A close-up photograph of a man in a dark suit jacket, white dress shirt, and dark tie. He is pulling the jacket open with his hands, revealing a bright blue, textured surface underneath, reminiscent of a superhero's chest. The background is a blurred city street with buildings.

7 **WAYS** **TO BE** **INDISPENSABLE**

Are you your clients' one and only?
Follow these strategies to ensure
they won't be looking
anywhere else.

BY ALEX PALMER



It all started with a desperate phone call.

Leonard Ortiz, owner of Lenn-O Industries (*asi/251900*), had handled a couple of orders for a utility company, but it was hardly one of his regular clients. One fateful day, however, he got a call from a frenzied contact at eight in the morning.

“They needed 450 watches imprinted with the company logo,” he says. “The kicker was they needed it done and delivered by 4 p.m. the next day. I started laughing, thinking, ‘Are you kidding?’”

But it was no joke. It turned out that there had been a miscommunication at the company, and the contact person thought someone else had handled the order weeks before. And the event was taking place the next day. Ortiz had a good relationship with the supplier and knew the order could be prioritized if he asked nicely.

An hour later, his contact at the utility company called back. “They’d made a mistake and they needed the order by 1 p.m. And it had to be delivered to LAX,” says Ortiz. “I took a deep breath and figured out how we could do that. Then they called a half hour later – they needed it at LAX by 11 a.m.”

While Ortiz considered telling the contact that was just not possible, he figured it was a good-size order and a great opportunity to show that he could do what few other distributors would be willing to do. Through the combination of a fast-working supplier, a late night and a very early morning, Ortiz personally arrived at LAX at 5 a.m. the next day, watches in hand.

Not surprisingly, the company has been a loyal, regular client ever since. Ortiz had proven exceptional customer service that he was not only able to deliver what few other distributors would be willing to do, but was also happy to do it, knowing it would make a huge difference to the client. He made himself indispensable to the client and has been reaping the benefits ever since.

Whether it is through an exceptional show of customer service, or a more mundane, but no less important, day-to-day relationship built with a client, becoming indispensable is a goal that every distributor sales rep aspires. Here are seven ways to do just that.

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Give Them a New Idea

lients know exactly what they want. A sales rep just fills the order and calls it done. It's easy for the client to start wondering if there shouldn't reach out to some other sales rep to get the same thing, perhaps for a better price. But the sales rep who can get the client to think bigger, or more creatively, or slightly differently about promotional products is going to be the person the client wouldn't dream of replacing.

It has been the experience for Burr, owner of Blue Collar Industries (www.bluecollar.com). The company specializes in merchandise for bands and musicians to sell on websites or at merchandise tables after shows. When Parker first got into advertising for bands, these almost exclusively consisted of T-shirts.

Burr was among the first to integrate promotional products and other things," says Burr. "We started asking, 'Why don't you do hats, or stadium cups or pint glasses?'" Burr's suggestions paid off, and soon bands were buying outside the T-shirt.

Burr started looking for ideas on truly unusual merchandise items to sell at shows. One label ordered band-branded knives. For the indie band Best Coast, Burr created a stuffed cat meant to look like Snacks, the pet of the band members, which has appeared in the band's videos and promotions.

The stuffed animal not only proved a hit at shows – it even caught the attention of editors at *Buzzfeed*, who included it in a post of Top 10 absurd band merchandise items. Success with this kind of unusual ad specialty idea goes a long way toward ingratiating the sales rep to a client and keeping them coming back.

Share Interests

David Novak, owner of Corporate Values (asi/169054), has become indispensable to clients by sharing interests and activities with them. He is enrolled in the sales training program as his client Adam Wolf, the director of marketing and business development of accounting firm Sax Macy Fromm & Co.

One other day he called and we chatted about it: "Where are you in the process? Have you tried this or have you tried that?" says Wolf. "The relationship is involved beyond the products."

Burr and the co-owners of Blue Collar are musicians themselves and know their clients' interests, not only of the merchandise table they provide products for, but also of their touring process, which gives their clients a reassuring sense that they are in good hands.

