
The Importance Of Being The Complete Businessman

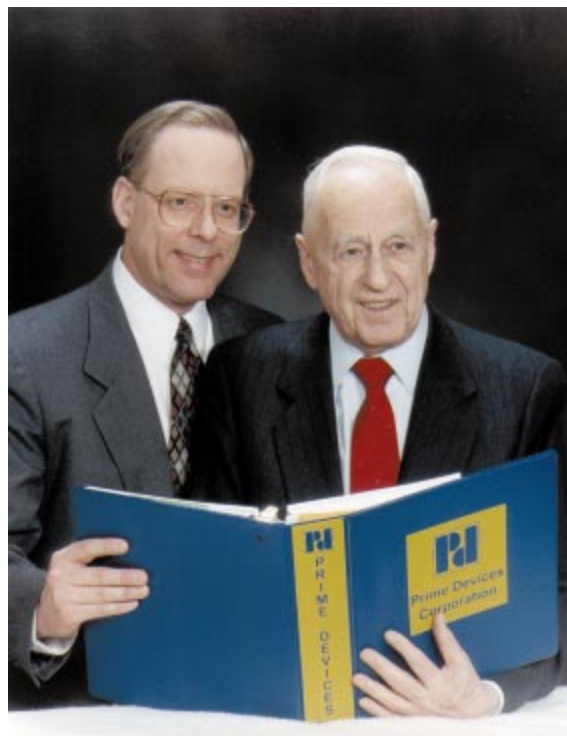
This is the second in a series of eight articles that will explore the Seven Coping Strategies for the 21st Century.

Last month we began a series of articles detailing seven coping strategies that independent manufacturers' representatives must employ in the face of a series of threats to their future success. As with any series of threats, there are accompanying opportunities that may only be realized with the recognition and use of these coping strategies.

In this second in a series of articles analyzing these threats/opportunities, we take a look at the first coping strategy — the ability to become the complete businessman — that is inherent in the ability to turn a threat into an opportunity. If there is an example of this first coping strategy, it firmly resides with Charley Cohon, CPMR, founder and president of Prime Devices Corporation, Morton Grove, Illinois. Prime Devices is a manufacturers' representative firm specializing in products sold to OEMs and distributors who serve OEMs.

Cohon, who has been written about in these pages in the past, realizes the absolute need to become that complete businessman and he has built his personal success and the success of his agency around that premise.

To determine how Cohon — and by extension those around him — became the “complete businessman,” the best place to start is the beginning, and that takes us to 1984. “It was just me in my basement 16 years ago,” he relates. The road to his basement began seven years prior with a BA degree in journalism from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. “I spent a year or so trying to become a newspaper reporter. The competition in journalism was fierce and the 65-70-hour work weeks at low pay didn't bode well for a career in journalism.” It was then that Cohon's father, Harold, a partner in a rep firm, offered him a job as a rep, at an annual salary of



Charley Cohon (left) and Harold Cohon.

\$12,000 plus a car. After jumping on board as a rep, he began going to school at night studying a variety of electrical topics — all to build up his knowledge so he would be more confident in making product presentations.

Finally in 1984, armed with as many lines as he could gather, he opened up business in the basement. His desire to project the image of the complete businessman was in place from day one as he realized the need for professional letterhead, business cards, etc. “While I knew I was just one guy alone in his basement, that’s not the image I wanted to project. From the very beginning I made a continuous effort to improve the sorts of things that would be visible about me to the outside world. I was always upgrading my business cards, company profiles, making sure that everything I sent out was ‘first class.’”

Cohon obviously followed the right course given that today his agency enjoys a solid reputation in the markets it serves. That’s

not to say that sterling reputation was easily achieved, however. A lot of hard work and dedication to business have resulted in the agency’s regular appearance in such publications as *Agency Sales*, *RepConnections* (the official publication of NEMRA), *Electrical Wholesaling* and *Electrical Marketing*. (A bibliography, together with much more information on the agency, can be found at www.primedevices.com.)

To gain a perspective of how Cohon achieved his status as complete businessman, it’s interesting to note his views on a number of activities that have contributed to his success.

Employee Tenure

“We’ve had excellent success in retaining our employees,” he explains. “We recently ran the numbers on tenure and our average employee tenure is 10.2 years.” Cohon maintains that the lengthy stay of employees is due

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to a number of variables. “We’ve always made a point of allowing our salesmen to be salesmen and allowing our clerical staff to function as clerical staff. We make every effort not to blur the lines of responsibility. For instance, we don’t necessarily want salesmen making calls in order to prepare a quote, or having them type their own letters or anything else that doesn’t involve them being planted firmly in front of the customer making a sales call. To achieve that goal, we have a support staff in place for our sales personnel. That allows the salesmen to be out in front of our customer 4½ days a week. That kind of schedule allows them at least one-half a day in the office each week. My feeling is that sometimes you need to sit down and get yourself organized. But at the same time, I want to emphasize that the clerical functions can best be performed by the clerical people, people who are better situated to get that work done.”

