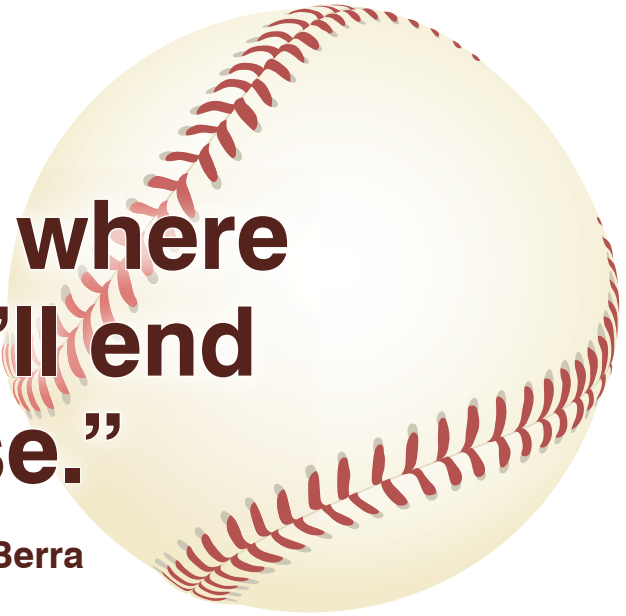

"If you don't know where you're going, you'll end up someplace else."

— Yogi Berra

How do you prepare to consistently execute a good plan now in your manufacturers' representative firm? By studying past problems and challenges and having a response ready when those problems and challenges recur.

In today's world, we borrow from the jargon of computer programmers and call this list of possible events and appropriate responses an algorithm, defined by Google as "a process or set of rules to be followed" to calculate an answer or solve a problem.

When my mentor hired me to work in his small manufacturers' representative firm decades ago, no one had heard of algorithms. But my mentor had created "a process or set of rules to be followed" that have guided me ever since and helped me to build a firm with 32 people covering 11 states from four offices.

These are the guiding principles I credit for much of my success as a manufacturers' representative.

1. When you are with a principal, treat that principal like they are your number-one line, even if they are your smallest line. One day they could be very important to your representative firm, and they will remember how they were treated when they were your smallest line.

2. With that being said, you may find yourself in a situation where your largest principal demands time you have already scheduled with your smallest principal. When your largest principal says "jump," remember to ask "how high?" on the way up because that principal pays the bills.

If you can't be with the smaller principal as scheduled, always be professional, truthful and apologetic. But above all else, the top dog not only needs to be treated like the top dog but also needs to know you're treating him or her that way.

3. Stay in touch. Be informative without overcommunicating, and be sure that your principals know you're working hard for them. Mirror your principal's communications. If your principal is chatty, be chatty. If your principal's communications to you are short, keep your responses brief. Remember that every sentence you add to an e-mail makes it a little less likely that the whole e-mail will be read. Even a chatty principal appreciates e-mails that are concise.

4. Pick your battles and let the small stuff go. Bellyaching about some long-past minor injustice will come back to bite you. Someday when your numbers are just little bit off, you want the principal to see that as an opportunity to work with you to improve your numbers instead of as an opportunity to rationalize firing a representative firm that's been getting on his or her nerves.

5. Before a principal visits your territory, send an itinerary detailing the customers you are scheduled to visit together and the objective of each visit. Warn the principal of any pending issues with each customer to give the principal the opportunity to prepare for those meetings. Never let your principal be blindsided during a customer visit. It is your responsibility to prep them before they are across the desk from a customer.

6. Assume that every e-mail you write will be for-

warded to the person who that e-mail would most offend and that the person you offend will someday be in a position to fire your firm. Bad news should be communicated by phone or in person. A toxic e-mail will never disappear and it will come back to bite you again and again and again.

7. Grow at the same pace as your principal. Know when it's the right time to add personnel.

8. Be a resource for market knowledge. Be an extension of your principal's eyes and ears, and also be the voice of the customer.

9. First impressions last forever. Treat the new regional manager and other new principal contacts with the utmost respect. You may have had the line forever and are a superstar in the eyes of the last regional manager, but there's a new sheriff in town. Be loyal to that person and remain loyal to the person he or she replaced. People often leave a company but rarely leave their industry, so it's likely that people you worked with in the past will also be people you will need to work with in the future.

10. Have a succession plan. Your principals will breathe easier if they know they won't need to recruit and train a new representative firm if you retire.

As I've applied these rules over and over in my career, I've discovered one more reason they are important. Not only do these rules let me respond quickly to problems and challenges, they also give me peace of mind.

For people who don't have guiding principles, every new problem or challenge means indecision, angst, and lying awake at night second-guessing themselves. Did I make the right decision?

Knowing that my guiding principles are sound gives me confidence that my decisions were good. And I sleep great at night.

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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