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Preparation Is Essential

Whether you are playing in the World Series, or running for President of the United States, or interviewing for a new line, the outcomes will all have two things in common. Number one is that there is no prize for second place. And number two is that, although preparation won't guarantee your success, the lack of preparation will almost certainly guarantee your failure.

I have had the opportunity to interview for some very powerful and lucrative product lines over the years. When it was a line I really, really wanted, I usually got it, and the way I got it was preparation.

The first part of preparation is to understand the audience to whom you will be presenting, and also to understand who will be the decision-maker. You want to be sure that your presentation addresses the concerns of the audience so they won't throw up roadblocks. But you especially want to be sure that you address the concerns of the decision-maker.

The decision-maker could be the national sales manager or VP of sales who is thinking, "Will hiring John put me on track to hit my forecast and make my bonus?" It could be the regional manager who is thinking, "My territory is foundering, will hiring John turn things around so I can keep my job?" Or it could be the president, who is thinking, "The venture capitalists who financed this company want to get this company ready for sale so they can take back their equity. Will hiring John help me make the company more salable?"

How do I find out? I ask questions before the interview, carefully but purposefully, to find out who I need to give special attention to and what do they need to know to be comfortable giving GSA Optimum their line.

What are the elements of a good presentation? With your audience in mind, these are the things you need to be sure to cover:

1. How does this line fit with the other lines on my line card? If it is not synergistic to our current products, what could we do to offer to build some additional synergistic lines around it on our line card?

2. How we will reinvest the commission from existing sales in the territory to build this manufacturer's sales? And in the rare case where we take on a pioneering line, what can we do to build sales without existing income?

3. We share what we have learned about their company and their competitors, so they know we have done our homework.

4. We talk to our own current customers who might be candidates to buy this product to get market information about whose product they currently buy and, we hope, what they pay. We can present the prospective principal with market intelligence they didn't have and demonstrate our value.

5. We include our company's history of growth, but we remember to spend most of our time talking about their needs instead of our history.

6. A pie chart showing the markets your rep firm

serves is pretty much expected in any good presentation, and they will probably want to know how their product fits with your top three or four lines. If you don't include it, they may take a guess at how well your firm fits their product, and they may guess in a way that is not to your advantage.

7. My salespeople need to be in the room. They aren't just hiring me, they are hiring my sales team, and they need a chance to know the people who will be presenting their products. (I'm also proud of my team, so I like to show them off!)

8. Let them know that you will give them a bound copy at the end of the presentation so they don't need to take notes, but don't give it to them until the presentation is over. If they are flipping through the pages of your presentation, they are not listening to you. And don't cheap out on the bound copy, if you can't do spiral binding and color printing in your office, have a local office supply store like Staples or FedEx print the bound copy.

9. Stand up to present. You can't slouch if you are not sitting down!

10. Send a thank-you e-mail immediately, and ask what else they would need to know in order to hire your firm.

11. And mail a thank-you note by postal mail the same day you send the e-mail. You will probably be the only rep who does and that could be a tie breaker.

Remember, it isn't good enough just to be the best. You have to effectively communicate that you are the best, and the best way to communicate professionalism is by demonstrating that you have carefully prepared for this meeting.

Unless you happen to be interviewing for a line that GSA Optimum also is interviewing for, in which case I totally recommend that you wing it.

John Beaver founded GSA Optimum, Oakdale, New York, in 1984. The metropolitan New York/New Jersey independent manufacturers' representative firm has 33 employees covering Maine to Virginia out of its four offices. The agency specializes in electrical mechanical, electronic, and electrical components. This growth can be partly attributed to his successful acquisition of six firms. In 2015 he began his tenure as a MANA Board member. He is also an active member of ERA and NEMRA. As a member of ERA he serves as a National Delegate and is the Chairperson of Metro NY/NJ ERA local chapter.

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