

WARNING: Reading this article may subject you to a whole new perspective and new found respect for today's professional representative

Fourth in a Series

The perfect rep in the eyes of the industry

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Reps are passionate, and I'm not referring to their sex life! I found that spouses of representatives often state that their mate is married to their job - IT'S THEIR PASSION and I believe that this is what separates the entrepreneurial rep from the direct selling force. I see great spirit in the rep community. I see fire and desire. I see emotion that drives an entire team. Is there any wonder that so many reps have a jealous spouse? Reps truly love their jobs and the challenges they present. Ideally, they balance their passion between business and family.

If reps were perfect, they could join their mythically perfect supply chain partners-manufacturers and distributors-to form a team of mythical super heroes. Unfortunately, all three entities are far from perfect. But reps, like manufacturers and distributors, have come a long way in perfecting their professional skills while building strong organizations.

All reps are entrepreneurial "risk takers" and should also be recognized as being among the industry's multi-talented individuals. That's not because they "wanna be," but more importantly *they have to be!* Just think about it; most manufacturers and distributors have a stable of specialists - VPs for this and VPs for that.

The manufacturer's representative typically is his own multi-functional, multi-tasking, multi-lined, multi-pressured, multi-alarm fireman. This doesn't make him perfect, but it does point out that the rep field sales function is every bit as demanding as any of the other supply chain partners. It also brings to light that the good ones are extremely talented. You may think that

this is a bold and brazen statement, but stop and think about it. Reps are typically small by their nature and yet they have to be proficient in a plethora of skills such as being:

- Productive salespeople
- Professional managers
- Skilled sales managers
- Talented marketing managers
- Market development managers
- Technology experts
- MIS managers
- Finance managers
- Business plan makers
- Forecasters
- Budgeters
- Report creators
- Sales meeting presenters
- Contract analysts
- Line acquirers
- Networkers
- Good hosts and entertainers

-and a myriad of other stuff. Am I exaggerating? I wish I were. Most reps will tell you that there isn't enough time in their day. They'll also state that they are fierce competitors trying to

perfect all of the aforementioned skills.

Did I leave out "consultants and advisors?" How silly of me. That's another calling for reps, who are honored by being asked to serve on "Rep Councils." I think they're great, but to do it right takes prep time and smarts, not to mention another precious weekend away from family, friends, hobbies and relaxation. Don't get me wrong-this writer loves helping principals develop more perfect:

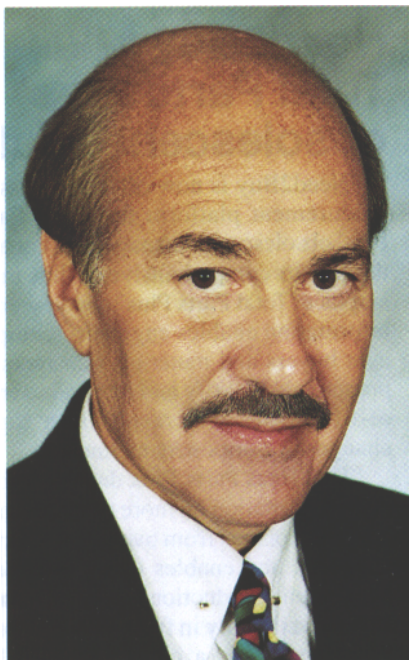
- Marketing programs
- Incentive programs
- Performance analysis
- S.W.O.T. review
- Great sales meetings
- Better training tools
- Performance standards
- New products
- Registration programs
- Split commission tracking
- Advertising ideas

If you think this is a long list, remember that many reps are chartered with educating and motivating their network of competing franchised distributors, which brings to mind that they have to be diplomatic politicians-especially on sensitive, competitive distributor business issues. Like distributors, they don't want to offend or upset any of their supply chain partners -*and this is not easy!*

LIMITED LINE COUNT

Some naive industry colleagues believe the perfect rep firm should have only one line (principal) for which they capture 100% market share. In the eyes of the imperfect manufacturer, the rep will work for minimal commissions and the imperfect distributor will expect 100% of the business to be referred to him. Please stop laughing and I'll come back to the world of reality.

