Some manufacturers’ sales representatives are a valuable asset to a contractor and so sell them equipment they need. Others find themselves unwelcome on the contractor’s premises and subject to a polite but firm “don’t call us, we’ll call you.” This type of rep loses business for a manufacturer as contractors often pay a higher price, even for an inferior product, if they get consistently good service from the manufacturer and its rep.

When we spoke to contractors from around the country about their relationship with salespeople, the results were all over the place, but there were some common threads.

**A Question of Timing**

Timing of calls can make a difference in the relationship. Some contractors only want salespeople to call if they have an appointment. Others don’t mind “walk-ins.”

Many contractors have specific times that work best for seeing reps, running from “Early mornings before things get too hairy” to “The worst time of day is at the very beginning of the day.” No help there. The only common denominator is that most contractors feel the middle of the week is best, and not the very beginning or the end of the day. The responses were so varied that any sales rep would be wise to find out what’s preferred by each customer, rather than simply assuming he’s welcome at any time. The majority prefer to see sales reps by appointment.

For a number of contractors, the “when” depended on the “who.” If it’s one of our regular reps that we deal with all the time, it doesn’t matter when they
come,” points out an estimator in California. “If it’s someone we don’t normally work with, or plan to work with, then they start to get in our way after a while,” he adds.

A contractor from Illinois says, “Certain reps are very sensitive to us and if we say, ‘We can’t see you now,’ they’re out the door and come back in a couple of days. There are others guys who don’t need to be there and yet who show up anyway. It really depends on who it is.”

A Georgia contractor notes a trend toward fewer visits from sales reps. “We’re seeing fewer and fewer salespeople,” he says. “Instead we go through suppliers. You can call them any time and don’t have to chase them down or wait for them to return your call. You create a relationship with a certain person there, and they know your needs and fulfill them.”

The president of an Alabama company says he prefers to order direct. “Rarely are the salespeople who walk in my office the ones I do the ordering with. We prefer to order direct. National Gypsum, for example, has a terrific order-taking system and their salesman, although we’re good friends and he comes by once every month or two to say ‘hello,’ doesn’t need to come by and do a lot with us. He’ll let us know if anything unusual is going on.”

**Snail Mail, E-mail or No-Mail?**

“How do you prefer to receive product information?” was the next question.

The almost unanimous answer was, “Through the mail,” but there were some interesting variations.

If it’s something like a pricing change, then a fax is useful.

Some contractors prefer not to receive unsolicited literature as it just “clutters up the mailbox.” They find out about new products by reading **AWCI’s Construction Dimensions** or other industry publications and then will call for literature or use the Free Advertiser Information card if they want it. Most, however, are happy to receive unsolicited mailings about new products in the industry.

“I have no problem with people sending me information all the time,” says an Iowa contractor. “That’s one way you keep up on new products out there because sometimes you don’t even hear about them otherwise.”

The Internet and e-mail are becoming more popular. “Some of the manufacturers are doing things on an Internet site, and that’s very convenient for us to be able to look at,” notes a contractor from Illinois. “E-mail is becoming a very good way of getting information for us,” he adds.

“We also use the Web sites,” agrees an Indiana contractor, “Especially if we’re searching for something that we’re not familiar with.”

Although many contractors are quite receptive to unsolicited mailings, there is also a sizable percentage that prefers to be sent literature only when they request it. Manufacturers and reps should be aware of this.

**The Power of Knowledge**

How important is it for salespeople to be knowledgeable in all aspects of their
product, including application techniques?

Very. At least 95 percent of those interviewed agreed that it was vital that sales reps know their product. In fact, in many cases, it makes the difference between being willing to talk to them or not. Some ignorance is permissible, however. For example, a contractor on Oahu, Hawaii, says, “As long as they can get me the answer, they don’t have to know it themselves. Some reps, when I start to get a little technical, say ‘Let me refer you to our technical department’ and then, when I’ve got the answer, I go back to sales and we resume where we were. That’s fine.”

A very demanding purchasing agent for an Iowa-based contractor is always willing to cut a new sales rep some slack. “There are some beginners,” he explains. “You understand that and live with it, and as they become more comfortable with their new position, they’re apt to get more business. I was the same way 22 years when I arrived here, so I understand.”

While contractors might be prepared to put up with some ignorance, they won’t tolerate pretense or dishonesty. This from a Jacksonville contractor: “This guy from ‘Manufacturer X’ should be selling cars because he doesn’t know anything about stucco. I listened to him with a smirk on my face when he started telling me about the product. I thought, ‘This guy just read this out of a book.’ The ones that are knowledgeable, especially if it’s a new product or a new way of doing something, we’re willing to spend some time with and listen to.”

When it comes to installation, the rep will have some convincing to do. “It is rare for a rep to be credible about installation techniques,” says an Illinois contractor. “Although some are very knowledgeable because they’ve had specific background in their product. Probably the worst thing is to have a rep come in and try to blow smoke in your face and tell you he knows something about installation. You can tell in the first three minutes if he has no clue what he’s talking about. It’s better for them to say, ‘You know, I don’t know a lot about that but I have another person in my company..."
who does . . . ’ Sometimes you get guys who give you all sorts of opinions about how to do things and how much time it’s going to take, when they really have no clue. It doesn’t speak well for them. Sometimes it is really helpful when you’re dealing with a product that’s new to you if the manufacturer has some people who were involved with other contractors in installations and they can give you some information about that. But to just come in and generically talk about things just wastes time.”

