

# Reps Provide Dependability in the Field

BY JACK FOSTER

“Our purpose is to keep people away from live voltage.” Call it a daily reminder or simply a mantra for their business, but that’s what Grace Engineered Products does for a living. And to get the job done successfully, the manufacturer of electrical safety products has learned the value of working domestically with 26 independent manufacturers’ representative agencies. The company also has an international footprint with sales in Canada, Mexico, South America and Europe.

## “I believe in establishing trusting relationships between the reps and us.”

In achieving the level of performance and success that the company can boast of, Phil Allen, owner and CEO of the Davenport, Iowa, company, is quick to share credit with a former employee for pointing him in the direction of reps. “After serving as the manager of operations for Allen Bradley, Tom Howard joined us and put our entire rep network together. He thoroughly understood the rep thing.”

He continues that when “I asked him what I had to do to build a sales channel, his feedback to me was ‘You’ve got to be committed to independent manufacturers’ representatives.’ And, that’s exactly what we’ve done.”

Allen admits that before working with Howard, “I understood what reps were and what they did, but I really didn’t know how to work with them.” That’s where Howard came in.

### Sage Advice

Among the valuable nuggets of sage advice Howard offered to Allen was the fact that “These guys (reps) have to earn a living. There’s

a lot of manufacturers out there that beat them up all the time thinking that that’s how you get performance from them. That’s just not the way to do it.”

Allen offers that “Maybe I’m too nice of a person to be running a company, but I don’t like pounding on people all the time; so that philosophy was perfect for us. I believe in establishing trusting relationships between the reps and us. I send the commission checks out all the time right on the 15th of the month. All I really want to do is do the right thing and treat people well. I don’t believe reps are disposable. Sure, we have 30-day cancellation contracts like everyone else, but we never use them. I’ve found that when manufacturers have to make a change with their representation, it’s doesn’t occur because you’ve been running your reps hard. It comes about because they change lines or business focus. For us, any change in our representation has to be a six-month discussion.”

### Valuing Dependability

Armed with a philosophy for working with reps, Allen notes that



one of the first things he learned about them was their dependability in the field. “The good ones really know how to create and maintain professional, honest relationships with distributors and customers. We learned early on that the good ones also have been there forever and they know where all the bones are buried.

“We were the first to market with our products. We began by paying our reps 15 percent commission and before we knew it our customers were specifying our reps.”

Another benefit of Howard’s tutelage for Grace Engineered Products was the fact that “When he started working with us, he brought a lot of his existing relationships with him. He had such a high degree of integ-

## “He [Tom Howard] made sure our reps had everything lined up for the trip and he was meticulous to the point that he’d almost get in my face when it came to preparations.”



rity that it was a natural fit. On top of that he was relentless when it came to working with our reps. For instance, before any joint calls in the field, he'd stress the importance of having everything set up just right. He didn't miss anything. He was aggressive in saying he needed to get in to this guy or that guy. He made sure our reps had everything lined up for the trip and he was meticulous to the point that he'd almost get in my face when it came to preparations. Obviously that approach has paid off for us."

If a "knowing and understanding how reps work" approach has paid off for Grace Engineered Products, so too has its approach to so many other aspects of working with an outsourced sales force. For instance, read what Allen has to say about:

- Challenges of working with reps — "I think one of the major challenges in working with reps is that it can take a long time to get your messaging across. Sometimes in our industry there are so many sales obstacles, requirements, certifications, etc., that we're slow in getting traction out in the field. It's a little bit like trying to swim upstream. It would be different if you're dealing with a direct sales force. You can simply bring them in and really pound your message into them. You can't do that with reps, however, because they're independent businesses."
- Achieving mind-share — According to Allen, the real key to achieving mind-share among reps is to be "sure that the information and content that



## The Grace Engineered Products Story

In 1993, while working on a friction welder retrofit project at John Deere, Phil Allen was on the cusp of discovering the first of two new niches in the electrical safety business. The machine I/O was located in the front while the electrical panel with a 250-horsepower drive and a 400-amp main feed was inconveniently located at the rear of the machine. The only way to access the machine for maintenance was to open the doors, but the maintenance supervisor understood this caused a potential hazard. The supervisor insisted they "Keep those doors closed!" He wanted them to put a PLC programming convenience interface or communication port on the operator console where "all the I/O were located."

The engineers at Grace decided to accept the challenge and responded with a panel interface connector that contained a printed circuit board and cable solution. They housed it in a UL Type 4 rated, rectangular connector enclosure and the customer loved it! The local distributor loved it, too, and it became obvious that Grace should offer this solution to all their customers. And so GracePorts were born!

From there, the team at Grace Engineered Products has added SafeSide Permanent Electrical Safety Devices, which help workers reduce risk of arc flash and increase productivity in lock-out, tag-out procedures.

**“I really don’t want a lot of written communication. I’d rather have them out there making another sales call for us.”**

you push out to your reps is well-targeted and professional. In addition to that, something else that we’ve done is to ensure that we make the added effort to provide ‘warm’ to ‘hot’ leads to our reps and make sure that they follow up. From what I’ve seen, there are a lot of manufacturers that tend to take leads from their reps. We make sure that we go in the opposite direction and send the leads to them. We also go the extra mile to regularly remind our reps that we’re providing them with leads. After we do that, if their sales are flat, we want to know why. It’s all about communication.”

- Rep turn-ons — “Here’s what really gets my attention with a rep: Is he calling on real customers and making real sales calls? If the answer is ‘yes,’ that’s what attracts me. They can’t just be making distributor calls and traveling a typical milk route.”
- Training — “Training our reps has always been a priority for us. It’s a constant process and our goal is to see to it that our reps are really focused on the job. We’ve been doing a lot better when it comes to pushing out information via training webinars and it’s been a constant process for us. Our goal is to have our reps

out there selling, and we don’t require a lot of reports. I really don’t want a lot of written communication. I’d rather have them out there making another sales call for us.”

- Rep councils — If there’s any tension in Grace Engineered Products rep council meetings, it’s what Allen calls, “good healthy tension.” He explains that the company’s rep council meets about every six months with six members that are routinely rotated. “The members of the council can be depended upon to tell you the stuff you need to hear. I can’t believe how honest they’ve been with us.”
- Pioneering — “All of our reps know that we can be depended upon to create new products for new markets. I’m not looking to sell what others are selling. Since we’re so established in the marketplaces that we serve, we don’t have any need for pioneering. Our reps know that and they also know that we’re not interested in grabbing some market space next door that we’ve never focused on previously.”

*MANA welcomes your comments on this article. Write to us at [mana@manaonline.org](mailto:mana@manaonline.org).*

**“The members of the council can be depended upon to tell you the stuff you need to hear.”**