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Finding Great Manufacturers' Representatives

By [Jack Foster](#)

Given the opportunity to compare notes on how best to attract top rep agencies, manufacturers who participated in a MANAchat held nothing back when it came to describing their experiences.



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With a working title of "Finding Great Manufacturers' Representatives," over the two-day chat 14 manufacturers weighed in with how they found, signed and maintained successful relationships with independent reps.

One of the most effective means employed by one manufacturer was to counsel with some reps that he knew. Here's how he explained his experience: "I met with some retired reps — reps who knew they weren't in the mix for consideration, but just wanted to help me out. What they offered me was information related to what reps expect from a manufacturer. I was able to have them interview me as a prospective partner. Armed with the input from those interviews, I felt I was confident to ask a prospective rep what he was looking for, and then follow up by letting him know that I could provide everything he needed."

This manufacturer added, "Thankfully, one of the reps I spoke with referred me to MANA. I followed his advice, and that's why I'm involved in this chat today."

Finding the Right Rep

If that was one approach to finding representation, some of the other avenues followed included these:

- "We consulted with someone that we trust who had extensive experience in sales. One of the first things he suggested to us is that we join and use MANA. We placed an ad with the association and received responses from five people. We're now in the process of narrowing down our search and we're confident that either of the two remaining agencies will be the right fit for us."
- "Maybe we've simply been lucky, but we're at the point now where we have seven agencies working for us throughout the country. As to how we've settled on those agencies, we've had some people come to us knowing that we're looking for representation; we consulted with our existing rep network for recommendations; and we've had some luck in attracting attention at a number of the industry trade shows that we regularly attend."
- "We've simply reached out to a couple of reps that we were aware of. After our initial conversation one of them agreed that it simply wasn't going to be a good fit. We agreed and parted as friends. We're progressing with a second firm and have had them sign a non-disclosure agreement as we proceed with our conversation."

It was at this point that it was noted that one of MANA's most sought-after and effective services is the association's online RepFinder®.

(Editor's Note: Traditional methods for locating independent reps were described in the August 2020 issue of *Agency Sales* in an article entitled "Searching for Reps" by MANA President/CEO Charley Cohon. In that article five traditional techniques to search for potential reps were described:

1. Search MANA members from the RepFinder® database available to all manufacturer members.
2. Talk to your existing customers in the territory — who would they recommend?
3. Ask your reps in other territories — who do they know in the vacant territory?
4. Put "Rep Wanted" signs in your trade show booths.
5. Build a rep company from scratch by offering a vacant territory to one of your own current employees who is eager to start their own business.)

After chat participants offered information on how they located prospective reps, they were asked to expand upon the question, "Once you locate and speak to them, what attracts you to a prospective rep?"

What Makes a Rep Attractive?

First up, a manufacturer that admitted they were new to working with reps stressed that "We used to employ direct salespeople. But once we trimmed the staff, we began looking for rep partners that would allow us to expand our coverage. Among the characteristics we're seeking would be that the rep have OEM contacts, specifically contacts that we haven't had in the past. In addition to that, anyone we choose to work with must have the type of personality that's positive and enthusiastic. We certainly don't want anyone who is too far over the top, but we want someone who can grab a customer's attention."

A second chat participant offered, "I want to work with reps who are strong in the specific markets we're looking to impact, but in addition we also want someone who can already offer a book of business that would be interested in working with us." He added that it's "mandatory that the rep already represent complementary lines, and finally that they have a website."

Concerning the latter point, it was emphasized that the majority of MANA members do have websites that are regularly updated.

Finally, a manufacturer emphasized that it was important that a "prospective rep already cover the territory that we're looking to impact and possess a thorough knowledge of our product line — and be willing to work hard to promote new products. Having the correct answer to "What added business can you bring us?" is obviously another plus. If they're already dealing with customers that we deal with and they can add business to that account, that's got to be the biggest turn on.

"Bottom line, what we're seeking are reps who possess what I'd call "tribal knowledge." We want them to know what's going on in the territory and be willing and able to communicate that to us."

Operating Virtually

Another chat participant added, "Given the trying times we're working in, it's important that the rep be technically savvy when it comes to communication. For instance, we're all depending to a large degree on virtual meetings these days. I had a prospective rep conduct a Zoom meeting with us. Their time ran out after 40 minutes — and he didn't even know what happened. That didn't impress me too much."

Staying with the subject of a rep's technical ability, the point was made that many reps have been able to complement their face-to-face sales efforts with customers by conducting virtual sales calls. "In the past it was common practice for manufacturers and reps to conduct joint field sales calls. Given travel restrictions, it's the reps who effectively have embraced the practice of conducting virtual joint rep-manufacturer calls that get my attention."

Conversely, the same manufacturers were asked what might turn them off from pursuing a relationship with a rep. On this subject the participants were just as anxious and willing to offer their thoughts. Key among their "turn offs" were the following:

- "If a prospective rep is already representing too many lines, that's a turn-off. That's the first sign that they're not going to be able to give enough attention to my products."

In response to this point, it was emphasized how valuable an agency's website can be. According to one manufacturer, "That's one of the first things you should check when vetting a rep — and generally, the information is right there on their website."

- "If someone's a showboat or who is constantly dancing every time I ask a question, those are sure signs that I want to stay away from them."
- "We're a relatively small manufacturer — that's why using reps is so appealing to us. However, if an agency shows that they're much too eager to take on the line, I'll steer away from them. My past experience has shown me that it's those reps who ultimately won't devote enough time to my line."
- "A willingness and ability to follow up are key considerations for us. We base our sales effectiveness on leads we provide and the quotes that are then generated. If we determine a rep isn't savvy enough to follow up, we're not going to have a lasting relationship with them."
- "Slow response is definitely a turn-off. If we can't get the information we need from our reps in one day, it's not going to work for us."

Taking into consideration all the pluses and minuses of working with reps, perhaps one of the manufacturers explained it best when he said, "What we're seeking is someone who has an eagerness and willingness to sell. On top of that a sense of loyalty to the partnership and an ability to communicate with us are the key attributes we're looking for."

List of MANAchat Participants

MANA wants to thank the following members for their contributions to the "Finding Great Manufacturers' Representatives" *Agency Sales* magazine article. These online virtual meetings create a platform where members exchange information on how to successfully operate their manufacturers' representative businesses. Jack Foster, *Agency Sales* magazine editor, wrote the article using the information and knowledge these members provided during the MANAchats.

Thank you! We sincerely appreciate the time you took to participate in the MANAchats and particularly the information and knowledge you shared.

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MANA welcomes your comments on this article. Write to us at mana@manaonline.org.



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Jack Foster, founder of Foster Communications, Fairfield, Connecticut, has been the editor of *Agency Sales* magazine for the past 23 years. Over the course of a more than 50-year career in journalism he has covered the communications' spectrum from public relations to education, daily newspapers and trade publications. In addition to his work with MANA, he also has served as the editor of *TED Magazine* (NAED's monthly publication), *Electrical Advocate* magazine, provided editorial services to NEMRA and MREFF as well as contributing to numerous publications including *Electrical Wholesaling* magazine and *Electrical Marketing* newsletter.