

The Ultimate Multitaskers

Making sales calls and dealing with customer problems are all in a day's work for independent manufacturers reps.



THROUGHOUT MY CAREER I'VE ALWAYS had a great deal of contact with manufacturers reps. Early on I thought their job was a piece of cake—they had no inventory, no receivables and no employees—but that perception was definitely distorted. I soon learned that the best reps are among the hardest-working people in the industry. Much more than road warriors, they spend a good part of their long day juggling the needs of their manufacturers and accounts. That's why they're what I consider to be the ultimate multitaskers.

Don't believe me? Then check out a rep's typical day, as explained by Bob Furstenberg, a retired salesman who most recently carried the bag for Greg Dawson and Associates in Northern and Southern California:

"Generally, my day would begin by 6:30 a.m. with the processing of all orders via e-mail or fax from the previous day. Orders were always processed the same day or the next morning, at the latest. I would simultaneously begin to work with my manufacturers to elicit deals and promotions for key customers, some of whom I might actually be planning to see that day. While most of my manufacturers had some sort of monthly or quarterly promotions, others didn't. Many manufacturers simply lacked a promotion that worked for a particular, unique account. As a result, much of my morning consisted of hammering out deals for the day's or week's clients. Additionally, I would work with credit managers to resolve held-order issues and gather information to facilitate release of orders. The calls I couldn't finish prior to leaving the house—typically by 9 a.m.—I would do via cell phone. While in my car I was always on the phone—about 2,500 minutes per month.

"Morning appointments in the Bay Area began around 10 a.m., but I could meet with certain L.A. distributors as early as 8. At the clients I'd check e-mail via my wireless laptop to handle any matters that might have come up and discharge them ASAP to prevent them from piling up. Morning and afternoon, I'd also check in with the office and respond to about 25 voice mails per day. Distributors and manufacturers both appreciated this timely response to their needs. I knew that inas-

much as manufacturers appreciated the business, they accorded nearly as much value to service and attention to detail.

"The day would conclude with my final sales call ending at about 6 p.m., followed by a brief dinner and a solid two to three hours in my home office processing orders and documenting opportunities and problems to both build new business and protect existing business. An average workday, including Saturday and Sunday, generally consisted of 14 to 15 hours. In terms of percentage of time, a typical day could be broken down this way: sales calls, 40%; resolution of credit issues, 5%; travel, 15%; sales planning and marketing, 20%; order processing, 10%; and working shows, 10%."

As you can see, there's a lot more to repping than making sales calls. To get a closer look at what being an independent salesperson in the beauty industry is all about, I recently surveyed a group of reps from around the country: Todd Smith and Joe Gebbia, both of whom cover the Southeast for The Kirschner Group; Alan Aronson, the longtime Gerry Udell rep who is now part of The Kirschner Group's new Northeast operation; Cathryn Haines, president of Elite Sales & Marketing, a relatively new sales organization covering the Western states; Mark Richman, a sales associate in the Northeast with CFN Sales & Marketing; Ted Fishman, president of Ted Fishman and Associates, the Midwest rep organization that has been servicing the multicultural marketplace for many years; and John Lucy, who heads up the Van Nest Coleman West organization. In addition to making account calls, here are some of the other aspects of their jobs:

Todd Smith lists the following activities as normal parts of his day: collecting accounts receivable, handling returns, working on shelf management, running sales meetings, contributing to product development and design, resolving shipping problems, working customers' trade shows, and serving as a mediator between account and factory.

Cathryn Haines spends time managing the six sales associates in her group and processing their commissions; mailing product literature and samples to her reps and prospective accounts; and educating accounts on the features and benefits of

her lines. In addition, Elite services a number of clients with hair-accessory racks and cosmetics floor displays, resulting in the need for Haines to custom-design planograms for individual accounts.

