what—neither does your RSM. Now that I’ve established that you and your RSM have some things in common, let’s explore what makes them tick and their place in our business lives.

I am absolutely convinced that most principals (suppliers) go to great lengths and expense to be as perfect as possible and that means trying to hire the perfect regional sales manager. As a manufacturers’ representative, I have had the privilege of working with some very talented RSMs in the past as well as the present. Most representatives have had RSMs who set a fine example for their staff and present a professional image to our customers. The problem is that reps and distributors can’t get enough of a good thing—great RSMs. The perfect RSM is a solid businessperson and has an understanding of the industry and the products they sell. Perfection would mean the RSM can also function as an FAE (field application engineer), and some do. But most important of all, they are **great communicators**.

So why is the RSM one of the most maligned positions in our industry? This article will explore the issue and, if anything, will serve to exalt the position—one that has been the pathway for many of our industry leaders. One of the problems is that some manufacturers regard the position as a stepping-stone for advancement, while others recognize the importance of this truly important function. The most perfect of principals recognize the enormous value of professional RSMs and provide continual challenges and financial growth. Incidentally, if you think you have a lousy RSM, don’t blame the individual

-blame their employer (or boss). There is no place for RSM bashing in this article. Besides, I’m tired of hearing it!

RSM HOME BASE

Should the perfect RSM be located in the field or at the factory? Who cares as long as they get the job done? There are times when we wish RSMs could leave their desk and fill an order or fix a production problem. Like it or not, there are other people paid to do those jobs. Correcting inefficiencies in operations and production is not part of the RSM’s responsibilities. If they get involved, it is a sign of bigger problems. Near perfect RSMs are known to get results from their home office, the factory or while using a rep’s cell phone (a little levity). Conscientious RSMs do their thing 24/7/365 and—yes—even on vacation! Don’t you just love the exceptional ones?

TERRITORY VISITS

Perfect RSMs plan their visits to rep territories and convey their goals in advance. They provide their rep with at least four to six weeks notice. They



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only visit with a purpose and goal in mind. They do pre-call planning and post-call reviews. The perfect RSM even sends you a copy of his trip report, presuming the perfect principal requires one. It spells out the action items for all involved parties. Most importantly, it spells out a candid critique of the call—the good, bad and ugly. He or she solicits opinions as well as gives them. The perfect RSM doesn’t make any pretenses of being technical if he does not have the expertise. They utilize the talents of FAEs or the in-house design engineers. They truly respect their rep’s time even if the customer brings up other lines.

MONTHLY REPORTS

Perfect RSMs request monthly reports only when they intend to read them! They treat these reports as “action items” and not simply reference material. The same applies to the numerous reports that are solicited by RSMs, which include:

- Monthly activity report
- Monthly forecast
- Annual forecast
- Quote status reports
- Sample status reports
- Lead status reports
- Conference calls follow-up

All of the aforementioned reports serve a valid purpose when they are read and acted upon. If they are not, they are simply non-productive and a waste of time and energy. They take away many precious hours that salespeople could spend on selling and planning. The perfect RSM understands this and tries to maximize a salesperson’s valued inventory — **selling time!** Incidentally, the perfect principal makes sure their RSMs and reps have all the reports they need to track quotes, samples, orders and even reconcile commissions (including splits).

PETER PRINCIPLE

This is a touchy area. It relates to why some RSMs are not respected as much as they should be. Some principals consider RSMs to be a critical component of their success and want stability in that position. Others promote, transfer or appoint staffers from inside support functions (including customer service) to the challenging position of RSM. Sometimes they lack the experience and education to perform an effective job, but their em-

ployer doesn't make a change to best suit their ability—hence the **“Peter Principle.”**

I, personally, view the RSM as the reps “go to guy” or champion. They can help drive the opportunity to fruition and push their colleagues to resolve problems. Good RSMs are worth their weight in gold. Are there perfect RSMs? No, but they strive to be—just like reps, distributors and principals.

