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**Dave Zaval Heads the
Whittemore Company,
Celebrating Its
Centennial This Year**



Whittemore Company Marks Centennial

BY JACK FOSTER

When *Agency Sales* was notified earlier this year of The Whittemore Company's goal of expanding its territory into Kansas and Missouri, it couldn't help but cast a spotlight on the agency's rich history stretching all the way back to 1918 to the time when World War I was winding down and a flu pandemic was working its way around the world.

As the company readies itself to celebrate its centennial anniversary this year, Dave Zaval, who heads the Addison, Illinois-based agency, took the opportunity to recount not only how he forged a career as an independent manufacturers' rep but also how the agency he heads has survived and thrived for more than a century.

Zaval explains that his career began at an early age with a job as a toolmaker in a machine shop, "...and my passion for the industry grew. I have been in the metalworking manufacturing industry for more than 44 years, and I still enjoy it. From the shop, I went into outside sales for

12 years, and then went to work for an industrial distributor as a senior manager. My first exposure to Whittemore was when I was the president of Machinery Tooling and Supply, Division of Machinery Systems, Inc., Schaumburg, Illinois — (now a division of DXP Enterprises and located in Addison, Illinois), which was a distributor of various product lines for Whittemore.

"In 1982, the owner of the agency, then named A.L. Whittemore Co., was Ed Meissner. Ed was the third owner of the company, and he purchased it from the Whittemore family. As Ed was nearing retirement,

"During its 100-year history, the agency has only had four owners, and that has been instrumental in the stability of the agency."

Cover: With more than 44 years experience under his belt, Dave Zaval heads the Whittemore Company.



Dave Zaval is seen here discussing a project with Charlie Ingram (right), vice president, sales & marketing, Eriez Manufacturing Company.

I asked if he would be interested in selling his business. In 2000, I joined A.L. Whittemore as a sales engineer to learn the rep business. In 2001, I became the owner and president. A few years later, Ed retired and I changed the name of the business from A.L. Whittemore Co. to The Whittemore Company. During its 100-year history, the agency has only had four owners, and that has been instrumental in the stability of the agency.”

Metalworking Specialty

As to how and why the agency specializes in the products and services it focuses on, he continued, “We provide sales, technical and marketing support services to the metalworking industries and OEM manufacturers. We use the latest collaborative technologies to network and communicate with our principals and to facilitate our internal initiatives. We employ a non-competing, limited,

complementary, and, most important, *application-based* product line philosophy, which enables us to focus on specific market segments, adding value through technical application expertise. We make sure that we engage our principals, distributors and end users in an ethical and professional manner because, in the end, our reputation is all we’ve got!

“Our sales and applications engineers suggest the best option from our premium metalworking product lines to maximize our customers’, distributors’/integrators’, OEM partners’, and machinery dealers’ performance. Our team of sales and application engineers shares extensive training and experience.”

Zaval emphasizes that “Early on in my management career, I had always attempted to add value through manufacturing experience and technical application expertise. I was successful in doing so at Machinery Tooling and Supply, and I carried that

same mantra to Whittemore when I purchased it. As is the case with so many manufacturers these days, engineering services from within the company’s ranks are scarce or even non-existent. These manufacturers rely on outside sources for objective and accurate solutions to their real-world problems.

“It seems to me that the companies that provide these valuable technical services will be revered more as ‘partners’ rather than simply ‘vendors.’ That is what we are aspiring to do. Our best customers use us as a resource.”

No independent rep firm has much to offer if it’s not partnered with quality principals — and that’s one of the areas where Whittemore has enjoyed great success.

According to Zaval, “All of us on the Whittemore team are continually evaluating the pulse and trends of the ‘environment’ and searching for new principals. We are a unique rep agency, and principals want us to represent them because of what we know, the relationships we’ve sustained over the years, and our reputation. Because we are established and relatively well-known, we are highly selective about whom we represent.

Finding the Right Fit

“The prospective principal must ‘fit.’ By that, I mean they have to gel well with our other current principals. They need to have an excellent and high-quality product with clear and concise presentation materials. They must be price competitive and keep us informed of changes in their product mix. They need to have experience working through manufacturers’ representatives and they must be collaborative with us in their approach to the market. We need to be working together to achieve goals — not on a one-way street.”