24 Hours of Booty, which hosts bike rides to raise funds for cancer research (one of which is around the "Booty Loop" in Charlotte, North Carolina, the organization's name), sources its apparel from a distributor who has been impacted by cancer himself and has become deeply involved in the organization's events.

Burr is in the event, captains a team, and knows the group and wants to be part of it," says Basil Lyberg, executive director of 24 Hours of Booty. "We don't worry about going through a long quote process; it's easy to be satisfied that we're getting the best price possible."

The sales rep who can get the client to think bigger, or more creatively, or just slightly differently about promotional products, is going to be the person the client wouldn't dream of replacing.



While sales reps often gain clients through activities they're involved in, for example, their child is on a soccer team so they begin sourcing apparel orders – this can go the other direction as well.

Sales reps should review their clients' interests and activities and see whether there might be an opportunity to learn about different aspects of their customers and build relationships that go beyond a business transaction.

#3: Be a Friend

Even if participating in common activities proves difficult, sales reps can become indispensable to clients by connecting with them on a more personal level.

"It's much easier to call a friend than go to the Internet to place an order," says David Novak, owner of Tradewind Marketing (asi/346079). He works hard to know clients and prospects from the first conversation, trying to learn about their families and where they're from and taking the conversation from business to personal.

Harlan Goerger, president and CEO of sales training company ASI, agrees, emphasizing that every sales rep should aim to become a trusted advisor or even a kind of "business therapist" for their clients, offering both business and personal advice, in order to really become indispensable.

At the same time, he cautions that sales reps must proceed carefully when they connect with clients to ensure they do not make them uncomfortable. "If you're talking to a Seventh Day Adventist who is a very moral, stand-up person, don't talk about your wild night out in Vegas," Goerger says.

#4: Dig Deeper

As a sales rep with a lot of responsibilities to deal with on a daily basis, it's tempting to just do what the client asks and call it a day. But distributors who have built strong client relationships over years have found one of the most effective ways to earn the appreciation of a client is to always ask a few questions before moving an order along.

continued

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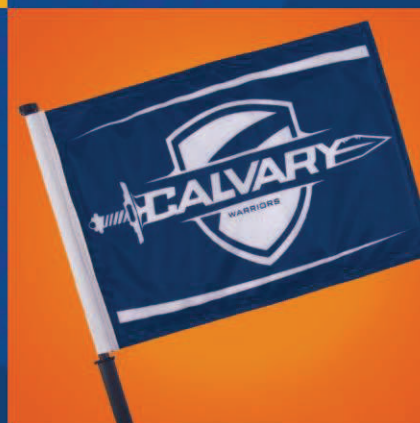
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ed to probe deeper,” says Dave Puntney, owner Independent Forms Ser-
(asi/230885). “The client may have a specific goal in mind, or may have
what they would like to do, so you have to look at your large amount of
concepts and gel it and make it work for them.”

r gives the hypothetical example of a client that requests custom-
nocolates for many events, and places a reorder for an upcoming out-
t during the summer. It would be up to the sales rep to ask whether
best choice for the event or if there might be a better product – such
bottles or branded hand fans.

hat may be an obvious example, similar situations where a product
be quite the right fit come up often. A product that was a hit as a
v giveaway might seem tacky if given out at an executive retreat. A
rating a company’s 50th anniversary will lose some of its shine once
y through the company’s 52nd year.

distributor who asks the questions that may not have occurred to his
ay save the day, or at least deepen the client’s trust.

really are looking for people who
nge their thinking,” says Goerger. “If
k them, ‘Why are you choosing this
,’ they start to look to you as a per-
s thinking more deeply about their
nd that can build trust quickly.”

er Additional Services

re of the logistical issues that may
tra thought on the part of a sales rep
ig difference for the client. When a
an make the process of ordering as
ossible for a client, the customer
less likely to go to the trouble of
g a competitor who might not be as
rk with.

laxton, a sales rep for Industrial Uni-
LC (asi/230903), saw an opportunity
w client came to the company look-
er apparel. The client’s previous dis-
ad sold them a massive quantity of
onvincing the client that buying in
ed the best value. Three years later,
ad a closet full of cheap branded

is in mind, Plaxton developed a
atalog for the client to include in
ny newsletter featuring a range of
a styles, including embroidered and
nted graphics, as well as items rang-
-grade-show giveaways to polo shirts
ality jackets.

a lot of work on the front end, but it
choice rather than the same T-shirt
same design,” says Plaxton. In the
ient ordered \$8,000 worth of items
employees, allowing each individual
ize his or her order.

tion to making ordering simpler,
s a common area for client head-
ntney learned the hard way what a
it could make on the client’s behalf
packaging and shipping for them.
ars ago, a client ordered glasses,

which it then took upon itself to send out to its customers without
him about proper packaging.

