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Williston Sales Reviews Its History

BY JACK FOSTER

Nine years ago, *Agency Sales* visited S. Williston Sales Company. This year as the East Greenwich, Rhode Island-based agency marks its 15th anniversary, Steve Williston, the agency's president and CEO, took the opportunity to recall several of the agency's challenges and milestones. At the outset, Williston notes that the agency's passion and efforts to succeed have firmed up the agency's position as it serves the HVAC industry in its territory.

According to Williston, he learned the independent manufacturers' representative trade in the HVAC/R industry from his father, a respected rep in the northeast region, which includes Upstate New York and New England. This enabled the younger Williston to develop his passion for sales.

According to Williston, when the agency opened its doors as a small business — just as others like it — it was fueled by passion and an aspiration to become one of the leading

manufacturers' representatives in the region. Over the years the agency continued to evolve and adapt with sound business practices in the industry to improve its product lines' market presence through the use of strategic resources and professional marketing programs. The agency also kept up to date with the industry via its membership in relevant rep business associations including MANA and the Association of Independent Manufacturers' Representatives (AIM/R). As Williston explained: "Our mem-

berships in both associations allow us to keep abreast of industry developments and business practices. They also allow us to expand our business network during the associations' conferences and business updates. More often, they allow us to connect with the right people."

Forming Relationships

Williston Sales has achieved some meaningful milestones since its profile in *Agency Sales* in 2016. The agency has been able to maintain

its staff size, all while establishing a strong reputation in its territory. Their reputation helped them forge business relationships with distributors across the region. “This is one of the key factors enabling us to grow our product lines’ market reach in the region despite challenges that accompanied the Covid pandemic,” explained Williston.

He continued, “Over the last few years we have experienced a positive change in our product lines. Our two new product lines (i.e., Klein Tools

and Sauermann Instruments) have been leading with positive growth in the northeast territory. In addition, our agency management grew our product lines using a dynamic CRM system which allowed our relatively small organization to manage and maintain our momentum to monitor and act on ongoing opportunities.

“The upgrade of our CRM system to RepFabric has provided us with a great focus on sales opportunities. RepFabric’s powerful tools allowed us to align our sales priorities to

achieve targeted goals. In addition, the pandemic has also prompted our team to immediately shift our gears to maximize the use of additional electronic tools such as Webex, Zoom and the Microsoft Teams platform. These tools allowed us to make up for the limitations from the pandemic that severely limited face-to-face meetings.”

Technology’s Impact

Staying on the subject of technology, Williston further emphasized

Their reputation helped them forge business relationships with distributors across the region.



Stephen Williston lends support to the manufacturers and distributors he represents at annual conferences and trade shows.

“The use of the right business tools helped our company to thrive and adapt to the current rep business environment.”

that he has always been a firm believer in using the appropriate technology in order to achieve desired goals. “The use of the right business tools helped our company to thrive and adapt to the current rep business environment. It’s also helped us to develop our product lines while keeping the organization size stable while we improve our business profitability. The proof of this has been evident as we have been able to thrive during the pandemic despite its many challenges.”

Williston also mentioned that his and his agency’s experience during the Covid pandemic brings to mind the quote: “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change.”

Williston continued that the rise of a variety of communication technology tools has given some customers the tendency to heavily use voice or email rather than engaging in personal face-to-face contact. “This is an important trend, especially for those who are trying to maximize their productivity all the while juggling multiple tasks to achieve their sales targets and address supply chain concerns.

“These communication tools have allowed us to increase our productivity as we visit customers in our territory. They let us use our time more efficiently and kept us connected to our customers, enabling us to address customers’ urgent concerns. In addition, they helped us break down the communication barriers that we were facing during Covid, and continue to support us to this day. Looking back,

the pandemic caused us to appreciate these tools, allowing us to use them to our and our customers’ benefit.”

Shared Costs

No conversation today with a rep is complete without addressing the subject of obtaining compensation in dealing with pioneering work on behalf of a principal that has no existing business in a territory. According to Williston, in general terms here’s what his agency is looking for when taking on a new line: “Our business philosophy is to look into a product line that is a perfect fit for the industry that we represent in the region, that is, a product line that has a higher potential to thrive in the market, which in turn could contribute to our business’ profitability.”

He continued by explaining that “As a rep agency we always look for a business solution based on how we could grow our products’ line to increase our revenue. We are always looking out for some opportunities which will positively contribute to our revenue targets. Hence, we are always flexible when it comes to adapting to the business.”

Here’s how Williston continued to explain how his agency approaches pioneering lines: “Our negotiations concerning pioneering lines help us to determine the work that we need to put in in order to ensure that we are moving in the right direction. We want to ensure that we are investing in an effort commensurate to S. Williston Sales’ and our manufacturers’ economic expectations to ensure our long-term business

partnership. These expectations include having joint sales calls with our manufacturers’ sales managers. In this way, we are able to update our manufacturers on how we try to expand their market reach and increase their product lines’ presence. Our joint sales calls also allow our manufacturers to meet with our prospective distributors and our new accounts. It is always our intention to ensure that we are able to extend the best effort in achieving a result with our joint market expansion to achieve an economic result and maintain a long-term relationship with our manufacturers.

“We continue to welcome and develop our strategy in developing this kind of business partnership to ensure that we can achieve a sustainable and economical result for our agency and our manufacturers.”

In conclusion, as the agency marks its 15th anniversary, Williston offered a prediction of what the agency might look like if *Agency Sales* makes another visit five years from today. According to Williston, “I see us outsourcing some of our business support functions such as customer service concerns and all other back-office support related concerns. This would all be accomplished while our sales team continues to focus on driving sales and market growth by making efforts to strengthen our product lines’ presence in the territory we serve.”

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