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Getting in Your Reps

The manufacturer representative is sometimes considered a necessary evil. But that doesn't have to be the case.

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By Thom Mullins, CTS

SIR HENRY WOTTON ONCE REMARKED, "AN AMBASSADOR is an honest man sent abroad to lie for his country." A more accurate translation of the original Latin is that he is an "honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country." The former was a deliberate misquote intended to cast aspersions on Wotton's job as British ambassador in Venice, but you can see the obvious differences in meaning between the two quotes. It cost Sir Henry some steady work until he was able to convince the king of the true intent of his words.

From time to time, I receive phone calls from manufacturers looking for a new rep in my neck of the woods. They'll ask me for my opinion of one firm or another or, sometimes, for a list of recommendations of other rep firms that might be a good fit for a particular manufacturer. This can be a dicey conversation, somewhat akin to being asked about the capabilities of a former employee who left under less than stellar circumstances.

So what in the world does this have to do with Sir Henry? It's simple: Manufacturer representatives are the ambassadors of the industry.

I know of some people who cannot be bothered with them. In their opinion, reps are worse than the flea on the hair of the dog that bit you. That opinion is not universally held, however, and for good reasons.

WHEN THEY'RE GOOD, THEY'RE REALLY GOOD

A rep's primary job is to make sure product gets sold. But along the way, reps have to be able to explain how and why a particular product solves a problem or meets a particular need. Much of their time is spent dealing with retail stores, contractors, and system integrators. They must understand their products and their clients well enough to bring the two together at the appropriate time.

The best reps (and we are blessed with some good ones in the great Pacific Northwest) share some common traits. First, they know their stuff. Not only do they understand what markets their gear fits, they understand why and how.

This is more than just knowing where to pull a cut sheet from; it's also about knowing the technical

details of equipment that are important. Is the product apropos to the application? (And not just the equipment, but the technology in general.) Are they pushing line arrays, for example, because that's the latest and greatest Band-Aid or because they understand the problem you're trying to solve and arrays fit? Do they know how their gear will be used, or even more importantly, how it might be used?

Second, they know the limits of their knowledge and expertise, but they also know where to go to get the answer. If they can't answer a question, they'll tell me right away. And if they don't know who to contact, they'll work their tails off to find out who I should be talking to and arrange an introduction. In the process, they improve their technical chops and are able to provide better service to other clients.

Third, they know when to back off and let you make the decision. I've known reps who give me a litany of "where their gear is being used and by whom, which consultant is specifying it, and by the way, this is the monthly special." TMI, as my daughter would say, "too much information."

Primarily I want to know the technical details of a product. Does it provide a good solution to the seemingly intractable problem I'm faced with? I'll get around to price and availability later. It's nice if they can read my mind, but not necessary. After 28 years, I don't expect that of my wife (not all the time, at least, but she comes pretty close), so how can I expect that of a rep? Where a device is being used can provide insight into how I could use it in my application. I really appreciate the rep that provides me with the information I need, lets me make the decision, and respects that decision.

Fourth, reps' understanding of the lay of the land is unique. They have visited a contractor's office and shop; many times the rep has been on site at a project and seen their work. That perspective on contractors in a particular market or geographic area is invaluable. I've been introduced to some really good contractors that I might never have heard of otherwise. If a job I'm doing is in an area I'm not familiar with, my first call is typically to a rep firm I know that covers that region.

Finally, a good rep provides a solid conduit back to the manufacturer for suggestions and complaints. Knowing that someone is listening is vital.

I raise all these issues because I wish I had more phone calls from manufacturers asking about their rep's performance. All too often I hear about a good rep—a great rep even—losing a line after the fact. And while I understand it's a manufacturer's prerogative to hire and fire its personnel, I think there's more to life than the bottom line. How often do reps drop by? How knowledgeable are they? Do they provide useful information and resources, both material and personal, about your line? Are they easy to contact and responsive when you have a question? How do they respond when you ask a question they don't have an answer for immediately? Manufacturers should just ask; most consultants aren't shy about voicing their opinions.

At a time when many manufacturers don't have a consultant liaison who specifically responds to most of these issues, a good rep can fill many needs. I'm not suggesting that manufacturers divest themselves of reps in their dealings with consultants—that would be cutting off our nose to spite our face. I'd rather have a good rep firm than an ineffective consultant liaison.

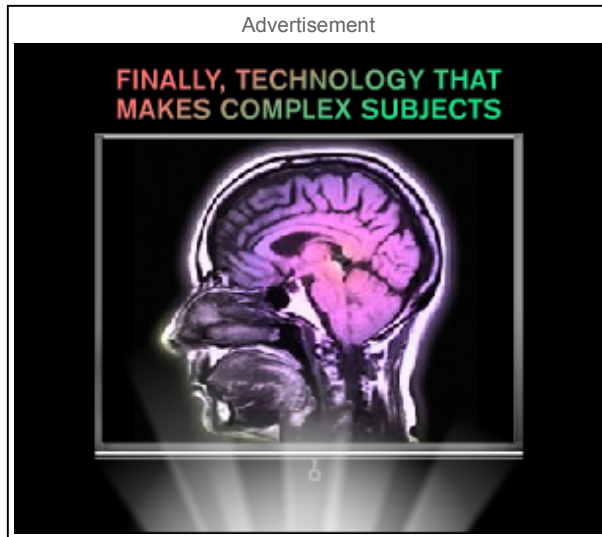
VALUE BEYOND THE DOLLAR

In my final analysis, the value of a rep firm does not lie solely in how much income it generates for a given manufacturer in my corner of the world. Their value goes far beyond that. Losing a good rep can have adverse impacts on your business, too. You have to consider the time it will take to train a new firm and bring them up to speed, as well as the loss of good will from contractors and consultants in the area. I can think of two manufacturers that to my knowledge don't have reps and

have eliminated their consultant liaisons. Those decisions have cost them money because I no longer have access to knowledgeable people who are willing to help me. Without that knowledge, I can't confidently specify their gear.

I'm not looking for an HR job in any firm other than my own, but I would like to remind manufacturers of another quote, this one from William A. Foster. "Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skillful execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives."

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