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Past Practices Can Work Today

Mills Rendell (right) with his son Brad Rendell (middle) and his grandson Mills Rendell

Past Practices Can Work Today

BY JACK FOSTER

When Mills Rendell, formerly with Rendell Sales Company and now the president of Zeus Battery Products, read “Is This the Future for Many Outside Salespeople” in the September 2022 issue of *Agency Sales*, it caused him to reflect on his career as a rep. It also reminded him that there’s no room for excuses if a rep is having difficulty getting in touch with customers and no substitute for hard work if a rep is seeking a path to a successful career in sales.

According to Rendell, “There’s no need for me to go into a great deal of detail, but I recall that it was a friend of mine that I was caddying with in the 8th grade who got me a job selling for Fuller Brush when we were juniors in high school. I was assigned a section of Chicago where I learned my trade. All I had was a catalog and a small black case filled with samples, and I went door to door selling my products.

“This was all back in the 1950s and Fuller had developed some interesting metrics to encourage us to sell. You would make a sale at every third door you knocked on. The average sale was \$3.50, and you’d earn a commission for each sale made. You could make eight calls an hour which

included walking between calls and writing the orders. In an eight-hour day, you could make 64 calls, and 21 sales. After you work everything out you were making \$4.41 an hour — not bad when you realize the minimum wage was \$1 an hour. At the same time, you also had to write up the orders and mail them to headquarters. They’d send all the material back to you and then you were expected to deliver the products to the customer and collect the money. It was a very entrepreneurial atmosphere to say the least for a 17-year-old kid. When I went off to college, I contacted the corporate people and asked if they had a local Fuller Brush man in the small town where I attended college. They didn’t, so I had a way to help pay for college.”

Mills Rendell (right) with his son Brad Rendell (middle) and his grandson Mills Rendell.



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Starting a Career

Following graduation from college, Rendell continues, “Like so many other kids at that time, I got married, started a family, and began working for a Chicago-based company that sold connectors. I mention that specifically because when they purchased a printed circuit company in California, they sent me there for training in the middle ’60s. So now, I know all about connectors and PCBs. After training, I was sent to the Chicago sales office, which was a real advancement from the factory. Now, I was a salesman.”

He explains that each salesperson had assigned accounts, and the sales manager worked hard to create an atmosphere of competition “which I loved. He would regularly announce the top salesperson each week, month and for the year. For those of us who were competitive, it was like a drug. For those who had been mailing it in, however, it proved to be their demise.”

Even though the Chicago office showed growth, company headquarters wasn’t satisfied with performance, so, according to Rendell, “They hired a hot shot who developed a commission plan where you would get an established base and a bonus of two percent on any sale over the bogey. I was making \$7,200 annually, and I was fired up to bring home money for my wife and now my second child.”

After the first year with the new sales plan, Rendell explains that he was up more than \$600,000 and was owed \$12,000 in commission. “The corporate guy came in and said they really could not pay me all that as it would mess up their system. I would be making more than the district manager. I settled for \$6,000. At the same time, they literally swore on a Bible that was the last time they would do anything like that to me.

“I started the next year with a \$1.6 million bogey and by year-end, I was up more than \$1.3 million over that, and they owed me an additional \$26,000. Once again, I was called into the president’s office and they gave me half again, or \$13,000. As a result, I quit early in 1968 and

opened my own rep business. Incidentally, my first two lines were connectors and PCBs.”

Rendell recalled his thoughts as he opened his own agency doors, “Here I was now, a manufacturers’ rep, someone who’s different and the direct opposite of direct factory sales. He’s an independent salesman who manages his own agency and knocks on doors in a given territory. Bingo, I was back to my Fuller Brush days.”

As he recalls his days working as a rep, Rendell says, “I loved calling on buyers and engineers with the lines I was able to secure through my old and new contacts. I’ll admit that in those days it was easier to see a buyer than it is today. This all emphasizes that the rep-buyer relationship was key. Some of the customers I called on had a sign in the lobby that said ‘We see salesmen between the hours of 10 a.m.-3 p.m.’ I learned who was doing what to whom along the way. What competitor was entering the market? I had the ability to walk back into shipping and see my competitors’ products. I could ask how they liked the way my parts were packaged. I was able to compare the quality of my approach and my products to those of my competitors.

“I loved to sit in front of a buyer and see the pictures of his children or him in golf attire or with a fishing pole in his hand. That all gave me an easy way to start a conversation.

“Customer lunches were a must. I probably had one every day and golfed with customers on Saturdays. I brought in teams from one of the lines I represented and did ‘lunch-and-learns’ for 20-40 people at a time. Dinner out with a customer and his wife was commonplace. And, my wife was an extremely important part of the sale. If I had dinner on Saturday night and the buyer was deciding on Monday to give someone a contract, guess who was 90 percent of the way there?”

Article Reaction

All of which brings us to today and Rendell’s thoughts related to that article in *Agency Sales* last fall — and Rendell’s reaction to it. The article, which addressed the role of

“I am committed to the rep model with my company, Zeus Battery Products.”

the salesperson in the future, covered any number of challenges salespeople face today including getting in touch with elusive customers, dealing with technology and overcoming the challenges that accompanied Covid.

According to Rendell, “Today I’m no longer running my rep agency. Although I’m still involved, I turned that over to my son when he and I decided to start a battery company 22 years ago. We had a great line that decided to go direct. As a result, we decided that wasn’t the best thing for them to do, so we went into competition with them. My agency is in great hands today — my son and his son, along with my daughter, are running Rendell Sales Company, which will be 55 years old this year.”

From his vantage point as now a manufacturer who works with reps, Rendell maintains, “Salesmanship is about meeting people and pressing the flesh. Once you remove the personal touch, the career is gone. My son runs my agency now and is doing a fantastic job. As for myself, I have been involved in the battery business for the past 25 years, deciding to go into competition with a line I thought unfairly terminated my firm. I am committed to the rep model with my company, Zeus Battery Products. I will say some of the reasons why some reps say they cannot get an order amaze me. I can’t tell you how many times a rep tells me, ‘Well I have sent 10 emails and am not getting any responses from the company.’ Since I am not from that generation, I suggest to them that they should get in their car and go and knock on the customer’s door. There are dozens of ways to get to see the person. Ask a local distributor whom you know if they can make an introduction; try Zoom Info, POS Reports, LinkedIn.

“The current generation is using Covid and its after-shock to become computer jockeys. I realize Covid has become a convenient way to have people work from home and for buyers and engineers to avoid physical contact, but if we want the rep model to continue, we must find a way to keep the rep out there selling. Get up, get out, and get in front of the customer. New salespeople can be as good as we were, but they need to use some of the old tactics rather than try and work from home. Looking a person in the eye and shaking their hand is still the best solution.”

Acknowledging that these are all “just some musings from a guy with 55 years in the business,” Rendell concludes by noting that you can see from television shows like “Shark Tank” and websites like Kickstarter that the entrepreneurial spirit is alive and kicking in the United States. “Young people with either a concept or a product are more than anxious and willing to go out there presenting their ideas to prospective investors and customers. Sales is personal, and there has never been a proven substitute for one-on-one selling. You still have to talk to people, investors, bankers, prospective customers. And you still need a way to get your product to market. I believe that the independent sales rep organization needs to step up and re-introduce itself into these situations. Let’s stop sending out thousands of emails in the hope of landing a few orders and put that effort back into the hands of a respected sales organization that can open the correct doors for manufacturers.”

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

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