

**OVER 500 NEW RUGS IN
COLLECTIONS
FEATURED IN RUG NEWS
EACH YEAR.**

(click on collections at www.museumbooks.com)

Carpets and Rugs Part 5

Training the Trainers

By Leslie Stroh

In Part 5 in our continuing series, we asked a number of sales reps about the retail sales associate training problems previously identified. Some would speak for attribution, and others wanted to be candid but did not want to bite the hands that fed them. All were thoughtful and indicated a sincere desire to see the training process change in a positive direction. And virtually all of them recognized that training was a cost that had to be borne by someone.

Also, out of our conversations with reps came an awareness that product knowledge or p.k. training as it came to be known from a retailer now downsizing its rug business, is product specific, specific to the product of a particular manufacturer, rather than an across the board training in the fundamentals of rugs. As one person said, "we talk about our product as having 'heat-set' poly, but most of the audience hasn't a clue what 'heat-set' means.

Tom Morris, who is now the Northeast Regional Manager for 828 International worked for 16 years at Able Rug and then seven years with Karastan, before recently joining 828 this year. He was unequivocal that Karastan had the best retail sales associate training in the rug business.

He also said that there were store owners out there who viewed the sales associates as a proprietary resource and did not want sales reps chatting with sales associates—as if information about the product was a guarded secret of the owner. That gets back to a question previously posed in a previous article: Does the owner with all of the ownership tasks have the time to run sales training on a regular basis?

Morris said that Karastan was very heavily involved in sales meetings, whether it was Saturday morning at 8:30, or any night at 6 p.m., coffee and donuts were part of working with people. He complimented Karastan because it provided a lot of internal help for salespeople to be better presenters. They focused on providing their reps with presentation skills, and Morris commented that not every sales rep likes to role play or take an afternoon learning how to make a presentation, but that these are essential learned skills.

Morris commented that most field sales reps do not have

the basic skills in running a sales meeting—that part of the process is engaging in conversation, not lecturing. One of the many goals of a sales meeting is to personalize the product and the people. And the key to success, according to Morris, is the leave behind which can be as simple as the outline of the presentation the rep has just spent an hour making.

The unfortunate reality that Morris acknowledges is that the sales rep makes his living getting the orders from the owners, so they are always faced with a choice between face time with the retail sales associates, or the store owner.

George Foot, who has been in this end of the business running a national sales force, and as a one man band clearly defined the big box problem—which everybody we talked to said was both different than the sales associate problem, and had problems of their own.

As Foot describes the big box, they are characterized by no sales help whatsoever. That means that there is no explanation of differences in quality as translated into price, and therefore they are doing a disservice to the retail customer. This makes trading a customer up difficult, so there is no incentive to do so, resulting in the big boxes essentially buying product by the pound. An over-simplification perhaps, but for purposes of discussing retail sales associates training, useful.

Foot observed that specialty store sales associates sell that with which they are most familiar. And he further observed that we as an industry are not doing a good job educating the retail sales associates to that which is new. The result is that retail sales associates sell the products with which they have been most recently successful. He commented that maybe 10% think about the consumer, and that 90% do that which is quickest and easiest.

A sales rep of long acquaintance said that the industry does a very poor job of educating the sales reps, the sales associate on the retail floor, or the consumer. And he then went on to say that the industry is doing a worse job on educating reps, or retail associates on how to compete with big boxes. As an example, he pointed to the "Land's End" catalog (which this writer would qualify by saying, before Sears) where when they mentioned a technical term, they told you more than you ever wanted to know about the origins of that product and

ultimately justified the price at which they wished to sell the product.

His point among several was that sales reps live by the commissions they make—so that dollar volume is critical to them—and that commodity products drive dollar volume. Reps (and floor sales associates) are paid on gross sales not on gross margin. They all basically work with the same tools, samples, catalogs, and price lists. A specialty store has competitive advantages, but nobody has taken the time to tell the floor sales people what they are. Reps sell their company's products—not rugs in general, and this friend thinks it is illogical for the industry expect the rep to do a job the industry is not willing to do or fund.

Bob Rollins in California has worked with rugs, although he is predominantly a furniture guy. But the problem that he saw was that while rugs are easy to sell, in the furniture store environment, it takes discipline to add the \$2,000 sale, after the sales person has completed the \$20,000 sale. The furniture people generally were not tuned in to the rug story. Design departments were different. There they worked with people dealing with specialty items. Training meetings for most participants went in one ear and out the other. It was difficult to engage the attention of the furniture sales people.

John Hanhauser, who has represented Oriental Weavers on the West Coast for a long time, broke it down by noting that there were many levels of distribution where they dealt with different products, had different information needs, and had different ways of selling.

For the big boxes, it is all in the ticket and the packaging of the rug. The rest they can't and don't do.

For the specialty stores, rugs are much more knowledge driven, needing much more differentiating details for educating the consumer.

The flooring super store may, or may, not be able to sell rugs, and it varies more by salesperson and not necessarily by store. Two stores same chain, one has salespeople who get rugs, the other does not. Sales will reflect this.

Even if everybody in the food chain from the manufacturer on down does everything right, only 5%-8% of the retail sales people actually care. A multiple product sell is difficult, and cross training sales associates on hard surface, broadloom and area rugs is difficult. (The hard surface industry is said to have done a very good job on training by the way.)

And as Hanhauser describes it, a B store in a chain with a committed rug person can outsell the A store. In a store that is open 120 hours a week, with one person on the floor, the sales person may well take the easiest way out and sell the rug off the rack rather than open the catalog and reorder it as a replacement.

There are three barriers to sales in every store chain, the retail sales associate, the store manager, and the store owner. Aligning the priorities of all three for all the different product categories in the store is a challenge for the manufacturers sales representative, and a critical management problem for any chain.

So, to *Rug News*, the question is, "Whose training the trainers??—besides Karastan."❁

SEE
WWW.MUSEUMBOOKS.COM
FOR A TRIAL SUBSCRIPTION.