



SUPPLIER SALES REP OF THE YEAR

Kari Rehder

NORWOOD & BIC GRAPHIC N.A.

By Michele Bell

There are best-kept secrets, and then there's Kari Rehder. A veteran of Norwood for the past 12 years, and currently with 3,000 Norwood and BIC Graphic customers in her role as an inside sales rep covering Kansas, Oklahoma and Colorado, Rehder received an overwhelming number of nominations – more than 130 – from distributors to be SGR's Supplier Sales Rep of the Year. Which is amazing, when you consider that very few of them have actually *met* her.

"Kari has gone above and beyond so many times for me I have lost count," says Krista Oslin of Promotions Inc. (*asi/301509*). "She deals with me and my crazy clients and never tells me no. I don't know how she does it because sometimes I myself think my demands are outrageous. She always treats me with respect even when I know she thinks I'm a nut-ball," Oslin laughs.

Rehder knows that customers want good follow-through and communication, and firmly believes that's how you earn their trust. "They like to know I'm listening to their needs and, of course, being positive on a daily basis is also very important," she says. "I also think that letting them know I care about them and their success has really helped."

Having once worked in Norwood's claims department taught Rehder that whatever the company does reflects directly on clients. "The end user doesn't care that we messed up something; in their eyes we are the distributor," she maintains. "I've learned that whatever we can do as a supplier to make the distributor shine is what's important. Once you earn your customers' trust and build on that relationship, everything else falls into place."

In addition to her sales role, Rehder also monitors the company's Facebook pages from a sales perspective. "She helps to connect our customers with their sales rep when she sees an opportunity for follow-up," says Jill Stirnkorb, Norwood & BIC Graphic's vice president of inside sales and Rehder's boss. "And from a process improvement standpoint, she's come forward with several recent ideas to strengthen our quote follow-up process."

Gavin Unruh of *Counselor* Top 40 distributor EmbroidMe in Dodge City (*asi/384129*), notes that Rehder has always stepped up to provide samples, ideas and selling techniques for Norwood & BIC products. "She has helped us close many deals with her support," emphasizes Unruh. "Kari is an excellent choice for this award."

Erin Ronan, national accounts director for Wellington Promotions (*asi/356915*), agrees. "I have worked with Kari this year as I transitioned to a new distributor company," says Ronan. "She has helped us gain sales with Norwood and BIC by offering better pricing, free virtuals and lots of ideas for projects. She is always ready to assist with even the small details to make sure orders are done right and on time."

Lest you think it's just clients who are wowed by Rehder's skills, her colleagues were asked to vote to for a co-worker they felt met all the company's values. They, not surprisingly, nominated Rehder. "I was given the BIC Graphic Values in Action award," she says, "and was very, very honored."

Rich Workman, president of Pinnacle Design & Marketing, can see why Rehder has been lauded with so many accolades. "Without a doubt, Kari is the number-one rep of any supplier I use," says Workman. "She makes my job easier and makes suggestions, helps with rush orders and creates marketing flyers so I can give professional marketing alternatives to my customers. She's there when I need guidance, and is a great person to have on a team."

And what's the one thing the 2013 Supplier Rep of the Year, beloved by so many clients but actually known in person by so few, would change? Not surprisingly, she'd like to meet some of the distributors she's built such solid phone relationships with in person. "I would enjoy the face-to-face contact with my customers," Rehder says. "Being in inside sales, my role is more phone contact, therefore have never actually met my customers in person. I think meeting anyone in person brings a business relationship to a whole new level. It would be cool to give them a high-five for that nice order."

"Kari has helped us gain sales by offering better pricing, free virtuals and lots of ideas for projects."

ERIN RONAN, WELLINGTON PROMOTIONS

FIRST RUNNER-UP

Ed Rodriguez

TRADENET PUBLISHING INC.



When considering Ed Rodriguez, sales rep extraordinaire for TradeNet Publishing, it’s the sheer volume of the numbers that’s most astounding: Rodriguez himself, who’s responsible for nearly 10% of the company’s total annual sales, handles about 80 calls per day and – wait for it – about 16,000 per year.

