

Women Open Their Own Doors to Rep Careers

BY JACK FOSTER

The independent rep profession has much to offer to any budding entrepreneur willing to take a chance. But to listen to the participants in a MANA teleforum early this summer, it's an especially attractive and welcoming career for women.

That was one of the key takeaways from a session entitled "Opening Doors for Women Rep Owners."

The three participants in the teleforum each offered their view of the profession and stressed that the business opportunities, flexibility, and the opportunity for women to exercise their multi-tasking abilities were especially important.

Participants in the teleforum were:

- Claudia Cort, Cort Marketing Group, LLC, Eden, Maryland. The agency specializes in kitchen and bath design and cabinetry.
- Rosanne Brunello, Mountain Rep, a Cleveland, Ohio-based manufacturers' rep firm that specializes in the thermal processing industry.
- Michelle Jobst, Jobst Incorporated, Eden Prairie, Minnesota. The agency represents manufacturers of custom-made rubber, plastic and composite parts and assemblies.



Claudia Cort



Rosanne Brunello



Michelle Jobst

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The one-hour session, which included questions from listeners, was moderated by Nicki Weiss, SalesWise Academy, which teaches selling and influencing for engineers and other technical professionals.

Interestingly the routes each of the women followed on their path to become reps wasn’t much different from that described by any rep, regardless of gender. First up, Michelle Jobst, a MANA Board member, said that during the time she was working in the corporate world, “There came a point when I felt I had to take the next step in my career. At the same time, my father’s rep firm was expanding. I always had a passion for small business and that coincided with him extending an opportunity to me. Although I had grown up in the business, it really was his invitation that got the ball rolling. We thought we’d give it a try for six to nine months and see what happened.”

Roseanne Brunello entered the rep profession a little differently as she admits, “I didn’t even know what a rep was.” She notes that in 1983 she was working in sales in a machine shop and basically getting the shop’s products out the door. “That position provided me with an understanding of what a machine shop did. After about two and a half years of bringing in a great deal of business, I thought it would be a good idea to work for multiple companies at the same time. My thinking at that time was that I had to be sure to represent one product line in each category I was selling.” Thirty-five years as a rep shows that she made the right decision.

Then there’s Claudia Cort, who’s been in the industry she serves for more than 30 years. “My last position before becoming a rep was as the vice president of retail sales for a dealer. When my contract was up with them, I didn’t renew because I knew I wanted to help designers and architects. I opened my own agency and have been able to keep my hands in the design world and mentor new designers.”

Importance of Mentors

The path that each woman followed, however, was hardly one they traveled alone. Cort and Jobst each point to the influence a mentor had on their careers, while Brunello points to the contributions that MANA has made in making her the rep she is today.

According to Cort, “You need someone to bounce ideas off and that’s what I had. Another rep served as my mentor. She involved me in the rep business and showed me how to go out and talk to other dealers. I could call her at any time for assistance. I was able to learn from her passion and enthusiasm for the business.”

Before describing how her father had served as a business mentor for her, Jobst noted that her father was lucky enough to have another rep serve as his mentor, and even bought the business from him. She continued, “I grew up in the business so much so that I thought all kids spent their summer breaks going on calls with their dads. I thought all kids practiced sales calls on their Fisher Price phones.

“As a child, my siblings and I would put labels on brochures, and as I got older my father really helped me to understand all the facets of working in the business — accounting, financial, sales calls, etc. I naturally went to college, but it was his teaching me about the business that was my real introduction. In a small business like we had, we enjoyed a great comradery.”

Simply stated, Brunello points directly at MANA for much of what she learned about the rep business. “Again, at the beginning I didn’t know what a rep was. I made up a lot of what I was supposed to do all by myself, but what I didn’t learn by doing, I learned from MANA. The association was a great help to me.”

Females in the Business

Since the title of this teleforum was “Opening Doors for

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Women Rep Owners,” it’s inevitable that questions would be asked about what it is like to be a female in a predominantly male profession — and that’s just what happened.

Admitting that there’s a positive and a negative side to being a female in the rep profession, Jobst explained, “I sell OEM components to mostly males on the purchasing and engineering side. On the one hand, we (females) look different and sound different. If that’s an advantage, I take any advantage I can when it comes to serving my principals and customers. On the other hand, over the years I’d say there have been less than a handful of gentlemen who at the beginning didn’t believe I could do the job as well as a man.”

To allay that latter situation, she explained that “When the factory hired us as their rep, management leaders of the organization set the tone and in most cases a person who might have had a problem with me figured it out. If they didn’t they got a nudge in the right direction from the factory sales manager.”

A similar scenario was described by Cort who said, “When a dealer very verbally let the factory know that they didn’t want to be served by a female rep, the factory stepped up and said ‘Sorry, but we support our rep. Her team is repping for you. Accept it.’ He did and we’re still together today.”

“In general I have to admit that my dealers are glad when I see them. It makes me feel good about what I do and drives me to continue.”

A similar positive view was provided by Brunello. “Sure I’ve had customers who test me, who want to see if I truly know the business. I’ve made joint calls with a male and sometimes they pay more attention to the man because they think he’s leading the conversation. But this really shouldn’t be about men or women when we’re talking about reps. Manufacturers outsource their sales function to a rep firm and they’re only paying for the business that the rep brings in. Once you earn your customer’s trust and respect, it really doesn’t make any difference.”

Benefits of the Profession

In discussing why the rep profession provides at-

tractive opportunities for females the three women were quick to note a couple of tangible positives that they enjoy:

- **Cracking the glass ceiling** — “In working for a small business such as a rep firm, you really have more of an opportunity to have a larger say than you would in a bigger company,” maintained Jobst. “The control is more in your hands and you truly have the opportunity to put a crack in the glass ceiling.”
- **Flexibility** — According to Brunello, “As a single mother who has raised children, my work has never interfered, and I’ve always been able to attend important family events. On top of that, I’ve been able to stay involved in MANA and have attended any number of the association’s seminars.”

Cort added that one of the benefits of being a rep is that you are able to earn as much money as you want — it’s up to you. “I’ve had my reps ask me how much can I make in this job? My answer has always been, ‘How hard do you want to work?’ That’s the key. I’d add that if you don’t work hard, you won’t be in the business very long.”

Finally, Jobst noted that “Flexibility is important to me and I’ve always been sure to regularly get in front of the customer. But the travel scheduling is easy because I’m the one who schedules it. I do that at the same time that I’m aware of the requirements at home.”

- **Multitasking** — When asked what women specifically can bring to the job as a rep, Cort was quick to offer that “Women, in general are very organized and are used to juggling many tasks at one time — whether they’re related to family or business. As a result, they can thrive in the business environment and know what it takes to work with dealers, distributors and principals.”

Brunello added, “We’re great multitaskers, and women making the rep career choice are making a great decision.”

MANA welcomes your comments on this article. Write to us at mana@manaonline.org.