

DEMAND MORE OF YOUR REP

BY GIDEON HONEYCUTT

Have you ever been hard at work in your office, attempting to put together an important quote for a client, working on payroll, or planning your next business meeting, and in walks one of your sales reps, unannounced and unplanned? Now, instead of doing something productive for your business, you have to spend an hour in pointless conversation that culminates with that rep giving you another calendar you don't need and a writing pen that will fall apart after a handful of uses. Or perhaps it's early spring and you've just finished a long and grueling winter season with too little sleep and not enough profits, and in comes one of your sales reps in a \$100,000 car, wearing a \$20,000 watch to tell you that your sales were down. I experienced both these situations while I worked in retail, along with plenty of others that gave me an overall sour disposition toward sales representatives.

And now, here I am, a sales rep myself.

When I became a rep, I was determined to do things differently (for better or worse) than what I had experienced from the many sales reps I worked with during my time in retail. This, of course, doesn't make me right or wrong—just different. Unfortunately, as I travel around now and see things from a more macro perspective (as opposed to the microcosm of my own world that I operated in during my time in retail), I see many dealers frustrated with their sales reps by the same things that frustrated me. The simple fact is that far too many reps have given the position a stigma similar to that of a used car salesman. The stigma is one of a person who comes around five

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days a year to waste your time, talk about some new products or your sales, and then spend the other 360 days a year collecting a paycheck off the back of your hard work. Of course, this stigma—like most stigmas—is unfair to the majority of hardworking sales representatives in our industry who are doing what they can, but that's how a stigma works: It only takes a few to undermine the entirety of a profession.

To lay out my vision of what a sales rep should be (which, as noted earlier, is neither right nor wrong, but simply my vision), I'll first state what should be obvious but is sometimes misconstrued. A sales representative has a two-way job. The first is to be the sales representative from the manufacturer to you—the dealer—but the second is to be your representative back to the manufacturer. Too many sales reps have a one-lane view of their job; they are the repre-

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representative to you *from* the manufacturer. They tell you about new products, they report when your sales are up or down, they let you know about early buys and special event savings when their boss is pushing it on them, etc. But when you need them to be a representative back to the manufacturer (e.g., helping you with a warranty claim, checking an order status for you, attempting to smooth over a frustrated customer with you, etc.) they give you the 1-800 line and push you off to someone else. A sales rep should be able to handle all of the above. And yes, I am aware that the emphasis in the title sales representative is typically on the word "sales." After all, if we don't sell product, we're out of a job. However, I would submit to you that taking care of the dealer (e.g., by helping when they need technical assistance and are struggling to get through to your technical department, by helping find a product at another warehouse to alleviate a long back order, etc.) is also part of the sales process. If reps want more people to buy from them, they should treat dealers like partners—not obligations.

The culmination of all the ramblings above—and really the thesis of this article—is that reps can do better, and the onus is on you (the dealer) to demand that they do. This could look like a number of things depending on your specific needs. Reps are not monolithic, and neither are dealers. The needs of one dealer may not be the needs of the next, just as the skill set of one rep may not be the skill set of the next. The point of this essay is not to harp on a specific set of criteria that reps should be able to achieve. Instead, it's to encourage dealers to not allow their reps to take them for granted. We are partners—equals.

If I were to now shift gears for a brief moment and take the side of sales reps, I would also encourage dealers to keep us in the loop on how we can help as much as possible. The most frustrating situations for me are not when dealers have problems, but rather when they have problems and I am only brought in at the last possible second when all parties are already frustrated. I understand that a lot of dealers like to leave reps out of situations to avoid "bothering us," and I'm appreciative of the sentiment and the fact that dealers care about our well-being, but it's my job to help solve problems before they escalate—not to work a miracle after they already have. Challenge reps like me to be helpful, then give us the opportunity to do it.

In admittedly unorthodox (and not scholastically acceptable) fashion, I would like to close this brief essay not with a summary of the preceding paragraphs, but rather a call to action for both dealers and reps who may be reading this article. Reps, reach out to your dealers consistently and ask how you can help. Keep tabs on incoming orders as well as you can and try to help walk things through. Call your dealers with unique and fun ideas for events, weekend specials, or ways to grow sales. When you learn something new that helps you in your business, share it with your folks. Dealers, give your reps opportunities to be superstars in the near future. Whatever it is. Helping to get a back-ordered part quicker than expected, calling and introducing them to a customer who just gave you a check for one of their products. Yes, we are busy. But that's the point. I can only speak for myself, but I crave opportunities to help dealers grow their businesses—and I know I'm not the only one.