

Why and how to increase the power of ERA's 'voice'

"ERA gives reps a voice ... by listening and responding to members and the forces that impact the success of rep firms and manufacturers who sell through reps."

Does that statement seem familiar? I hope it does because this text was used for many years on the home page of ERA's website. Now that our all new website has launched, it seems appropriate to revisit that statement and ponder a bit on the subject of ERA's "voice."

Within our industry and even beyond, the "volume" and power of ERA's voice on behalf of the professional outsourced field sales function is directly proportionate to the size of our membership. The more individual voices we can count when ERA speaks, intercedes or advocates for the rep function, the more influence we have with our audiences, wherever they may be.

It's difficult to count the total number of individuals employed by ERA's member rep firms and manufacturing companies, plus the distributors that belong to local chapters. It's surely in the many thousands. Yet, that total could be MUCH higher. Imagine the strength of our ONE VOICE if it could be backed by even thousands more!

Over ERA's 80-year history — and yes, 2015 marks the 80th anniversary of ERA's founding — your association has often and eagerly stepped in to protect the rep function from various attempts to weaken it. These threats have come from major customers hoping to bypass their suppliers' reps in the purchasing process, from proposed legislation that would restrict reps' ability to conduct business and from misguided manufacturers trying to take unfair advantage of their reps. I'm sure there are other examples as well.

ERA also "speaks" continuously and clearly about the benefits of going to market through a rep sales force. Many of our efforts are aimed squarely at educating manufacturing executives who do not understand the value of their existing or potential rep networks.

In these regards, ERA speaks for ALL reps in our industry because our outreach benefits ALL reps, regardless of whether they are members or not. And that's the sticking point that remains a mystery to me.

Thanks to our members and their long-term support — over three and four generations in some rep firms — many non-members have benefitted from ERA's activism. Yet ERA's voice could be so much stronger and more effective if we could bring those non-members aboard. Otherwise, we must realize that our voice and our efforts could be diminished.

So ... how do we increase membership to raise the volume of our one voice? This is not an easy task at a time when membership in all associations is generally in decline. I propose two manageable and, I hope, easy-to-accomplish small steps. **Here's my challenge to current rep and manufacturer members.**

1) REP MEMBERS:

Seek out just one non-member rep among your friends and associates, and have a conversation about joining ERA.

2) MANUFACTURER MEMBERS:

Choose one current rep whose firm does not belong to ERA, and ask that rep to join.

For both types of these conversations, you can use any or all of the many resource materials we have available on that spanking new website at era.org. And be sure to send those prospects to our website to learn more.

The most important step — and you know this — is to ASK FOR THE ORDER. Ask for a commitment that a prospect will visit our website or will email info@era.org for more information, and then follow up just like you would with a customer. Nobody's better at selling than ERA members, so use your sales skills to get a prospect fired up about joining. Tell your own stories of how ERA has helped you and your company. Make it personal! If you can add a new member to ERA's ONE VOICE, I trust you will be rewarded with a feeling of satisfaction and even "harmony."



by **Thomas J. Shanahan**
ERA Executive Vice President and CEO
e: tshanahan@era.org
p: 312-419-1533

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