A photograph of three people standing on a waterfront promenade. In the foreground, a man in a black polo shirt with a red and white logo on the chest is smiling and leaning on a concrete railing. Behind him, a man in a white polo shirt and a woman in a black blazer are looking towards the camera. The background shows a wide river and a city skyline under a clear sky.

Rep Spreads the **Word** on MANA Benefits

BY JACK FOSTER

John Beaver's enthusiasm and sense of humor sound loud and clear when he speaks about what he chose as his life work: "I wouldn't change anything about being a rep. I never wanted to be a doctor because I don't like blood; and, being a lawyer would be too boring for me. Being a rep is the most exciting, diverse, interesting and fun thing I could ever imagine. You do something different every day. If I had the chance to choose my profession all over, I wouldn't hesitate to be a rep again."

Left to right: Against the backdrop of the Hudson River are Devon Beaver, Distribution Sales Manager; Larry Flach, Executive Vice President and John Beaver, President GSA.

“We’ve got a number of people here for 10-15 years and their value to the agency can’t be overemphasized.”

It’s partly because of that philosophy that Beaver and his agency are featured in *Agency Sales* this month. And, it’s also because when earlier this year MANA members were challenged to recruit other reps as association members that Beaver took that challenge to heart and corralled rep peers to join him in MANA.

Beaver, president of GSA Optimum (www.gsatech.com), Oakdale, New York, heads an organization that serves a diverse group of industries including aerospace, military, power supply, security, telecommunications and others.

Beaver explains that shortly after

he graduated from Long Island University with a marketing degree, “I was working for a distributor when our largest line terminated us. When they offered me a job, I countered by asking them to make me a rep. They took me up on it and gave me the metro New York and New Jersey territories. That’s how GSA began.”

Now nearly 30 years later, Beaver and GSA find themselves with a 24-person firm serving metro New York, New England, Maryland, Virginia, and the Mid-Atlantic areas.

Pointing to the agency’s diverse product line, Beaver notes that “What’s unique about us is that we

represent everything from photoelectric, motor control and rectifier lines. While at one time I might have said ‘This is ridiculous,’ it really isn’t. There’s no need for us to have to make a choice about the direction we take. We’re strong in all markets and we’ve been able to grow in markets where others have not.”

Engaging the Customer

He continues that GSA’s philosophy is one where “We’re customer-specific, not necessarily geography-specific, and each of our salespeople sells the entire line card. At the same time, we have two or

more salespeople working on the same account. That works for us because we’ve found that if our people call on the account one day, the customer may be reluctant to see them the next day. By having someone else call on another buying influence, we’ll get in the door.”

He adds that “With our approach, we’ve grown tremendously over the last five years, adding at least 25 percent to our staff. We plan on adding another 25 percent in the next few years.”

As he mentions the growth the agency is anticipating, Beaver admits that it brings with it the need to locate and train good, new people who have the same interest and enthusiasm that he has in the rep profession. “Admittedly, most people don’t necessarily know what a rep is. In order to locate the right people, we attend college fairs and advertise. For instance, right now we’re advertising in the Rutgers (New Jersey) college paper. I’m looking for recent college grads, individuals that I can mold into the way we conduct our business. There’s no denying that this is hard work, but our approach has proven satisfactory thus far. We interview a lot of potential hires. We watch new hires carefully and we’re not afraid to terminate them if needed.”

While many people don’t know what a rep is or what he does, Beaver explains that “One thing we’ve got going for us is that we do carry some recognizable brand names (e.g., Panasonic, ABB). Potential hires can identify with those names and that makes our position a bit more attractive.”



Tool of the trade: Devon and John Beaver proudly display Devon’s license plate, which stands for “My left lane.” Devon, GSA’s distribution manager, is notoriously known for her aggressive driving habits. Typical New Yorker: she is never late to a meeting, nor is she on time.

Personnel Tenure

While speaking about the need to be able to find qualified personnel to grow the business, Beaver boasts about the number of people who enjoy long tenures with GSA. “We’ve got a number of people here for 10-15 years and their value to the agency can’t be overemphasized. People here make a good living and there’s no replacing the knowledge they have when they might decide to retire.”