In order to achieve those stated



From left to right: Zaval; Mike Flannery, Whittemore's sales & applications engineer; George Burleson, regional sales manager, and Steve Onik, national sales manager, both from Röhm Products of America, confer on a new product application.

goals he notes, "We have a fairly robust website (www.whittemore-inc.com), which we have invested heavily in over the years. I realized a long time ago that having a strong web presence is paramount to getting noticed by both customers and principals. Everyone goes to the web to 'check us out.' So many agencies don't tell the 'whole' story about their company on the web. I am not sure of the reasoning behind this, but my style has always been to put everything about us out there, on the web, for all to see.

"We also have a PowerPoint to formally present our company, a tri-fold brochure for our 'elevator speech' presentation, and we all wear shirts with our company logo when attending shows and conventions so we look 'pulled together.' I believe each of these initiatives helps get us noticed. But the strongest method is *still* word-of-mouth and/or recommendations by our distributors and end customers."

Business Changes

While Zaval can't boast of serving

with Whittemore for its entire 100-year history, his own lengthy career does provide him with the opportunity to note some of the changes he's experienced in the profession during his tenure. "Sure, I've have seen huge changes over the years. There have been many distributor consolidations, which is a large factor in how business is conducted now. There are more national channels such as MSC, Production Tool Supply, DXP, and Blackhawk Industrial. Also, national integrators like EWIE and Vallen, etc., have changed the

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The Whittemore Company headquarters building is located in Addison, Illinois.

landscape forever. Another change is that some of our principal manufacturers have decided to handle orders both directly with end users and also through distribution, which makes life very challenging as a manufacturers' representative.

To meet that challenge, Zaval explains, "We do our level best to guide our principals in the channels they choose and how they work with each of them. Of course, as a representative, you only have so much control, and some of our principals elect to sell through multiple — and sometimes very conflicting — channels. Some can get away with it because their brand is so strong, while others are sales challenged as a result of this strategy. It is very difficult to sell di-

rectly to end users as well as through channel partners like distributors, integrators and OEMs.

"Our company is very up-front and honest about our principals' strategies and if anyone asks (whether it be a channel partner or end user) we tell the truth and provide the information without filtering in any way. This breeds trust with our company and within our markets. We are committed to keeping our agency reputation clean and intact and this has served us well over the years. Although we are more committed to selling through distribution than direct, it is not always practical to sell through that channel. Additionally, if the principal's competitors are selling direct, then we really

have no choice in the matter. Most of our distributors understand and accept this."

He continues, "However, the primary change we have seen in our customers is price competition. Many customers are overly concerned with the bottom-line price and, therefore, they chase multiple quotes for the same item. The distributor who worked on the order/project doesn't necessarily receive the order anymore. As an agency, we spend a lot of the time and energy assisting the distributor in providing the best possible solution and price. Nowadays, customers are not as loyal and do not consider the relationship built with them. By policy, many turn all the information provided to them over to their purchasing departments who shop around for another vendor who will come in lower for the same item(s)."

No discussion of change in the rep profession would be complete without touching on the impact technology. According to Zaval, "Technology has had a huge impact on our day-to-day operations and our efficiencies. We utilize our PCs, tablets, smart phones and other devices all day, every day. We have them all 'synced' so that a change on any one device changes all devices. It is *much* easier to work with the vast amount of information 'flow' that we encounter as a modern-day manufacturers' representative.

"Our customers want information, and they are not very patient

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about receiving it. So, we also have every one of our principals' flyers, brochures, catalogs, price lists, technical bulletins, policies, etc., online, in a secure cloud network, and we can access it from anywhere, whether it be from the office, at the customer, our cars (of course, *not* while driving!) and even from home. This access to information is critical in today's sales arena. Additionally, all our team members' e-mail and calendars are linked to the cloud platform for added efficiency. I can see what everyone has planned and they can see what I have going and it makes things easier.

“We also collaborate online, as a team. This will allow several of us to simultaneously access a living document to see what others are inputting and react quickly to changing market demands and principal priorities. We even use this system to collaborate and organize as a group when seeking out new principals that fit with our strategic direction.