“About a third of them arrived to the clients damaged,” says Puntney
ask all the right questions at the time, and I learned from that to alwa
get the client packaging for delicate items – it doesn’t do anyone any
gets there in shards.”

#6: Offer Industry Insight

Distributors can also add value by keeping clients updated on the late
trends or research. This could include simply forwarding a link to a re
paper on marketing strategy, or perhaps a news article about new
that might affect the industry in which the client works.

Knowing about any developments in the industry that a sales rep
allow him or her to be seen as a resource, not just for ad specialty
also for valuable information. Up-to-date knowledge is particularly v

When a sales rep can make the process of ordering as simple as possible for a client, the customer will be far less likely to go to the trouble of considering a competitor who might not be as easy to work with.



They Were Hooked

Corporate Values' Kaye has strengthened relationships with clients by offering unusual ideas. At a meeting in New York recently, the subject said he'd asked his current vendor for ideas, but they just constantly came back with "USB drives," he says.

That's not how you win fans; Kaye suggests more creative solutions. For example, an insurance company was holding an event aimed at female executives. While you might think of the usual portfolios and pens, he showed the client high-quality purse hooks that are placed on the table to keep the purse from hitting the ground. It got several compliments from attendees, and the client is planning additional orders.

Like banking and financing or pharmaceuticals and health care, the industry continues to be impacted by legislative decisions.

In certain industries, gift items can't have a value over a certain amount. "Under \$25 or \$50," says Trish Orrico, marketing coordinator for Seasons of Palliative Care, which orders a range of products such as branded notepads, tissue boxes and notepads. "Promotional vendors will sell you whatever you want without taking these kinds of concerns into consideration because their business is promotional items."

Orrico emphasizes that sales reps who do their homework and learn what is not allowed for the industries they serve have an edge over the competition. "By knowing the client's industry almost as well as they do, distributors can become more valued business partners, rather than just a source for products."

There in a Pinch

An example of rushing 450 watches to LAX demonstrates, being able to solve a client's problem when they fear they have run out of options. "It really deepens a relationship. This may require sales reps to venture outside their comfort zones, working later or getting more creative than they are used to, and it's a gamble that doesn't always pay off. But more often than not, it will."

"It's a great opportunity for a salesperson to shine and really solve a problem for the client," says Goerger. But he adds that a distributor could also use such a situation as a teachable moment to cut down on the chance of it happening again. "If Martinez had to run to LAX at 5 a.m. every week, he might be indispensable to the utility company, but he'd have to drop the ball on his other clients. I can carry this for you, but I have to pull these strings to do it," says Goerger. "It puts the accountability back on the customer and shows you care about doing this work over the long run." ▲

Aminco International is a NY-based contributor to Advantages.

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Add "BLING" select a Sparkle or our Rhinestone Lanyards

LN-241 Rhinestone Lanyards

36" covered entirely with stones in a variety of colors. 1/2" full color photoart logo insert and a split ring and lobster claw attachment.

Stock stone colors: red, blue, clear, green, black and pink.

Set-Up: \$60.00 (G)

Production: 8-10 working days.

LT-SK34 Sparkle Lanyards

Select a lanyard color and add your logo onto the silver or gold sparkle 3/4" lanyard.

Price includes J-Hook attachment.

1 color imprint: No Set-up (C)

2nd color imprint: \$0.10 (C)

plus \$30.00 (G) set-up.

Production: 4 weeks after art approval.

Quantity:	100	300	500
LN-241:	\$6.95	\$6.00	\$5.80
Quantity:	300	500	1,000
LN-SK34:	\$4.60	\$4.15	\$3.65

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