Time Management

When considering the concept of time management, Cohon leans heavily on the idea that time is best managed if it results in the maximum amount of time spent in front of the customer. “If I was a one- or two-man operation, it would be very difficult to get everything done. But even when the agency was that small, I made

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The Prime Devices File

- Location: Morton Grove, Illinois
- Founded: 1984; MANA member since 1985
- Principal: Charles Cohon, CPMR
- Salespeople: Five
- Organization Strength: Eight
- Agency specializes in products sold to OEMs and distributors who serve OEMs.
- Web site: www.primedevices.com

every effort to have myself and any other salespeople in front of the customers from 8 a.m.-5 p.m., Monday through Friday. That would leave evenings and weekends to get all the office and clerical work done, but at least we maximized our customer time.”

Continual Education

The CPMR designation following Cohon’s name reflects the fact that he recognizes the need for professionalism and continued education. But he hasn’t stopped after completing MRERF’s three-year certification program for reps. According to Cohon, he’s also completed a correspondence course on electrical controls from the University of Iowa and he’s been to a “ton of seminars (including MANA’s).” He also works his schedule to attend seminars at NEMRA’s Annual Meeting, has completed a number of community college classes and is currently matriculating at the University of Chicago’s MBA program. Discussing his commitment with the latter course of study, he admits that “I’m taking the program at the slowest pace possible, but even so it requires 12 hours a week from my schedule.”

Cohon is a firm believer in the value of earning an MBA. He notes that “More and more of the presidents of companies that we deal with have their MBAs. I’ve found that the people I regularly interface with (e.g., regional and

product managers) have achieved this level of expertise. If I want to continue to be successful, I’ve got to be at their level.”

But he’s not done there — “I do a tremendous amount of reading, including association (from MANA, ERA and NEMRA) and trade publications and computer magazines. My feeling is that there is no shortcut to learning. It’s up to me to read as much as I can to learn as much as I can.”

Association Membership

The main reason Charley Cohon is a believer in associations is that “I can read every business magazine there is and I still won’t get all the information I need. The associations I belong to, including MANA, NEMRA, EGSA, and my participation in MRERF, put me together with people who are looking out for the best interests of manufacturers’ representatives. Either in their publications or their meetings and seminars, I’m going to learn something important.”

He adds some specific praise for MANA in his comments on association participation. “There’s a presentation that MANA has sponsored that features John Haskell (“Dr. Revenue”). In that session, Dr. Revenue reinforces so much of what I’ve always believed in and his comments have spurred me on to do many more of the promotional things that give our agency

This series of articles addresses what have been identified as the Seven Coping Strategies for the 21st Century. Each month, we will present a case history covering how a MANA member serves as an example of employing one of those strategies. The Seven Coping Strategies are:

- Becoming the Complete Businessman
- Consultative Selling
- Synergistic Selling
- Technological Savvy
- Principal Relations
- Globalization
- Use Your Association

a higher profile.”

In addition, Cohon praises the publication by Harry Novick — *Understanding the Outsourced Sales Professional*. According to Cohon, the dean of the University of Chicago School of Business had never been exposed to the Novick book. “In the course of my participation in the MBA program, I let him know about the book and he’s agreed to send a memo to every member of the faculty suggesting that they use the book to expose themselves to the outsourced sales professional.”

People Skills

While maintaining “people

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skills are impossible to teach,” the rep adds he takes pains to improve his skills at all times. “I’ll credit a measure of the success I’ve been able to achieve to my ability to take a giant step back and put myself in the other guy’s shoes. When I do that, I ask myself ‘How would I react in such and such a situation?’”

He adds that the best form of education he ever received in this area occurred when he made calls with a distributor salesman years ago. “From Chicago to Peoria and all the way back in the car, the

main topic of conversation was what he didn’t like about how his boss ran the distributorship. That caused me to draw up a list in my head of all the things I wouldn’t do as the owner of a company. I was determined that I wasn’t going to make all those mistakes that I had heard someone else had been making.

“I may not please all my employees with the decisions I make, but at least I can tell myself that I made it a point to look at the situation from all sides and made the best decision I could.”

Long-Term Goals

Cohon is quick to address this subject when he says “The goal for everyone here is to succeed. I want to succeed. I want to provide for my family and I want everyone who works here to be able to provide for themselves and their families. It’s up to all of us to grow and learn more new things every day.”

Next month’s article will discuss the importance of the consultative selling function. □