With 25 years in the industry and 18 with TradeNet, he’s learned a few lessons along the way, not the least of which is the value of clarity. “Pronounce words and especially figures very clearly, and reiterate what was stated so there are no questions,” he says.

“With Ed’s personal commitment to customer service, he’s made many of my clients’ events possible,” says Dee Goldstein, president of Gold Enterprises Marketing LLC (*asi/209027*). “He always goes the extra mile, and he’s such a resource that when TradeNet does not have the product I’m looking for, he know who does and refers me to a qualified supplier. Customer service is just his way of being.”

Illustrating that point is Rodriguez’s three-point plan of action for servicing his clients: “Be courteous from start to finish

of conversation. Listen to the customer. Be honest.”

“Ed is one of the very best people I work with, and he always has my back,” says Stuart Marks, president of A Grand Impression Promotional Products LLC. “He always returns calls, never gets upset and makes me feel like I’m his only customer. A couple of years ago we had a terrible problem with an order. He took care of it immediately and made me look like a hero to my client. He is the reason I buy from his company.”

Rodriguez loves that the industry helps to keep economies active via promotions, but bristles when encountering attitudes that the cheapest route is always the way to go. “You have to look at the overall picture of what’s obtained with every dollar,” he cautions. We have to make sure the distributor has everything to help their customer be successful.”

For new reps to the industry, Rodriguez advises actively cultivating a working relationship with clients and let them know you’re sincerely interested in helping them create new customers. “Focus on the customer’s purpose behind what they want or what they might need,” he says. “Sometimes a view from outside reveals shortcomings they haven’t noticed or directions they might take. Don’t overwhelm.”

CUSTOMER SERVICE REP OF THE YEAR

Adam Pfeffer

HIT PROMOTIONAL PRODUCTS



The story of Adam Pfeffer’s rise to the top of the customer service mountain is not one of struggle so much as it is a story of the right person finding the right job. Blessed with the effortlessly sunny disposition that can seem almost exotic to those of us confined to the terminally crotchety Northeast Corridor, this Alabama-native instead employs the magical qualities of kindness and empathy and an indefatigable can-do attitude to capture SGR’s first-ever Customer Service Rep of the Year.

“We cannot think of anyone else more deserving than him,” say Breezie and Jeremy Soward, owners of EcoImprint, LLC (*asi/185831*). “In those moments of panic that all of us distributors go through, he has a way of assessing the situation, figuring out the solution and leaving us with that ‘it’s gonna be ok’ feel. He genuinely cares about his customers and that’s why we like him the best.”

Though relatively new to the industry, once Pfeffer joined Hit in early 2011, it didn’t take

long for him to shed his greenhorn status and begin amassing the praises of customers. “Before I started working at Hit,” Pfeffer admits, “I had little experience in the customer service field and knew nothing about promo products.” What he did have was that Southern-born philosophy of treating everyone with equal respect along with a desire to learn as much about the industry as he could. “Initially they asked if I wanted to start off as a rep, but since I didn’t know much about the industry, and I would hate to be someone’s front line without knowing what I was doing, I wanted to start out as an order processor – just to learn how everything works. After that I was pretty comfortable with it.”

Linda Kendall of The Prestigious Mark (*asi/299267*) admits that Pfeffer is the reason she began using Hit again as one of her suppliers. “I feel confident placing a Hit order because I know that Adam will take care of me,” says Kendall. “I’ll have great pricing, a great imprint and on-time

merchandise. I also know that IF problems arise, Adam will be there with a solution.”

Kendall credits Pepper’s success to his ability to respond quickly with the right answer to any problem and to his commitment to follow through on promises. And she, too, recognizes the genuine satisfaction Pepper takes in making his customers happy. “Adam always has a positive attitude,” she says. “I can tell he’s happy to be of service and that he is thankful for loyal clients.”

