



Product application training is the cornerstone to Pittman Industrial Marketing Inc. Bob Pridgeon, from left to right, president of Pridgeon Machine, and Von McKnight, president of the Birmingham distributorship, Max Tool, Inc., watch and listen as John Pittman, vice president of PIM demonstrates the benefits Armstrong-Blum Mfg. Co.'s Spartan Ironworker. Armstrong-Blum scheduled the truck into the Birmingham area for Ironworker and band saw demonstrations.

By Pat Walker
Photographs by Caroline Davis

SELLING THROUGH ADVOCACY

Pittman Industrial Marketing looks for a distributor-level 'champion' to help grow sales

BIRMINGHAM, AL — Convincing distributors the value multiline reps carry can be a demanding task, but the folks at Pittman Industrial Marketing have found that by getting one distributor salesman "to see the light," others will follow on the footholds of his success.

The key is to get an "evangelist," a person who understands the product this multiline manufacturers' rep agency carries, one who knows the intricacies of Pittman's organization so well, that he becomes an advocate at the distributorship.

"Once the others see the success the evangelist has experienced working with you, they want a piece of that action, too," says John Pittman, the agency's vice president and general manager. "The key is to make it easy for him. If you make it easy for one, the rest will be more susceptible to come work with you."

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— Jack Pittman, president, Pittman Industrial Marketing

The Pittmans have seen this partnering with distributors overcome many obstacles, like purchasing agents who only look at immediate, and quite myopic, cost savings.

"If a company replaces a \$19 drill bit with an 88 cent bit, there'll be an immediate savings on the book," Johns says. "However, all the issues of the 88 cent bit will come to the forefront in a

couple months when the company reviews its production costs and sees that 88 cent bit only drilled 30 holes vs. 1,000 for the \$19 bit.

"Sometimes, 'cost savings' come back and bite the distributor and end user," he adds. "The production costs will outweigh those initial cost savings. Engineers need to be real hands-on in production. Sometimes, the bean counters don't see the whole picture."

One "convert" leads to others in a distributorship, and PIM has found distributors who work in-depth with it are selling this agency's complete package, which it believes benefits both parties.

"While they might also sell a competitor's product, too, they do sell our complete package," says Jack Pittman, the agency's founder and president. "This is what we want to accomplish."

An added benefit to this process is the bolstering of the multiline rep's tentative past reputation within the industry, something the Pittmans attack very aggressively.

"We have worked very hard to be reputable," Jack says. "First of all with the people we represent; secondly with the distributors and lastly with the end users. If any of those think ill of you . . . you're dead."

Rebels with a cause

Jack Pittman got his start in 1960 as a salesman for Carborundum Abrasives working the Gulf Coast area, eventually transferring to

Birmingham in 1965.

The presidential wage freeze of '72 caused Jack to take a cold, hard look at his position. He'd worked with manufacturers' reps in the field, and he observed that multiline representatives drove better automobiles, dressed more nicely and had longer vacations. He, too, went "to the river" and was converted.

Jack's son, John, came on board in 1987 after graduating from Mississippi State. Shortly after

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that, PIM began its shift from a distributor to an end-user focus.

"We focused heavily on learning who the end users were, and which product lines to target at them," John says. "We now formulate a sales plan for the whole year targeting our objectives with every user."

The agency saw they were assuming more and more customer training/educational responsibilities. To fully seize this opportunity, the Pittmans pursued more product knowledge education. This expanded role sits fine with Jack, who believes reps are more educators than salesmen.

"When we educate them on our products,

they find needs for our products," Jack says. "Since we perceived distribution not bearing down on this issue, we had to pick up that slack in order to maintain our growth."

John remembers going to distributors for training or sales meetings and then heading out for end-user calls in the area. The lack of calls frustrated John and propelled the Pittmans to do more.

"We'd call on three or four accounts but went by 300 potential ones," he says. "Manufacturers want to see an increase in sales. It identified to me that we needed to better manage distribution's efforts, its focus, with our products and that meant targeting where they took the product. Ultimately, it meant going to another level."

