



SUPPLIES HOUSE

Soapbox article

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United we stand

One of our sales managers used to work for a major manufacturer. He thought manufacturers provided excellent support to distributors. Then he joined us and saw things from a distributor’s viewpoint. He changed his mind. In fact, he’d say that support from most manufacturers is “complete rubbish”.

How much does this matter? As an independent janitorial supplies distributor based in London, the heart of the UK’s largest business area, and growing rapidly, we place several hundred thousand pounds’ worth of business with each of our main suppliers. They know we are growing, so the volume of orders they see from us should be growing too – after all, we must be sourcing our products from somewhere! If we’re placing fewer orders with them, though, wouldn’t you think they’d want to know why? Surely they want a bigger slice of this growing pie? But I am amazed how little we see of the reps from some suppliers.

Being completely realistic, I’d say we have one very good manufacturer, several ‘so-so’ players – and a few who are, frankly, poor.

Their reps are their fundamental business links to their distributors! Yet with one manufacturer we only see the rep if we call and ask them to come in. If we’re not begging to see them, they only call at their budgeting time. Other firms’ reps are content to just turn up, have a cup of tea, ask how much business we are going to do with them and then head off into the distance. Is it our choice of tea bags? Or are they simply not interested in the additional business our growth could be generating for them?

Thankfully, they’re not all like that. The best reps want to work with us – closely and frequently! They want to know all about our business, all about our prospects and opportunities and how they can help. And it isn’t just about shaving pennies off the price. All types of initiatives to develop our business, such as help with telemarketing or presentations to major prospects, help build the relationship.

We have happily offered a desk and phone for any representative to base themselves with us for a few hours or a day. Getting to know your reps better means we are much more likely to think of them when we are quoting for the next deal, or looking to expand our product range, or target new prospects or markets. Never seeing or hearing from the rep – well, out of sight, out of mind?

Another suggestion for manufacturers: why not place a sales trainee or junior in one of your good distributors for a few months? This would give them a good insight into what distributors really need and help you develop better sales people in the longer term.

As a good distributor, we recognise we’re in partnership with our manufacturers, where mutual benefit will only come from trust and recognising the value of long-term



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relationships. Unfortunately, some manufacturers don't trust their distributors. Of course distributors will try and drive a good bargain, but that doesn't mean manufacturers are being screwed.

Trust works both ways, of course. A concern for many distributors is: most manufacturers advertise. Do they get leads from that? If so, where do these leads go? We have never seen a single lead from most of our suppliers. Are they competing with us?

For our manufacturers, we can add real value because we have the direct face-to-face contact with the market. We are closest to the latest trends – we might even be creating them! For example, how important is environmental cleaning, and what are customers really looking for from cleaning products and services today and in the future? We can feed all those insights back to the manufacturers, helping them become more competitive.

That's what I mean by mutually beneficial partnerships – and I can cite an excellent example of everything I've talked about. Metsa Tissue's rep calls and visits us regularly. When we have big opportunities she works closely with my sales people to address them. Constructive ideas come from both sides. Working together, we have increased our success rate in new business – benefiting them and us. Our purchases from Metsa Tissue have increased dramatically as we have expanded. They are now our largest supplier. Building that relationship has resulted in major sales for them; other manufacturers could be doing the same.

All you major manufacturers and suppliers: how are your distributors doing and what part are you playing in their growth! Are you missing out on incremental business because you don't have the right relationships with them? Get involved! Ask what we're doing and how you can help us. Your sales graphs will thank you! Surely that's the best way for all of us in these challenging times?

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