“An additional benefit is that since we are using cloud technologies to store so much of our information, if we happen to lose, drop or damage one of our mobile devices, we have an online (and very current) back-up of all information so we can get back up and running with a replacement device very quickly.”

Staying on the impact of technology, Zaval explains, “We actively post information on LinkedIn and Facebook and we recently initiated a LinkedIn post which described our 100-year anniversary. To my sur-

prise, that one post had more than 4,100 views. That speaks volumes to the power of social media. In addition, since we represent a variety of principals, we have also found value in e-mail marketing campaigns to inform our target audiences and generate business. Recently, we revamped our website and branded all of our marketing collateral.”

If constant change is one thing that gets his attention, Zaval admits that there are some other business variables that regularly cause him some concern. For instance, “I feel responsible for the income stream for everyone who works here. My job is to keep the people who work with Whittemore focused, happy and positive so they can live meaningful and productive lives outside of work.

“I also worry about our manufacturers going into too many channels, and that becomes a huge snowball, diluting the market potential for our channel partners.

“And for quite some time, I was concerned about the decline or even elimination of representatives as the result of cost reductions in the channel. I am no longer concerned about that as I believe there will always be a need for strong technical skills in the field. Also, several principal manufacturers who are certainly large enough to afford direct employees in the field have chosen not to do so due to the variable sales cost model that selling through manufacturers' representatives can offer.”

And, if that isn't enough to be concerned about, Zaval also men-

tions that in his time with the agency, he's seen a noticeable drop in customer loyalty compared to what it's been in the past. “Loyalty is not what it used to be on our industry,” he says. “Of course, relationships will always be a strong factor in who receives the order, but pricing pressures, varying channels, and online purchasing are all affecting these loyalties. Customers are very pressed for resources these days and planning has really become a thing of the past. So, customers are looking for the quickest way to receive their products and at the lowest possible cost. Reaction times are critical. Not only for us, but also for our principals and distributors.

“We are continually ‘backselling’ and educating our principals so they react in the manner our customers expect. We talk about this at every sales meeting we have. We are also doing this with distributors and in many cases, end users as well. We tell them what we are going to do — then we tell them we are doing it — then we tell them what we did. The people in the industry today have very short memories, so making sure all parties are aware that we are creating value in the channel is a critical — and a learned — skill. This backselling is crucial in building loyalty. We want our customers to use us as a viable resource. We want them to contact us when they need something in our space — whether or not we can provide it. If we can, we do. If we cannot, we refer them, often to a competitor. Putting ourselves in the customers'

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shoes (having empathy for them) is our best way of creating loyalty. We are in this for the long term, not for a single sale.”

Returning to the agency’s plans to expand its footprint beyond its current territory, Zaval explained that “For quite some time now, my goal was to expand Whittemore’s territory into Kansas and Missouri. The key was finding someone to properly represent our principals for that area. Since it is not near Chicago (our home office), I needed to find a solid candidate who could work independently. Finally, we found the ideal candidate, and the timing was right for our principals to enhance their coverage in that same area. Many of our principals were not satisfied with their current representation. Brandon Crocker came to us with a combination of experiences

in industrial distribution, tooling manufacturers, and most recently in work holding. These experiences were critical to adequately support our principals in this territory. We represent several world-class manufacturers in Kansas and Missouri: Automator America, Inc., Forkardt, Kingsford Broach & Tool, Inc., Kurt Industrial Products, Kurt Engineered Systems, Mayfran International, Pratt Burnerd America, and Speedgrip Chuck, Inc.”

Why MANA?

No coverage of The Whittemore Company’s 100-year anniversary would be complete without mentioning the contributions its membership in MANA have provided. According to Zaval, “I originally found MANA as the result of a legal issue where I was looking for some advice. I joined

the association to gain access to a team of legal experts for that advice. In addition, MANA continues to provide a general benchmark of shared information, knowledge and wisdom about best rep business practices. The association publishes *Agency Sales* magazine which is a great resource that I read regularly. MANA also provides us boiler-plate contracts and territorial layouts. They genuinely want to help us navigate the evolving rep environment. MANA is a great resource to discuss and learn about rep-related business issues, and their staff does an excellent job of researching and getting back to me.”

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