COMMUNICATIONS

Perfect RSMs communicate effectively with their management on behalf of the customer, distributors and the representative. They welcome a challenge—both opportunities and problems. They see themselves as facilitators who work in the best interest of all supply chain partners. They understand the fine line of doing what's best for their employer, and the customer. They make sound business decisions after they collaborate with the rep or direct salesperson, as well as the customer, distributor and their own management. Perfect RSMs communicate verbally as well as document issues in writing. Perfect RSMs immediately advise reps of problems at the factory. This relates to quality issues as well as late deliveries. They are amenable to contacting the customer if it seems appropriate. Being a good communicator is one of their strongest assets.

“REP PUSHERS”

Would you believe that I know a sales manager who refers to his RSMs as “Rep Pushers”? What a thoughtless and derogatory term! Obviously, he has little respect for professional regional sales managers and even less for manufacturers representatives. Can you imagine the picture that this sales manager paints of RSMs and reps to the management of his company? If you are a principal who thinks the primary purpose of your RSM is to “push reps,” I feel sorry for you, your RSMs and your reps. If you have the right reps, they don't need pushing. The right rep needs to collaborate with sharp and professional RSMs. As far as I'm concerned, the term of “rep pusher” means “rep intimidator” and true professionals don't use this approach for motivation. Surely this is not the picture of the perfect RSM!

REP ADVOCATE

The perfect RSMs maintain a pro-rep attitude. They view reps as part of their own team and promote their value

as a “cost effective” outsourced sales function. They view their reps as professional partners, not peddlers. They never denigrate the value of the rep function, even if they are disappointed with one of their reps. If a customer wants to be a “house account,” they are not hesitant to point out the sound economics of the “outsourced field sales” function. The perfect RSM tries to preserve the integrity of rep commission rates, just as they do their own compensation program.

MANAGEMENT SKILLS

The perfect RSMs effectively communicate a litany of important sales criteria items to their sales force teammates. This includes:

- Corporate Plans
- Territory Goals
- Growth Goals
- Target Accounts
- Design Wins and more

The perfect RSM allows the reps the freedom to manage their own territory and gets involved with problems and priorities. They can also conduct effective product training sessions for reps and distributors.

DISTRIBUTION

Perfect RSMs communicate all matters of distribution to the field, including corporate goals. They don't view distributors as a customer, but as a viable conduit to the marketplace. They perceive and treat distribution as a valued supply chain partner. They facilitate strong distributor/rep relationships if they don't already exist. They understand the value of distribution and promote its virtues. Perfect RSMs do not play “distributor favorites,” but rather what's best for the OEM.

REVIEWS

Often the perfect RSM is chartered with the responsibility of quarterly, semi-annual or annual rep reviews. Are they productive? They are only as good as the perfect RSM makes them. Performance should be reviewed – **both ways!** Rep sales performance versus forecast or quota can be done via telephone. Open quote reviews can be done via e-mails or reports. When gauging rep performance, the perfect RSM is mindful that one year does not make a trend.

BEST AVAILABLE RSM?

I've often wondered if the perfect principal truly understands the value of

a great RSM. Do they search for the most talented people or do they recruit (in football terms) a low round draft pick? Bear in mind, however, lower round picks cost less, but typically need more training and polish. The perfect principal doesn't just recruit a good athlete (person), but looks for the **exact match**. Matters of IQ and adaptability are a given. Unfortunately, very few manufacturers have spelled out an RSM **job description**. I believe that this is the single most important reason so many RSMs are criticized – **they were never told what is expected of them**. Sad, but very true! Very few manufacturers assess their RSMs versus expectations. Their bosses seldom consult with the field for feedback from reps and direct personnel. They should (in a tactful way).

SUMMARY

The perfect RSM, in many people's minds is similar to **“big foot.”** Both are mythical and everyone is trying to find them. I'm here to tell you that you'll find a great RSM long before **“big foot”**. The problem is that multi-talented people swiftly move through the corporate ranks. It takes a keen eye and some thought to say. “There goes an outstanding RSM, who is destined for greater things.” They deserve the promotion and hopefully will train their replacement to be as good, if not better than themselves. I salute professional RSMs and their employers, who recognize them as a high power engine that helps develop and drive the sales process.

The perfect RSM promotes mutually profitable relationships and ethical standards of behavior between the representative, his principal and their mutual customers. He conducts himself in the best interest of the supply chain and the ultimate customer.