Today's rep really does want a limited, synergistic line card for which he can generate a reasonable income and comfortable life style. Additionally, all reps want fair and stable commission rates and no "house accounts." The lower the rates, the more lines a rep is subject to have. The perfect principal understands this aspect of the rep business. The perfect rep does not take on more lines for the sake of it, but only out of necessity. When he takes on additional lines, they are always synergistic with existing principals.



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TIME SHARE/MIND SHARE

The perfect rep creates the feeling that each principal is his most important line and receives the majority of his time. Minimally, each line does receive its "fair share." Perfect reps allocate time for each principal on every sales call and thoroughly pre-plan appointments with key decision makers. They are mindful of selling more than just products. They track and communicate all "design wins" and losses. They invite principals into the territory when there is a major opportunity or problem. The perfect rep is pro-active and not just reactive. They are time management experts – *they have to be!* The perfect rep has a perfect understanding of R.O.T. (Return on Time). Time is the rep's only inventory and each hour must be allocated wisely.

COMMUNICATIONS

Why is it that the most common thread of imperfection has always been "communications?" This applies to suppliers (principals), distributors and representatives. The irony is that we now have the best communication technology the world has ever seen, but keep in mind that imperfect people are chartered with the responsibility of using and maintaining it.

The perfect rep is the ultimate communicator. He provides prompt responses to customers, principals and distribution partners. He submits reports and forecasts in a timely manner. His phone is answered by people who care and voicemail is only used during off hours. He has ample landlines, cell phones, pagers and the soon-to-be-obsolete fax machines. He fully utilizes e-mail and documents everything. The perfect rep informs his partners of problems and issues as they happen and does not wait to document issues and problems in monthly reports. His entire team communicates, although he uses his inside staff for details while conserving precious selling time for the outside sales team.

FACE-TO-FACE

The perfect rep recognizes the importance of e-mail as a communications tool, but doesn't lose sight of the importance of direct, face-to-face contact. This applies to interacting with all supply chain partners—especially *customers! Rapport and strong relationships are developed over a desk, not over cyberspace.* The perfect rep realizes that passion and enthusiasm for

their products cannot be effectively conveyed via a cold e-mail transmission. Nothing takes the place of "pressing flesh" (handshake) when it comes to assuring a customer that they'll get the right product or service on time and perfect (we hope). Electronic Data Interchange was never intended to reduce face-to-face interaction, but rather as an effective tool to expeditiously process orders and information. It makes salespeople better informed and more efficient.

HIGH-TECH REPS

Like it or not, today's perfect rep is a high-tech organization with slick software systems that track opportunities, have account management, sales analysis, create RFQ's, quotes, sample requests and even do data basing. If you don't have it yet—think about it! If you don't get it—shame on you! If you don't care—you're in the wrong business! If I sound harsh, sorry – but this is the 21st Century and the era of the computer. If you don't know what I'm writing about, your electric company may have already turned off your lights.

SELLING PRODUCTS VERSUS RELATIONSHIPS

The perfect rep in the 21st Century will primarily focus on selling relationships and secondly offer product solutions. Product knowledge is easily accessible from the Internet and ironically reps are no longer essential to disseminate product information. The perfect rep understands and masters account culture and has strong relationships with the "movers and shakers." He has a clear view of his own relationships and that of competition. In regard to products, he has a firm grasp of his competitors' advantages as well as his own. *He remembers that products become obsolete and relationships last forever.*

"CAN DO" ATTITUDE

The perfect rep believes that he is in control of his own destiny, even though he is *interdependent* on his principals. He does not have frivolous excuses for losing the business, but a "game plan" to win it the next time. He feels that he is in command of both his business and personal life. He is keenly aware of his limitations and takes responsibility for his actions. He sets goals and has a strategy to achieve them. He collaborates with distributors, principals and customers. He does not try to control them—only influence them in the best

interest of all parties.

