

Modernizing Advertising Sales Management

By Raphael Badagliacca

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The right software can turn a struggling advertising sales department into a successful one. Everyone agrees that the right software program can streamline almost any job. But in the rush to create systems and software for associations, advertising sales has generally been the poor stepchild, a mere afterthought in the development process. For years, advertising managers and sales representatives have had few options when trying to computerize their sales efforts. Many have turned to an assortment of contact management programs, spreadsheets, and word processing programs, while others use a module-type program tacked onto their membership/accounting systems.

To remain competitive, organizations require software designed not only to meet the unique needs and challenges of advertising but that will require less administrative time and provide managers with the sales and performance analysis they need to keep advertising sales on track.

A Whole Different Language

Administering advertising sales presents challenges not faced by other industries or even by others within the association. The association's advertising sales staff has its own timelines, agendas, terminology, and a number of other special requirements that need to be addressed in any database program. In addition, in many organizations, the advertising sales staff often sells and/or promotes a variety of products outside the publishing department's purview, such as sponsorships, web advertising, or products from other departments.

Most associations offer member and nonmember rates for its products and services, including advertising. The sales staff needs to deal with these different rates, as well as be concerned with purchase frequencies and additional charges, such as for color, special positions, or production costs.

When it comes to reporting, one size does not fit all. The production department needs one kind of report; the finance department needs another; and the publisher needs yet a third kind. Production does not need the financial information, and the finance office does not care whether an ad is new or is being picked up from a previous issue. Advertising representatives do not need access to other salespeople's commission structures, but the publisher does, and so on. Invoices designed for membership or book sales are not structured to allow for all the various components involved in advertising pricing, including ad agency commissions.

Trying to maintain advertiser and prospect information in

the association's central database can be problematic for the advertising staff. The majority of advertisers work through advertising agencies, and the association's advertising representative needs access to both company and agency records, and those records need to be linked. But others in the organization do not need this advertising agency information.

Standard office programs for database management, spreadsheets, and word processing are often difficult to integrate the way sales pros need them to and often result in the need to enter the same data in more than one program in order to maintain a database of advertisers and prospects, generate sales reports and invoices, track sales, provide production information, and perform any kind of analysis.

Any such duplication of effort increases down time for sales staff—time that should be spent on sales instead goes to administrative chores. Fortunately, a number of systems manufacturers and software designers have begun to address the need for programs tailored to association publishing and advertising sales.

The Solutions We've Been Looking For

There are several products now available that were designed specifically for advertising sales management, each with its own approach and technology. Some are stand-alone products that allow certain information to be integrated or downloaded to other departments, such as financial/invoicing data. Some are web-based. Some are better for desktop use; others can be added to the overall network and made available to multiple users. Some can be integrated with existing association membership software. Each offers its own bells and whistles, but all of these programs should handle certain basics to do the job right.

Prospecting. A good advertising management program should be able to handle both prospects and existing customers, understand the difference, and present a smooth, sensible transition between prospective, both active and inactive, without any duplication of effort. The database should allow for targeted prospecting, allowing the advertising sales representative to enter product information and sort by that information.

Tracking Sales. Past, current, and projected sales figures should be easily accessible. The association publisher should be able to call up sales by any revenue factor that matters to the organization—publication, sales representative, ad type, etc.

Generating Invoices. Invoices should be easy to generate as an outcome of the insertion order, whether for advance

payment or payment upon publication, and should be easy to track. They should reflect all discounts and extra charges. Whether it appears on the invoice or not, the system should be fully aware of any discrepancy or discount between the rate card cost and the final cost of every ad.

Tracking Outside Sales Representatives. Many associations use outside sales organizations, benefiting from the expertise of seasoned sales professionals. The system of choice should be an effective communications tool that keeps both outside and inside staff fully informed about each other's needs and activities. The system should have a way to track sales forecasting by the outside staff, provide reporting on a regular and ad-hoc basis to sales personnel, and even enable the outside sales staff to access the headquarters system and use it, with appropriate safeguards.

Production/Trafficking. Production should not require a special, separate software program. Like all other details in the system, production details should be entered once and appear everywhere they are needed.

Sales Analysis and Reporting. Software should be able to analyze data and generate reports needed to evaluate the publication's sales. Capabilities should be broad and, to some extent, customizable by the user. Analysis is important on every level. It should be a natural outcome of using the system and should require no additional data entry.

Cost Benefits

Disconnected systems make it impossible to quickly summon the complete picture that will help make the next sale, determine potential growth, or analyze past performance. The right advertising sales system can streamline operations, put an end to duplicate tasks, and free up priceless time for actual sales.

Advertising sales success is easily quantifiable. An integrated advertising sales system will quickly and steadily prove a positive return-on-investment through that same bottom line by increasing advertising sales. With the right advertising systems supporting your staff, association publishers are in a perfect position to increase market share and create a solid future for their sales.

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Asking the Right Questions

When shopping for software, it is important to review each step of the sales process—from prospecting to invoicing—and come up with a list of questions to ask. The following examples will get you started, but your final list should reflect the needs of your own sales, production, and financial departments. And be sure to ask for references!

- How many years has the software provider been in business with an advertising sales product?
- Does the company create products for other industries or is it entirely focused on advertising sales products?
- Does the software provider handle data transfer from your current system into the new product?
- How many separate publications can the system handle? Can the program handle other products, such as web advertising or sponsorships?
- How easy is it to enter new rates and deadlines each year? Can the system handle more than one rate card?
- How will the program handle discounting advertising rates?
- Is the data structured in a way that it can provide instant analysis?
- How easily does the product exchange data with other programs? Does it exchange data with the programs your association has?
- How flexible is the product? Is the software provider able and willing to adjust the product to meet your association's special needs?
- Can you customize the standard reports and create new ones?
- Can you limit access to certain sections or reports?
- Can you use the program effectively if you have outside sales representatives?
- What customer support is included in the purchase price?