Mark Richman performs the requisite sales rep tasks, but also acts as his accounts' financial representative to manufacturers, explaining to them why an account might need higher credit limits or why it's slow to pay. He also spends time moving merchandise from one account to another if a manufacturer is not willing to issue a return authorization.

In his job description, Ted Fishman includes providing a quarterly deal bulletin to all of his direct-buying accounts, and some beauty and barber and OTC accounts that buy through distributors, tracking the status of all orders and providing customers with information on new items, price increases, items going off deal, order forms and POS materials.

Joe Gebbia points out that making a sales call is the second of three steps in the sales process. Step one is preparing for the call, which can include boning up on new items, pricing and promotions; checking on open invoices, current promotion updates, pending sales meetings and upcoming shows; and selecting appropriate items for close-out/inventory reduction pricing. Following the sales call comes step three: processing the order; communicating special shipment requirements, terms and pricing to the manufacturer; handling credit requests, rebates, ad allowances, damages, shipping problems, shortages and customer returns; mailing paperwork to appropriate personnel at all of the companies; and maintaining a good filing system to retrieve details if the communications process breaks down. "The objective is to make the entire process as efficient and hassle-free as possible for the customer," says Gebbia.

What are some of the aspects of your job that manufacturers or accounts might not be aware of?

Aronson: I spend two to three hours every night doing paperwork while the rest of the beauty industry is eating popcorn in front of the TV.

Smith: Reps pay all of their own business expenses. There's no company health insurance or retirement

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plan either. We have to cover it all.

Fishman: Reviewing customer orders and advising accounts of any available quantity buys; verifying pricing and descriptions; providing buyers with information so that they know when to buy at the optimum price; sending out customer mailings so that they're up to date on various lines; trying to reactivate customers who have not purchased anything in a while; running monthly reports on each customer's purchasing volume on every line; and constantly searching out competitive products in the market to keep manufacturers aware of what's hot in the marketplace.

Lucy: A rep cannot wing it and achieve a high level of success. You must prepare for who you're going to see, what you're going to present, and how you're going to effectively show customers how an item or lines will benefit their business. It's necessary to educate yourself on everything from appliances to brushes to nail care to skin care so that you'll be perceived as an expert in each category—and that takes a lot of preparation. Both the customer and the manufacturer look to you to be the one who can handle everything during—and after—that presentation.

A rep, in many ways, is his own company, as he is the sales force, sales man-

ager, marketing manager, administrator, secretary, show coordinator, and so on. We do it all. As a rep, I have mastered the ability to delegate to myself.

How do manufacturers make your job more difficult?

Richman: My pet peeves include manufacturers that don't send promo sheets on a timely basis, which means I have to download and print them prior to sales meetings; not sending product samples with literature; not providing enough lead time

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on bimonthly promotions so that I can present them to accounts early enough to make their flyer print deadlines; and not having a six-month promotional grid that shows the deals that are coming up.

Haines: When manufacturers launch new products long before they're available, it causes a boomerang effect, as the reps' credibility is questioned by the account that places an order and doesn't get it promptly. It also hurts

the manufacturer's reputation. Some accounts don't even remember ordering the item when it finally arrives!

Smith: Making promises to accounts but not keeping them and trying to force a business model or marketing plan that is too rigid is a problem. Politics and procedures vary from account to account, so there's no such thing as “one plan fits all.” Manufacturers need to be adaptable to changes in the market.

Fishman: Most of our manufacturers are very cooperative; however, in some

Aronson: There are times when I feel I care more about the manufacturers' businesses than they do. I get frustrated if they don't give me all the ammunition that I need in the field to do my job properly. Most manufacturers have the information available, but for some reason I feel as if I have to pry it out of them. At times, when business is slow, I also think that most manufacturers aren't as aggressive as they could be. That's the time for coming up with deals and promotions to create reasons to buy, but most of the time they don't react.

instances we don't get deal information on time, or we aren't told if and why orders are being held or the status of back orders. Not receiving point-of-sale materials, which we use as sales tools, or updated advertising information on disks creates problems too. Many customers need pictures and information for their catalogs, and if they don't get them they can't advise their catalog customers about product usage and companion products.