ADVOCACY

The perfect rep is the ultimate advocate for his principals. He tells and sells their customers on the fact that their imperfect principal is indeed "*perfection personified.*" Is this a bad thing? No, that's precisely what professional reps are paid to do. Is it BS? No, especially if the sales rep has the strength of his convictions. The perfect rep also promotes and advocates distributor participation in as many transactions as possible. The perfect rep understands the distribution function as well as his own. However, the rep should receive the same degree of advocacy from the distributor and principal as he gives. It's called reciprocity, or more simply stated – *mutual respect!*

LOYALTY

There doesn't seem to be as much loyalty in our great industry as there was in the past. Relationships are seemingly not as important as the "bottom line"—*not good!* The perfect "super heroes" are truly loyal and respectful to their supply chain partners. Open and honest relationships must be promoted, honored and valued. Good business ethics must be the Standard Operating Procedure. Perfect reps realize that in order to thrive they must strive to work together and build solid and loyal partnerships.

LINE CONFLICTS

The perfect rep has no line conflicts, but in the real world minor conflicts occur. Nonetheless, conflicts develop due to product line expansion of some principals. The perfect principal understands these situations and does not make major issues of minor conflicts. Major conflicts obviously have to be dealt with in a non-emotional, businesslike manner. The perfect rep reports line conflicts, regardless of degree, as soon they happen. The perfect principal is reasonable and does not over react. There is never a question of integrity regarding product line conflict with the perfect rep.

MARKET AWARENESS

Just because the rep resides in his own territory doesn't mean he has market awareness. However, the perfect rep has a keen knowledge of where to sell his principals' products. He knows the potential *total available market* and the *served available market*. The perfect rep maintains a data-

base of this information to share with his perfect partners—principals and distributors. I hasten to add that the reverse is also true in a perfect business world. The marketing trio doesn't keep secrets—they share their "marketing awareness."

THE ALL STAR STAFF

The perfect rep has an all-star team—that means each team member is perceived as the very best in their prospective marketplace or account. Their principals and customers view them as "*the best*" and wish they employed the same caliber of individuals. They are respected throughout the industry and sought after by competition. The perfect rep is humble, competent and confident. They are all-stars on the business front as well with family, community and their religious faith. To that point, they are honest and ethical to a fault.

SUPPLY CHAIN LOGISTICS

Distributors and manufacturers have requirements that are becoming a major focus of electronic commerce and supply chain planning. The question is, "Does that include the representative?" I say yes! The perfect rep should be able to plug into the principal's sophisticated EDI systems and provide instant customer support functions, as well as application and design assistance. If representatives don't provide this service, then distributors will clearly have more "account influence."

SUCCESSION

The perfect rep plans for succession—not too early and not too late. The principal/owner of the perfect rep firm has hired people with the "right stuff," who are capable of taking the organization forward after his retirement. If he made the correct choices, the agency will continue to grow and flourish. If he made the wrong choices, the destiny is clear—they will flounder and perish. The perfect rep firm principal/owner prepares successors with education like Certified Professional Manufacturers' Representative training.

NEGOTIATING

The perfect rep must master the skill of negotiating. This means with their principals as well as their customers. Most reps are proficient in their selling skills, but sometimes fall short on the important matter of negotiating. This especially applies to contracts and

commission rates. Remember Chester Karrass' mantra, "In business you don't get what you deserve, you get what you negotiate." The perfect rep remembers this and is not negatively predisposed. He presents himself as a professional businessman and not just a salesman.

PRODUCTIVITY

Last, but certainly not least, perfect reps are the exceptional performers. They have spectacular selling skills. They get to the ultimate decision maker and make the perfect presentation for the perfect product and service that they sell. They personify professionalism. They overcome objections and ultimately close the sale at a price that the customer feels is fair and makes their principal happy. What more can you ask? *The obvious!* The perfect rep has perfect principals, who will ship perfect products on time thru perfect distributors.

SUMMARY

As business people, we all realize that if we do not continue to improve we fall behind. Personally, striving for perfection is my goal. Have you given any thought to how imperfect you and your company may be? This author, albeit imperfect, strives to be the perfect rep.