

SYM BIO TIC B2B



**Pool pros and their
favorite product reps share
how they succeed together**

BY MICHELLE L. CRAMER

MISTY KNIGHT, TECHNICAL SALES MANAGER for Zodiac Pool Systems, says her customers become like extended family. Bryan Banta, owner of B&P Pools in Pompano Beach, Florida, can attest to that. “Misty answers the phone when others don’t,” he says. “She’s available to me when I need her.”

Establishing a strong B2B relationship between pool professional and product rep can be tricky. It requires effort and open communication from both parties. But when everything clicks, that strong working relationship can contribute significantly to the success of your pool business as a whole.

ESTABLISHING THE B2B RELATIONSHIP

Nikki Ruble, owner of J.F.Y. Pools in the Chicago area, establishes a relationship with product reps by working through the company’s distribution channel. “SCP often puts us in contact directly with the product reps,” she says, adding that attending lunch-and-learns and mini vendor conferences create opportunities to meet the reps for products they use often.

Showing a commitment to the products in both merchandising and presentation will encourage most reps to help contribute to your success by offering their support, says Al Eckert, regional sales manager for Litehouse Pools & Spas in the Cleveland, Ohio, area. “The ‘I’ll try a few to see how it works’ approach to a product will probably not encourage a rep to invest a lot of time with you,” Eckert says.

Terry Kiskin, sales representative for Innovative Water Care, formerly Lonza (and one of Eckert’s favorite reps), says understanding the types of pools the company builds and services lets him better understand how he can help — “Most specifically, what their needs are and what chemicals they’re using now,” he says. “Even if they are competitive chemicals, just to see if I can provide [similar products].”

But it’s not all on the pool business owner to initiate that working relationship. The average pool pro is so busy that a product rep who takes initiative is already off on the right footing.

“I always start by introducing myself, relay my professional experience and explain my role,” says Jim Bourque, sales representative for Pentair. “I schedule a convenient appointment to meet them, answer questions and determine specific needs for their business.”

Tom Landi, owner of Landi Pools & Games in New Jersey, says Bourque is one of his favorite reps. Clear communication from the start helped establish their strong working relationship, Landi says: “Be straightforward with each other, including being clear on each other’s goals to be profitable and successful.”

Mike Logan, owner of Logan Pools in Brentwood, California, says it’s important to be honest and transparent with your business expectations. “Let them know what you expect in the way of service, warranty responses and communication requirements,” he says, as well as your deal breakers, like failure to respond quickly to warranty issues or lack of communication. It is also important to let a rep know what to expect from you and your company, such as honest sales projections and prompt invoice payments, Logan says.

Annual planning meetings with product reps are a must for Brian Quint, president of Aqua Quip in the Seattle area. “That plan includes training plans and schedules, frequency of store visits [by the rep], how often the rep will meet with purchasing and other managers in addition to meeting with store and service staff,” Quint says. “We will discuss what new products they should be talking about when they get with our team. We will set goals for sales, merchandising and training. Depending on the rep, we will expect them to help us process and administer warranty claims and returns.”



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Banta recommends finding the brand you like best and being loyal to that one brand or rep. “If you’re trying to play all these manufacturers against each other, you’re not going to be significant to any one of them,” he says. “They all make good products — I don’t think anyone can go wrong with any of them. It’s really a matter of finding one and supporting them. They have a job, too. They have metrics they’ve got to meet, too.”

WHAT MAKES THE BEST REPS

A number of pool professionals were anxious to toot the horn for their favorite product reps, but personalized assistance seems to be the recurrent M.O. for the best of the best.

“Beau and Brad from Hayward Pool Products are always willing to help solve both construction and service-related issues,” says Joan Struckhoff, owner of Prestige Pools & Spas in St. Louis. “They always keep us well informed of new product developments. Their friendly personalities, great smiles and sincere willingness to go the extra mile for us and our customers makes it a pleasure to work with them.”

