

Managing Motivation

Managing sales through independent representatives can present challenges that involve considering the end in mind

STORY BY DAN STALP | PHOTO BY KENNY JOHNSON



Q. *How do you best motivate and manage an independent representative sales force and keep them focused on your product line? In my position, I work for a manufacturing company that is located in Wisconsin. We sell through a network of exclusive but independent representatives. Mike King, Regional Sales Manager, Sentry Equipment Corp.*

A. Mike, you have a fairly common dilemma—working for a company that primarily sells through independent sales representatives. They typically not only represent your company, but also other companies.

THE ADVANTAGES BEING:

- They have current relationships with multiple clients (end users).
- They live in the territories where you want to grow your business.
- Your product/service allows your independent representatives to expand their relationship with their clients.

THE DISADVANTAGES BEING:

- You are “one removed” from the ultimate client (end-user).
- They are typically not local (to you) and tend to be “lone rangers,” in many cases working out of their homes.
- Sometimes they are not personally interested in your product/service, so they won’t talk to their clients about it.

In terms of motivating them to do more with you, I suggest finding the ones who are motivated (in general) first. Then,

help them discover how your product/service can get them more of what they want. This will allow you to manage the many relationships you have. In essence, focus on the 80/20 rule. That is, the 20% of the independent representatives who will provide 80% of your business.

Once you’ve identified the highly motivated (20%), some of them may not understand or see how your product or service helps them. Let’s start with the end in mind. Meaning, as it relates to your independent representatives, what are their gaps?

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ADDING NEW CLIENTS:

- What gap in income is there between what they are making and what they believe they can make?
- What segment of their business do they want to grow?
- What type of client or how would they like to elevate the size of client?

CURRENT CLIENTS:

- Who are they most concerned about losing?
- Where is their competition improving or slacking?
- What products or services do they need more in depth knowledge of or new offering to keep up with their clients who are growing?

Have a question for Dan?

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Once you help the independent representatives understand what’s in it for them to sell more of your product line, you may need to coach them. Since they are between you and the end user, in some cases, you are only as good as they are.

Sometimes highly motivated independent representatives have been successful despite themselves. In other words, they work hard but not necessarily smart. If they don’t get or keep the business, you lose as well.

Here’s one of the first things I would ask when an independent representative brings you a new opportunity: Is the new opportunity a client or prospect of theirs? I would spend more time with a current client of theirs than a prospect, if time is limited for you.

Lastly, ask them to ask the same questions as above to the new opportunity end user. This will allow you to be a trusted advisor rather than just a vendor to your independent representative and they to their end user. **KCB**