Lucy: Manufacturers that don't listen to their reps, or plan promotions without our input, make things challenging. The beauty business is not a black-and-white industry, and each region has a significant amount of gray area. For example, the West is not the same as the Midwest, due to the different types of customers, yet manufacturers often try to have a nationwide promotion, policy or sales plan. Reps are hired to be the eyes and ears of

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our manufacturers, and yet the feedback we provide will, in many ways, go unused. In my experience, the manufacturers that work with reps and base their business practices upon regional customers have greater, longer-lasting success.

Gebbia: Manufacturers make my job more difficult by creating deal sheets that emphasize salon specials and don't break out distributor deal pricing. That lack of awareness or misunderstanding of the differences in market segmentations impacts the potential sales of their product lines. The varying needs of every account should be addressed on an individual basis to maximize sales.

How do accounts make your job more difficult?

Richman: Not being prepared to place orders when I come in, or not having enough store help to free up the buyer to spend time with me are major hindrances to my ability to do my job.

Haines: The few accounts that don't pay their invoices in a timely fashion are invariably the same ones that call, impatiently wondering why they haven't received their order. It becomes a time-consuming activity to contact the manufacturer and then the account

to explain about the credit hold.

Smith: If you make an appointment and show up but the buyer doesn't have inventory information and is generally not prepared, it makes for a less productive meeting.

Aronson: It's upsetting when an account lies to the manufacturer, saying that I told them to take a deduction or that I told them something that's completely untrue. And it seems that some accounts will say anything to benefit themselves. That's why I take the time to fax copies of all my orders to my accounts—this also helps prevent any mistakes that I might have made. Accounts that can't seem to make a decision during the sales call, or hem and haw and generally waste my time are also annoying.

Lucy: A lack of consideration and respect for our time and efforts is my pet peeve. Reps and accounts sometimes have a love-hate relationship that can penalize one rep for the actions or attitudes of another—guilt by association—but all relationships should be based on what an individual rep brings to an account's business. If something a rep does is not to your liking, communicate it and give that rep a chance to change or correct it. The rep who doesn't correct it is not doing his job.

Reps only benefit if the manufacturer and account benefit first. Also, good reps will know their accounts' type of business and whether or not the lines they represent fit and benefit them. They'll also respect their accounts' business and the efforts they put forth to succeed and grow it.

Gebbia: Reps who allow accounts to take advantage of them can lead to abuse and unrealistic expectations of both the rep and the manufacturer. Instead of partnering up for long-term mutual benefit, that attitude seems to regard both manufacturers and reps as expendable.

Any additional comments?

Hines: With the trend for manufacturers to go to direct sales through telemarketing, it's important for independent reps to be on top of the lines they represent. Lines that are merchandised by reps have a greater chance for increased sales. Reps need to find their niche in this industry and use their sales and marketing skills to be successful. It's ultimately our reputation that wins us good lines, and our relationships with our accounts that secure our sales.

Fishman: The multicultural business is much more competitive today—much more sophisticated—and we have to be

on our toes and do what we can to get the business. Our credo is that we don't promise more than we can deliver, and we deliver more than is expected. We're constantly striving to give our customers and manufacturers the very best service and to keep the lines of communication open.

Richman: The rep's job is so multifaceted that it seems there are never enough hours in the day. There's never a time when a rep can sit back and say, "All my work is done for the day." There's always something left to do. A rep has to try to be everything to everyone, and it's hard to keep everyone happy all of the time. We're constantly moving and keeping busy to stay on top of all of the work that needs to be done. It's hectic, but I love what I do.

The life of a rep is challenging, exciting and rewarding, if you do it ethically with integrity and honesty. Every day is different because you're always seeing different accounts to present your lines. In the eyes of many, the job of a rep can be an easy one; however it's the hardest one in our industry to do right. ■

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