That’s the kind of feedback that Beau Veihman says they strive for with Struckhoff and their other dealer customers while also providing expertise on products and programs. “Added value comes from knowledge related to general industry trends, successes and ideas to help all aspects of the dealer’s business,” Veihman says. “The dealer is your conduit to the end user. [We] try to answer any of their questions quickly and correctly because, ultimately, it’s the dealer’s reputation at stake.”

Quality reps communicate openly with store management, Quint says. “An important part of a rep’s job is to report to managers anything they hear or see in our stores that could help us improve and grow our business,” he says, “and what they are seeing elsewhere that could assist us in growing.”

Quint says Aqua Quip’s BioGuard rep, Randy Darby (district sales manager for the pro dealer division of BioLab, Inc.), is the best rep in the industry. “I answer the phone day or night, including weekends, so [my customers] know they can quickly get a hold of me anytime and get answers to their questions or concerns,”



Misty Knight (left) and Bryan Banta



Al Eckert (left) and Terry Kiskin

“Be straightforward with each other, including being clear on each other’s goals to be profitable and successful.”

Tom Landi, owner, Landi Pool



Dan Bradford (fourth from left)
with Poolwerx franchisees



Mike Angelo (left) and Beau Veihman

Darby says. “I follow up on issues as quickly as possible and do what I say I’m going to do. And I try to anticipate needs and potential problems before they occur.”

SETTING BOUNDARIES

Setting boundaries is a critical portion of building strong B2B relationships between pool pro and product rep. Answering calls at any hour may not feel right for every rep; likewise, the ‘drop in and say hi’ approach to rep visits may not work for all pool companies.

One approach that’s popular across the board is the habit of checking in even when things are going well. “If you’re only going to call when there’s a problem with one of your pumps, then you’re going to have that relationship where [your rep] says, ‘Oh, crap – I know when I see his number that he needs something from me,’” Banta says. “I call Misty about all kinds of stuff. I run things past her. I tell her what’s going on in my business, and she checks on me.”

Landi cautions not to take your reps for granted. “I have had reps tell me that dealers call them on weekends or late in the evening and, if the rep does not respond, the dealers actually curse them out,” Landi says. “They throw it in the rep’s face that they bought X amount of their product and they expect them to answer whenever they call. A partnership is not one sided; it is being considerate of each other and working together to build success that works for both parties.”

Todd Crowe, director of operations for Pool Scouts, says that it makes sense for a product rep to be available outside normal business hours, because many pool pros won’t have a chance to contact their rep until the work day is over. The approach is important, however. “I always think there should be a non-phone call form of initial contact as opposed to just picking up to call somebody at 9:30 at night,” Crowe says. “A simple email or text message [to initiate the conversation] would be good.”

Boundaries with product reps differ, but some manufacturer reps may stop into a pool business unannounced and expect the owner to have time for them. While that might work for some, with others that approach could damage the business relationship.

Dan Bradford, business development manager at Poolwerx, teaches Poolwerx franchisees across the nation about the buyer/seller relationship. “If your rep is your best friend and you don’t care that the guy bops



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in anytime he wants and buys you lunch every time, then that's great — let him do it," Bradford says. "But if it's not going to work for you, you really need to be firm — tell him you require three days' notice and an appointment."

"Just showing up doesn't get a good quality meeting in for either party," Crowe says. "One party is usually not prepared."

Product reps can set those boundaries for pool professionals too, but the best reps tend to make themselves more readily available. "That's certainly the relationship I have with my franchise partners," Bradford says. "They can call me at 10 at night and I'm going to answer the phone. I tell them that, if I don't answer, it's because I can't, not because I don't want to. And I'll call them back right away."