Going up . . .

PIM had a tough go at raising the bar, originally, as distributors were wary of PIM calling on end users, feeling reps could potentially have more control of directing the business. With time, the concern eased, and key distributors didn't object to PIM calling on their users because the agency knew how to No. 1: Get to the user and sell the product, and No. 2: Communicate back to the distributor what took place.

After making the call and closing the deal, Pittman's sales staff digitally records any pertinent informa-



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tion and electronically relays it back to the office. The next day, a memo containing a synopsis of that information is sent out to the distributor, principal, end user and other key people.

"We have to possess the capabilities to be electronic with all of our customers, from accepting e-mail through receiving CAD drawings and being able to manipulate them, to calling up the necessary data for the correct speeds and feeds of any application and the units price," John says. "You have to leave a business with an order, or at minimum, leave enough information for the decision maker to make an informed decision."

Both Pittmans believe an agency's staff will need to be experts in seeking and retrieving information needed for such presentations in order to meet with success.



Jack and John have worked together since John graduated from college in 1987.

"The FAX isn't good enough," John says. "You're going to surf, find the information off a web site, download it and e-mail it to the customer. They'll have it instantaneously."

Quick turnaround . . . John remembers one production challenge that demonstrates that growing necessity. A factory was changing part of a system PIM sold them. Part of PIM's staff stayed on-site while John returned back to Birmingham and a factory decision maker headed to Jacksonville, FL. The plant's and PIM's staff ran the

necessary tests and then e-mailed John the results the changes had on production. John forwarded those results onto the decision maker in Jacksonville, who OKed the change. Within five minutes, a process which normally took one day to handle previously, had resolution.

"When you stop to think on how we used to do it," Jack says, "it blows your mind. I don't think we've seen anything yet — it's going to get faster and faster. When you're doing just-in-time deliveries, you can't afford to wait, and we've got to be right out there on that cutting edge where you're delivering information to them if you're going to get the orders, and there's where we aim to be. We try to be innovative in our business and this is just one of the things we do."

Keeping abreast with the ever-changing technology is a continu-

ous aim of PIM. The company approach, according to Jack, is to budget money annually for the purchase of laptops, communication devices, etc.

"We made that commitment years ago," he says. "It's a challenge, one we're constantly trying to keep updated."

All the staff members have laptops, e-mail, office fax at home, digital recorders, digital/hybrid phones with voice mail — the tools the Pittmans

deem necessary to be successful in business now and in the future.

Change: a channel constant

PIM has had a stocking warehouse since 1981 and stocks product for four manufacturers. It also houses trial tools, demo kits, etc. Like the rest of the channel, the warehouse's role could undergo changes in the future.

"What we're doing today is a small scale of what we'll need to do down the road," John says. "It still would be vendor-managed inventory. We'll work with our principals to make sure the inventory covers our region, and that distribution can call us for information, quotations and same-day shipment of needed product. Our objective is to ship very high percentages the same day."

Things in PIM's backyard are changing as more and more major businesses, like Honda, move to Dixie to take advantage of the region's more favorable labor laws. PIM addresses the business climate changes, the changing channel and consolidation much like a halfback looking for running room: Read the blocks, find the hole, then hit it.

"We've had to learn the approach to marketing by those distributors growing through acquisition," John says. "We've read their prospectus and asked, 'What is it they want to do? What are they telling their stockholders?' More than likely, their stockholders will make them stick to that, and if they want to change that, they'll have to communicate it again."

An established relationship transcends a merger, Jack Pittman believes, with the successful continuation of business the primary importance. Having an advocate, an evangelist, only helps cement that relationship, the business.

"We're maintaining our contacts and working with those people regardless of who bought them," he says. "After talking with the buyers, they've recognized how important we are to these people, their busi-

ness. That's what we're always trying to do — make ourselves important.

"There's one constant in this business, and that's change," Jack adds. "There's never a dull moment. You'd better be ready to change with it, or ideally, just ahead of it; figure out what that change will be, grasp it and go." ■

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