

Mission POSSIBLE

Lauren Fox looks at why putting your brand in the hands of a professional sales agent should have you stirred - but not shaken

At times of commercial pressure the freelancer is often first in line for any cutbacks, so when I went along to chat to Association of Professional Sales Agents members holding their AGM during a recent buying show I had expected to be met with an air of despondency. Not so.

There is something quintessentially British and rather proper about the word 'agent', no doubt fuelled by Ian Fleming and his creation of that ultimate of all agents - one Mr Bond.

Passion

You could be mistaken for thinking that being a sales agent was a role adopted as a comfy self-employed pathway. Far from it. These agents are delivering sheer professionalism, with absolute passion and a real knowledge of what is going on out in the market - and their very livelihood depends on that expertise. While getting together at a trade event invariably highlights the banter and camaraderie that is very much part of the spirit of our industry, it's not all the 'old guard' meeting up for a talk over 'tea and cakes', as some would have us believe. These agents are highly respected and extremely experienced sales people, and that

comes from having immersed themselves in the frontline challenge of sports business for some time.

The fact is that many brands are recognising that a skilled agent, particularly when things are tough commercially, can be more valuable to their business than an in-house sales representative. So while many self-employed specialists are losing business as clients dispense with external resources, it would appear that the role of sales agent in the sports trade is enjoying something of a renaissance.

First off there is the simple case of 'doing the math'. It is believed to cost anything between £50k-£100k to keep one rep on the road, and don't forget all the training, management and admin that's involved. For a new or small business that's crippling, indeed for many companies it's an overhead that is being reappraised. Using a sales agent is being considered the good-sense alternative, particularly as the cost involved is directly related only to the product sold. The financial burden falls primarily in the lap of the agent, whose personal investment in everything from their car to an office, showroom services and even samples can be substantial. That in itself reflects the high level of commitment and

motivation that a brand is guaranteed from taking this sales route.

Bob Ludlum has been a sports sales agent for 27 years and has handled many of the leading core sports brands during this time, including 20 years representing Gray-Nicolls. His success highlights exactly what makes a good agent and what it takes to become one. Says Ludlum: "If you haven't got a 'brand' you haven't got a chance. You must pick brands that have cachet." Ludlum epitomises the personality and acumen it takes to be a top agent with the kind of rapport and connections that make his role so enduringly vital. "It's a personal business - people buy people," he says.

His view is echoed by the many distributors and brands that I have spoken to. The one-word refrain they all repeated was "trust". Paul Sherratt distributes McDavid and Uhlsport and uses agents extremely effectively to do so. He emphasised that understanding and trust were critical in the selection of an agent and that the majority of recommendations are passed between the brands themselves.

Steve Lee of Rugbytech agrees: "It actually makes sense to work closely with other brands and your agents to support them in

developing their brand portfolio. It is to your benefit if they have a strong range of high profile brands - the last thing you want is to be stuck with a jack of all trades or to find that you are relegated in terms of time and effort because the agent is taking on too many small brands in order to just pay their own bills."

As business and promotion has become more reliant on the power of technology for fast communications, far from being left behind the experienced sales agent is proving to be a valuable asset, complementing the 'arms-length' marketing approach that many brands have been taking. An agent provides a real connection with a widespread audience, helping to reach specific geographical areas and market sectors through contacts they have developed for many years. It is without doubt the quickest way to get results from a fragmented customer base and can be successful on even an international scale.

It may be considered that there is an exciting dynamic right now to the business of a sales agent that is attracting new blood by expanding potential roles for brand experts. Dave Snowdon was managing director of AMG Footwear, the power behind the success of Teva, Simple and Ugg. His credentials with these brands - and previously K•Swiss and Reebok - meant he was recently voted 50th in the 'Drapers' top 100 most influential people in the UK fashion industry, and he has now decided to harness that experience into his own business called Brand Management Ltd, a hybrid consultancy that offers strategic brand development as well as agency services.

Snowdon had wanted to set up a business for some time and he thinks the time is right - for the right agents. "A lot of businesses need someone to help them develop right now. An agent with the right distribution and portfolio can get straight to the required sales channel," he says.

Power

The power of a respected agent seen to endorse your product at retail level, rather than a rep taking one brand door to door, cannot be underestimated, says Snowdon. "It's very much a matter of credibility," he explains. "The right person presenting the right brand, and there is definitely a new breed of agent

emerging with real strategic skill. An agent is well positioned to find you a creative retail niche and develop new opportunities you might have missed."

Possibly the youngest sales agent in the business currently, at just 27 years of age, is Jonny Duffield, who has built up an impressive brand portfolio that includes Head, Aqua Sphere and Trion:Z. He started at 23 after working in sports retail and wanting to do more. "I contacted so many manufacturers about careers, but most never even got back to me, or I was told I needed various qualifications," he says. "I chatted to some of the agents who came in and they told me how to turn my sales experience into my own business. It's been tough investing in setting up JD Agencies, but I know it's also been a massive responsibility for companies to invest in me. But I have been passionate about succeeding."

Anyone considering becoming an agent needs to recognise that the professional relationship between agent and principle has rapidly evolved, according to top agent Malcolm Steadman. He, like many others, emphasises that agents build their business on trust and recommendation, but he has seen how the nature of the business has changed - bringing with it pros and cons. European legislation now gives agents good employment protection and Steadman advises that agents ensure that they are up to date with their legal rights and requirements before entering into any contract.

Being micro-managed by a brand is something that many agents don't want - after all, they are self-employed in order to have a certain degree of

freedom and flexibility. This reinforces the need to choose an agent wisely - and for an agent to ensure that they are on the same wavelength as their principal. Sharing corporate ethos is important if the relationship is to have maximum productivity and communicate the full brand message to the market, not just rely on sales incentives. Get it wrong and you could end up suffering from 'agency dilemma' (or a 'principal-agent problem' as it is, of course, more commonly known). Ensuring that you are mutually motivated and correctly incentivised is something that has pages of economic studies devoted to it, trust me; there is even a linear equation to help companies get the right balance.

The benefits of joining APSA (www.apsa.org.uk), which operates under the umbrella of the FSPA and specifically represents the sports, leisure, outdoor and golf industries, cannot therefore be overlooked, according to Kate Costin the association manager. For a brand there is the assurance that all agents on the association register have been sponsored by an FSPA member, and that they adhere to the APSA code of conduct. For an agent there is that all-important legal advice for members, as well as favourable insurance and other business services, backed by the FSPA itself.

According to the dictionary, an agent can be defined as follows: an active power, which has the power to produce an effect. Small wonder that it's no secret that many brands are finding that agents are really shaking up their market potential.

BELOW: APSA chairman, Chris Hodges, presenting the APSA golf trophy to Neil Stacey