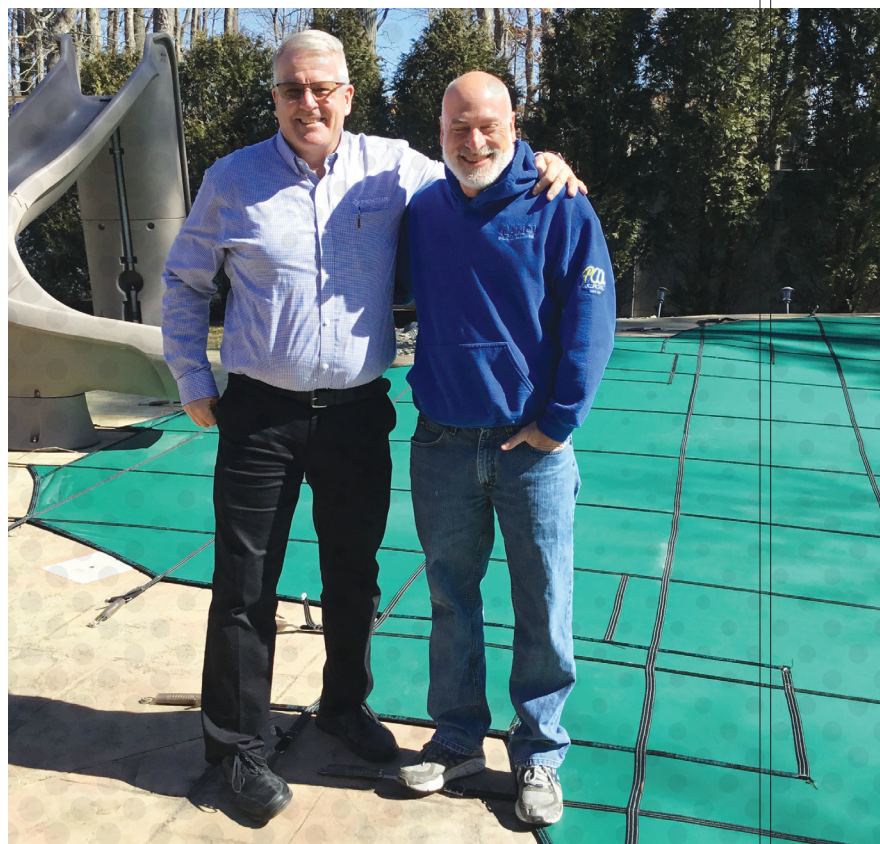
B2B MAINTENANCE

Keeping the relationship with your product rep mutually beneficial requires effort from both sides that goes beyond phone calls and periodic drop-ins. "It requires mutual support," Eckert says. "If they support us with training, MAP pricing, area protection and service, we will support them by promoting their products to our customers. Keep in mind that you are the customer, and you should expect your rep to treat you in the same way that you treat your customers."

Asking your product rep to join you at on-site consultations or equipment repairs is a great way to maintain that B2B relationship, Banta says, because the rep can bring a different perspective, suggesting parts and repair techniques. Product reps who will come to a job site and walk staff through an equipment installation are helping the pool company be the expert in the customer's eyes, he says.

Banta also recommends becoming a product warranty station for your customers. "[Manufacturers] are always looking for somebody they can trust to send to a customer's house and fix a problem with their equipment," he explains. "They have a brand to upkeep as well."

Knight says providing service to her dealer customers has taken on a whole new meaning in recent years. "With the internet at our fingertips, anyone can become savvy in what they are researching," she says. "It is vital for our pool dealers to get support from us as a manufacturer in



Jim Bourque (left) and Tom Landi

order to have more knowledge than our homeowners. My customers not only see me as a business solution, but also my Zodiac team. My company works together to be the best at what they do."

In Crowe's experience, the best B2B relationships with a product rep come when the rep doesn't always do the talking. "Sometimes I feel like if they listened more they would hear real-world problems or situational problems that could [help manufacturers] possibly enhance their product and make their product better, make their product more well known."

Showing interest in new and innovative products your rep offers is important, too, Ruble says. Asking your rep to train your staff on these products shows you value their knowledge and see opportunities for personal connection.

"If they succeed, I succeed," Darby says. "They have to know you are there to help them and not just sell them products. It's a partnership."

The strongest partnerships between pool pro and product rep seem to happen when that the rep feels like part of the team. "I joke with Misty all the time," Banta says, "that, if she ever leaves Zodiac, I'm going to hire her to work for me." ■