The good news is that the majority of contractors are satisfied with the level of knowledge of most of their sales reps, and know they can count on them for useful information about their products.

The next question we asked was about the sales rep’s knowledge of competitors’ products. Most of the contractors felt that any sales rep worth his salt has a good knowledge of the competition’s products and can discuss specific points of superiority of his own product. They were unanimous in objecting strongly to bashing the competition, as an Illinois contractor summarizes best: “You tend to just blow off the guys who are constantly ripping on their competitors because that’s what they always do. There’s a very serious balance to it. If you have a guy who doesn’t normally do that and he goes out of his way not to rip his competitor, and then he starts to say something about a particular item or circumstance or job and brings up a problem that’s legitimate, you tend to listen.

But just ripping on people all the time is counterproductive.”

A Floridian expresses similar sentiments: “They need to know enough to show that their product line is superior to others—it has a better type of silica sand, for example, whereas a competitor’s might have rust particles that might lead to rusting of the walls. Most people we deal with are pretty professional. They don’t often get into competition-bashing. They’ll give you the benefits of using their product.”

One other point is that no contractor would take a rep’s information about the competition at face value, no matter how useful it was. He would check it out for himself. Some contractors don’t want any
information about competitor products, preferring to find out for themselves.

**Most and Least Wanted from Sales Reps**

Top of the list of “single most important attributes” in sales reps was the willingness to provide service to the contractor. This showed up under various guises. An Arizona contractor says, “When we contact reps for jobs, the stuff has to be there when we need it. If we say it’s needed on a Tuesday and they say ‘OK,’ it can’t be Wednesday.”

From an Alabama contractor: “What’s important is what he can do as far as his pricing, his delivery, his service and how his product will-work. Price is important, but if someone consistently doesn’t deliver, we don’t want that. When I first got into the business, my first responsibility was buying screws. I found the cheapest screw and bought a bunch of them, and they didn’t work. They ended up costing me probably double what the others would have cost because they didn’t work. So your product has got to be right and price isn’t always the most important factor. Getting things delivered on time, and getting what we need the first time so we don’t have to reorder or backorder is really important these days.”
“The most important factor is attention,” says an Illinois contractor. “I would go so far as to say a sincere desire and action to service me as a customer. He’s there when I need him. He’s there in many different aspects, whether it’s in my office, on the phone or taking care of a problem that may happen with the distributor that he works for or whatever the situation is, he’s there, he’s available, he’s working for me. Those are the only guys that are in here. In fact, there’s a distributor that had an exclusive part of my business—was doing a lot of a particular type of supply to me—just lost my business over that very point.

The rep made some claims that they would do certain things and then didn’t do them. It has to do with providing items, pricing, consistency. It all has to do with service—doing what you say you’re going to do.”

And from Indiana: “There’s at least one or two that never call you except when there’s a project on the line, and then they call and try to get their foot in the door. The good ones are always in touch with you on a consistent basis and are very good with the follow-up.”

Next in order of importance is knowledge of their product. “If he’s knowledgeable and can answer my question about the product, that would make me want to talk to him,” says an Alabaman.

Honesty and straightforwardness also ranked high. “Lying is the worst,” says a contractor from Illinois. “All the way through the process from service to pricing to performance to representing manufacturers and saying things about them that they can’t deliver on. I would go a step beyond that to just being dishonest, and that would be the very worst to me. Our whole way of doing business is built on trust, and if that’s not there, I don’t deal with people.”

Friendliness and courtesy are important points for some contractors. A contractor in Hawaii is particularly put off when she receives calls (mostly from the mainland) telling her about these wonderful products that she doesn’t need or want. When she explains she has no use for them no matter what the price, she suddenly finds herself talking to a dead line.

In the case of one big contractor spending a lot of money and not keen to have terms dictated by a manufacturer, the
main requirement of a sales rep is his “willingness to do it our way.”

The least popular attitudes or behaviors are too much pushiness and lying, or some form of dishonesty. A Floridian says: “There’s one rep out there who is just overbearing. He calls up and tells me how much more business they do, and almost demands my receptionist patch him through to me. He’s just overwhelming. I have to tell him, ‘Hey listen, just don’t call here any more.’ Too aggressive.” Fortunately, this type of behavior is not popular.

An Idaho contractor needs sales reps to “look for ways to help us be successful rather than just make a sale. One rep, trying to make a sale to us on a particular project, said to me, ‘I really need you to buy this product from us because I’ve got to feed my kids.’ It was somewhat tongue in cheek, but it just made me feel uncomfortable. I’m not concerned about your personal situation. Tell me how you’re helping my company. I thought that was unprofessional and distasteful.”

“I like the business approach, not the ‘good old boy’ type of attitude,” says a Georgia contractor. “It doesn’t make any difference to me if he’s from Brunswick, Ga., or from Illinois, and a good old slap on the back doesn’t get the job done.”

It’s not really that hard to see what contractors want in a sales rep. Unprofessionalism in any form is unpopular. Honesty, courtesy, friendliness, professionalism, knowledge and service are appreciated. Reps need to look for ways to help the contractor’s business, not make a quick sale. They need to be sensitive to the contractor’s needs and preferences. After all, it’s the contractors who are spending the money, and they do have a choice.

That’s not asking too much. Those sales reps who heed this advice will be rewarded with happy customers and abundant sales. Those who don’t will end up selling secondhand cars.

About the Author
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