

[Back to Member Website](#)[Back to MANA Website](#)

Making It

“A League of Their Own”

By Jack Foster
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As detailed in the 1992 film *A League of Their Own*, when men were shipped overseas to do battle during World War II a number of the jobs that were left vacant because of their absence were filled by women. Hardly exempt from that predicament was the world of baseball. In the 1940s the owners of baseball teams, not wanting the sport to be dormant indefinitely, decided to form teams with women. As a result, scouts were sent across the country to recruit women athletes to populate a four-team league.



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A bit of a recollection of that time took place earlier this year when MANA announced the creation of a special interest group aptly named “A League of Their Own.” Late last spring six female manufacturers’ representatives from the Midwest met to discuss several topics related to their ownership of a manufacturers’ representative business.

Based on the success of that initial meeting, they agreed to meet again. They decided one purpose of future meetings would be to discuss and create guidelines for women who want to start their own business.



Lisa Wilson

In reporting on that first-ever event and its hoped-for future activities, Lisa Wilson of L.S. Wilson & Associates, Inc., Bristol, Wisconsin, explained that “Initially our goal was to attempt to see where women fit in the rep business today and identify what some of the challenges might be for women. We wanted to be able to speak about and document the challenges we face that are different from those faced by males. We explored what some of our experiences have been and share them so other women can benefit from what we encountered.”

She continued that at that initial meeting, following introductions and descriptions of job titles and duties, the six women in attendance addressed several topics pertaining to reps and specifically of interest to the female rep. Among those topics were these:

- **The Importance of a Sales Contract**

Drawing from her personal experience, Wilson admitted that “The best thing I ever did for myself was to join MANA and get exposed to the importance of having a written contract. Over the years, I’ve learned that when you sign a contract, what you’re doing is putting something in place for your eventual termination. That’s why it’s so important to be prepared.”

Continuing on the importance of having a contract, Wilson recalled that “Years ago when I was starting my business, I worked as a sub-rep for another agency. I can recall the owner of the agency wanting to have an agreement that would require me to spend 50 percent of my time on his product line. He’d call me all the time basically checking up on me to learn what I was doing. Finally I had to tell him that there’s no need to keep on checking on me. I knew what my job was. I’m doing my job and you don’t have to worry about anything.

"He let me know that since he had more experience as a rep than I did, he knew what he was talking about. Obviously he was very controlling to the point of telling me how best to communicate with customers, how to dress, and even how to set up my business."

She explained that after about a year and a half of working as a sub-rep for him, "He called one day and let me know he thought I was spending too much time working on my own agency and not enough on his products. I certainly saw the handwriting on the wall at that time. I let him know that I was going to achieve my goals and my goals were probably different than his. We parted ways shortly after. I wonder if he would have behaved the way he did with me if I was a male?"

▪ **How Women Can Get Places That Men Can't, and Vice Versa**

In making the point that there are situations where the female may achieve a better response than a male, Wilson noted, "There can certainly be benefits to being the female rep. It has happened to me that a male decision-maker has been more responsive to the female approach.

"On the other hand, there can be times when the female rep can run into another female who's making the purchasing decision and it doesn't work out that well. For instance, I can recall making a call where I was selling automotive parts. From the moment I was introduced to the female customer, I could tell there was going to be a problem. Basically, it was an intuitive impression that I had. I shared this with the principal who was making a joint call with me. I let him know that I thought the best way to continue with this customer was to conduct joint sales calls. He refused and insisted that I take over the calls. Shortly thereafter, we lost that account.

"Bottom line, when it comes to a female making the sales call, it's going to vary. On occasion, the female is going to get a better reception; other times, not so."

▪ **Conducting Business With People From Countries Where Cultural Norms Are Very Different From North America**

"I've had the feeling that any number of times overseas contacts have tried to take advantage of me simply because I'm a woman. So many of the overseas businessmen have a hard time understanding that business is different here. It's really been a challenge for me.

"Then there's the strictly cultural side of the relationship. I can recall one time when I was a purchasing manager, someone I used to buy from asked me if I would rep his line. After six months of working with him I let him know I should visit his place of business to familiarize myself with his operation in case something unforeseen happened to me or him. My reasoning was 'My customers have to know who they're conducting business with.'

"His wife got on the line with me to let me know that their culture was superstitious and it was inappropriate to talk about death. I wasn't talking about death, I was simply planning for the future."

Continuing to look to the future, Wilson explained that this initial experience with the MANA special interest group devoted to women's issues "Stresses how important it is for women to be able to speak with each other, share experiences and mentor newcomers. As time marches on, it will probably continue to be a man's world, not only in sales, but in many other areas. That being said, it's important to recognize and be aware that sales in itself is not the easiest profession. I don't have all the answers, but women can certainly help each other if they are more prepared to succeed. That's why it's so important for MANA to have a group like this that women can call, because there are so many issues that men simply can't relate to. My hope in this area is that I can take whatever lessons I've learn in my 21 years as a rep and share the experience with other women.

"Moving forward, we left our initial meeting with the plan to definitely meet again and come up with some sort of plan for MANA so we can continue to have something to serve as a future tool for businesswomen to access."



Attendees at the initial "A League of Their Own" meeting (left to right): Michelle Nelson, Perhats Wenstrom Associates, Inc., Barrington, Illinois; Cheryl Parker, EK Micro, Rolling Meadows, Illinois; Susan Leager, Control Sales, Schaumburg, Illinois; Lisa Wilson, L.S. Wilson & Associates, Inc., Bristol, Wisconsin; Noreen Brinn, Control Sales, Schaumburg, Illinois; and Kara Brashea, Central Tower Exchange Corp., Peoria, Illinois.

MANA welcomes your comments on this article. Write to us at mana@manaonline.org.



Jack Foster

Jack Foster, president of Foster Communications, Fairfield, Connecticut, has been the editor of *Agency Sales* magazine for the past 15 years. Over the course of a more than 45-year career in journalism he has covered the communications' spectrum from public relations to education, daily newspapers and trade publications. In addition to his work with MANA, he also has served as the editor of *TED Magazine* (NAED's monthly publication), *Electrical Advocate* magazine, provided editorial services to NEMRA and MRERF as well as contributing to numerous publications including *Electrical Wholesaling* magazine and *Electrical Marketing* newsletter.