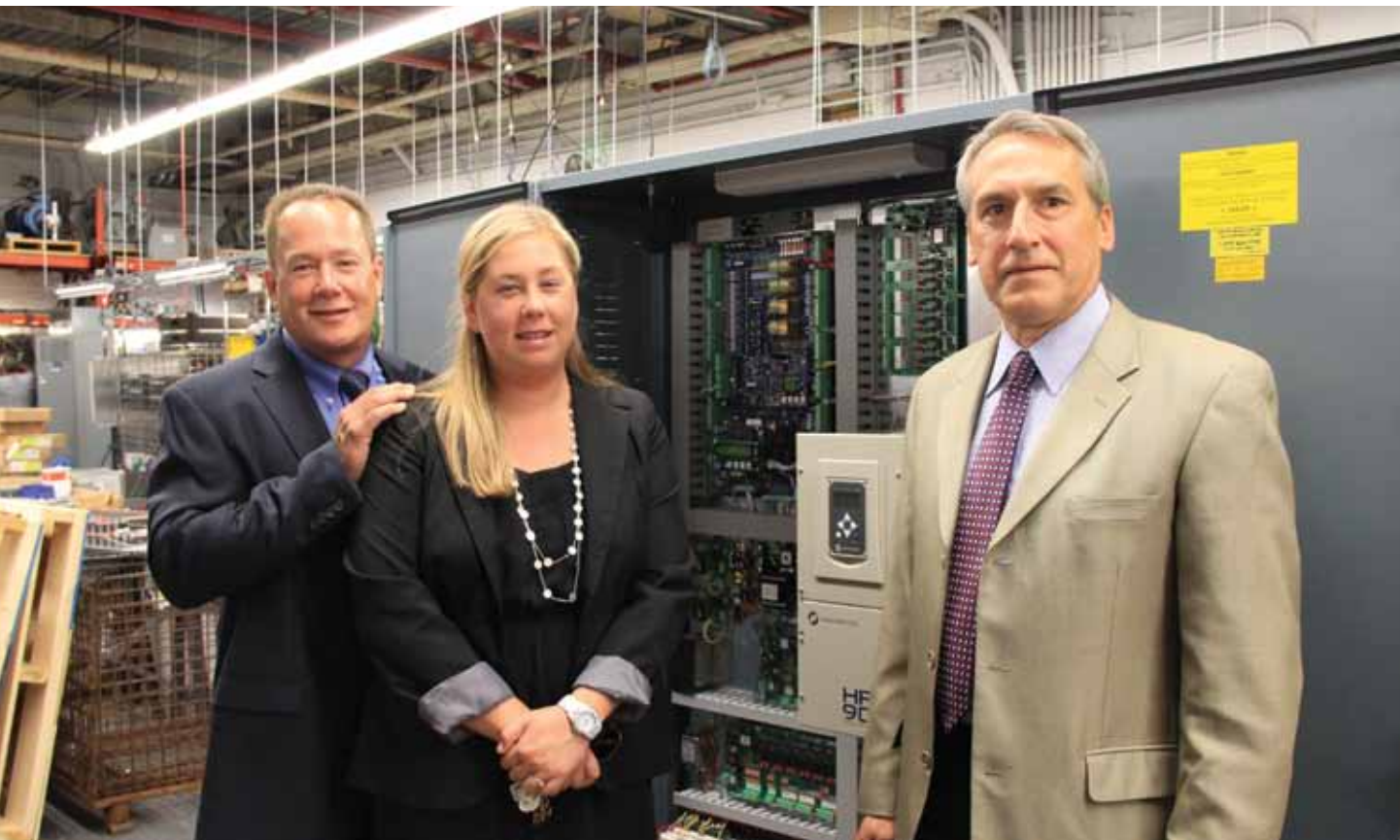
Keeping good people and locating qualified personnel while growing the business aren’t the only challenges that Beaver shares with other reps. He goes on to comment on a number of subjects that reps in any industry can relate to.

▪ Mergers & Acquisitions

When he’s asked what business concerns occupy his thoughts, Beaver quickly responds, “Mergers and acquisitions always represent challenges and opportunities. Just as anyone else, when one of our principals buys another company or is purchased itself, we can gain or lose a line. That’s something we’ve been faced with many times. When those transactions occur, conflicts can arise for us and then we’re faced with the prospect of dropping what might be a very profitable line. And, when I say drop a line, I mean a line that any rep would die for.”

On a related subject of what to do when losing a line, Beaver explains,

“What I’ve always done is to be aware of who and what the competition are. We meet other principals at industry events and they know who we are.”



Elevator Controller manufactured by GSA customer G. A. L. Manufacturing Corp., the Bronx, New York.

