

How to find and work with the right team of sales reps

Q: I own a mid-sized manufacturing business and I'm looking to expand my market share. I'm considering hiring sales reps. How should I go about finding and working with sales reps? How can I find the best team of sales-reps to handle my products?

A: Outside sales reps, or agents, can be an excellent tool for rapidly growing a business. But, like any tool, they are only effective if they fit the job. So before you sign up your first agent, you'll want to take time to consider your needs.

First, consider whether you need a sales force that is focused exclusively on your products or one that already carries multiple product lines to your target buyers.

A sales force that represents your products exclusively has the advantage of rapidly becoming experts in your field. Because they sell only your products, you get 100 percent of their energy and focus, but they may take longer to develop a solid customer base.

This is the option Vancouver-based Tilano Fresco has recently chosen to take. Founder Randy Orr explains "Because of our niche market, we've decided to start looking at a unique sales force, Moms. Much like the group of passionate moms responsible for amplifying the Robeez brand."

The more common option is to hire established sales teams that have the potential to put your products in front of a group of qualified buyers almost instantly. Owner of Vancouver-based Buddha Board Inc., Eric Thrall, has chosen this approach to increase his coverage in the U.S. He's hoping for "significant market expansion and an overall increase in U.S. sales of Buddha Board."

If you decide to work with multi-line reps, your challenge will be to get them to promote your products above or on par with whatever else they are selling. Reps focus on selling the products that sell best, so you'll need to add incentives. I suggest offering as strong a commission structure as your budget will realistically allow.

Once you've determined which type of sales reps best suit your needs, it's time to begin your search for the ideal sales team. Do the research and background checks. Find out which groups are best suited to your product, which have the best professional reputation, and which are already selling to or have the capacity to sell to the buyers you want to reach.

Jamie Hampson, VP Sales at Vancouver-based Babylicious, recommends going one step further, "It's wise to confirm that there really is a genuine interest from the rep or the agency you choose to promote and sell your products. Reps rarely turn lines down, but merely taking on a line is a far cry from actively promoting it. In a simple contract, establish a three month trial period and outline exactly what your expectations are during that time."

The fact is, while sales agents aren't that difficult to find, great sales agents are. So how do you get the best agents to develop an interest in your business and passionately represent your products?

A sales agent can only sell a product successfully if she truly knows the business and believes in the company she represents. So give her a company she can be proud to represent. This isn't as difficult as it may seem, but it does require baring a little of your corporate soul. Everyone wants to feel part of something they believe in. So share your values, share your dreams, and share your goals. Remember, at the end of the day, it's up to you as the business owner to motivate your reps to believe in and sell your products as long as they are working for you.