Breezie Soward concurs. “When you call Adam you can hear the smile in his voice,” she says. But, of course, it’s one thing to be so cheerful on good days. What about when trouble rears its ugly head? How does the unshakably affable Pepper cope then? “My manager told me early on: you can’t have two upset people on the phone at the same time – otherwise nothing’s going to get done,” he says. “So if you go into each day anticipating tough situations where you will have to be innovative, it’s not a surprise.” Pepper seems to have internalized the ideals of that oft-quoted Serenity Prayer, wherein a cool head combined with decisive courage and a generous helping of wisdom are the cure for any crisis. “What I’ve found is that as long as you approach the situation with a calm head on your shoulders, try to be friendly

“Adam always has a positive attitude. I can tell he’s happy to be of service and that he is thankful for loyal clients.”

LINDA KENDALL, THE PRESTIGIOUS MARK

and know what you’re doing, you can take care of it,” he says.

The confidence that such an attitude inspires is evident in the reaction of clients like Nicky Whisonant from Beehive Specialty (*asi/135780*): “Adam goes above and beyond to meet our client’s needs,” she says. “When we place an order with Adam, we know that he’ll make sure it’s imprinted correctly and delivered on time. Adam is huge asset to the entire Beehive team.”

Pepper sums up his approach to customer service with typical Southern hospitality. “The way I look at it,” he says “if you treat each person who contacts you like they’re a guest in your home, you’re doing something right.” His consideration extends to a plea for including his supervisor Melissa Mezerowski along with team members Lori Thibado, Megan Hatfield, Aisha Taylor and Sue Huddleston in the winner’s circle beside him. Pepper’s nice-guy manner isn’t to be mistaken for a come-what-may approach to his job, however. “The more I learn, the more it gives me a hunger to learn more, not only so I can be efficient for my customers, but because I believe no matter what you do in life, do it 300%,” he says. “Whether you are a customer service rep or the president of the company, as long as you work hard and try your best, it’s all gonna work out.” – *Chuck Zak*

FIRST RUNNER-UP

Pete Catone

LEED’S/POLYCONCEPT NORTH AMERICA



To get the full impression of what it’s like to have Pete Catone as your customer service representative, you might have to talk to someone besides Pete Catone himself, who will tell you in simple humility something like “I just try to make it as easy as possible for customers to place orders with my company.” But his clients can often provide a somewhat more effusive response – just ask M&M Sports’ (*asi/258065*) John Paolucci: “I love the guy!”

Catone laughs. “I just try to treat the relationship with my customers as a partnership,” he says. “I feel like I’m part of their companies and I want them to see me as an extension of their business.” After eight years with Leed’s/Polyconcept North America – six of them in his current territory – and with an army of roughly 2,300 customers, that’s a lot of relationships to stay on top of. Sandy Simon of Konik & Company (*asi/244815*) can attest to Catone’s ability to keep these relationships working. “He embraces the epitome of team work,” she says. “He is the #1 guy you want on your sales team.”

Ben Turry, national account manager for Cotton Candy (*asi/169186*), maintains that Catone is the clear definition of a

customer service superstar. “Pete knows my business and understands my client’s expectations,” says Turry. “He is always on top of his game, and never over commits.” Turry describes a particularly challenging 1,100-piece order that needed to be delivered in five days to four locations in two countries. “Pete immediately identified the challenges with a cross-border delivery and made it happen,” Turry notes. “I will be forever grateful, as this order gave Cotton Candy huge credibility with a new client.”

Paolucci counts off some of the qualities that make his partnership with Catone specifically, and Leed’s in general, so successful. “It’s his response, his attentiveness – when a problem arises, it’s addressed immediately, which is something I pride myself on in my own business.”

Catone knows every order is the most important order to someone, regardless of size. “I try to treat all orders the same, whether it’s a \$200 order or a \$20,000 order, because it only takes one, everybody remembers the bad order.” His solution to the entire range of challenges he comes across is the same solution the 33-year old Catone applies to the wife and two young children whom he calls “the driving factor for keeping as much business coming in as possible.” That solution? Easy. “Keep everybody happy,” he says. – *CZ* 🌐