If there's any subject Beaver is adamant about, it's the importance of rep councils — to both the rep and the principal. "I believe in them, have served on them, and recommend them to my principals."

"We've always got a plan. Having said that, one thing I will never do is to call a principal who already has a rep working for him. What I've always done is to be aware of who and what the competition are. We meet other principals at industry events and they know who we are. The industry lets us know when there's an opening and if it fits our needs, I'll make the call."

■ **Technology**

Beaver recalls with a laugh how it was so important to have a fax machine just a few years ago. "I'm not sure I can recall the last time I received a fax. I do remember, however, how long we had to wait at the machine for a lengthy communication to come through."

"As things have developed, I have to admit that I personally don't have the time to embrace the chang-

ing technology. But, thankfully, we have IT people who do. It's incredible how easy it is today to create and save reports in the Cloud. Then there are the iPads and tablets. I used to travel around with a truck full of catalogues. That's no longer the case. You've got everything you need in your hand.

"As I was traveling on a plane last night, I had Internet access for the entire trip and was able to get all my work done with the office. I think back to the time when we had to work in sweaty phone booths or worry about freezing while we were phoning the office. It's a whole new world today."

■ **Sales Call Reporting**

Submitting sales call reports doesn't appear to be the onerous task for Beaver and his sales staff as other reps have maintained. "The only

time filing a sales report is a task is when you have nothing to say. Otherwise, we feel that if management wants a sales report, that's what we're going to provide them. Having said that, it's no big deal. As I said before, we use the Cloud. Or if the salesperson prefers they can call a designated person in the office and the report will be written up for them. On the other hand, if the principal doesn't ask for a report, I won't send one, unless it's absolutely necessary."

■ **Entertainment**

It's not unheard of today to have customers and their reps eschew the use of entertainment as a sales/marketing tool, but Beaver isn't one of them. "Many reps have forgotten the value of entertainment," he says. "We do just the opposite. We'll take distributors out for dinner at Fire Island or rent an entire restaurant for a murder mystery night. We've also taken customers golfing and bowling. It's all about getting to know our principal's top management and all the buyers with our accounts. Nothing does the job of networking better than entertaining people."

■ **Rep Councils**

If there's any subject Beaver is adamant about, it's the importance of rep councils — to both the rep and the principal. "I believe in them, have served on them, and recommend them to my principals. My number-one bit of advice to principals in the use of rep councils, however, is make sure you never use the rep council meeting as a sales meeting.

That's not its purpose. At the same time, it's all right to have some dead time at the council meeting. Middle management might be tempted to impress upper management by filling in rep council holes with a typical sales meeting — but don't do it. Manufacturers have to be willing to let the council do its job."

The Importance of MANA

Finally, if the aforementioned are subjects that are important to Beaver and GSA when it comes to running a successful agency, he's quick to point to his membership in MANA as one of the most important business tools he relies on to get the job done. Beaver, who is a member of MANA,

ERA, NEMRA and PTR, says, "I have gotten more lines through MANA than any other source; I greatly appreciate the content that appears monthly in *Agency Sales*; I participate in the MANA-sponsored webinars put on by Nikki Weiss; have regularly made use of the free legal counsel; and also depend upon the ability to speak with someone at MANA headquarters whenever I have a problem." He's not done yet, as he also points to:

- The MANA-provided contract guidelines that "I can send to prospective principals."
 - Guidelines for working with sub-reps.
 - Life of Project contracts.
- More than just a talker about the

benefits of MANA membership, however, Beaver has taken on the task of actively recruiting independent manufacturers' reps who are not members of the association. "You've got to realize that not every rep knows about MANA and all of its products and services. That's why it's so important to spread the word. I was just on the phone last night with a rep telling him about all the benefits of membership."

He adds that during the course of his calls to prospective association members, "I'll very often get Charley Cohon (MANA's President/CEO) on the phone with the rep. He's much better at educating reps than I am, and generally he seals the deal." ☞

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MANA brings such value to its members that they often recommend MANA membership to their rep and principal colleagues. To give extra encouragement to MANA members to refer new members to the association, we launched a special promotion to feature the MANA member who recruited the most new members on the cover of *Agency Sales* magazine. Congratulations to our winner, John Beaver of GSA Optimum, and to the honorable mention winners below who each received a \$25 gift card for recruiting a new MANA member.

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The value of entertainment: John Beaver enjoys his favorite pastime of kite boarding.