



Women Cash In On Distribution Sales Careers

by Ashley Johnston, District Sales Manager, Lawson Products

Career-wise, I literally left a Lexus showroom for an armored vehicle depot.

And, I didn't trade in, I traded up, way up, to a career where I've written my own playbook, and get to help others write theirs.

After spending 13 years in sales and management positions in the automotive industry, I made a career change and accepted a sales position with Lawson Products. Lawson is a major distributor of maintenance, repair and operations (MRO) products, and No. 39 on Industrial Distribution's 2015 Big 50 List. We provide our customers with the fasteners, cutting tools, abrasives, chemicals, hydraulics, electrical, welding and automotive products to keep their operations running smoothly.

At that time, however, I didn't know the difference between a Grade 5 or Grade 8 fastener. But I did know that the skills and buying signals I learned in my previous positions would transfer. And I wanted the chance to build something of my own.

Seven years later, I'm a district sales manager responsible for a team of 20 sales representatives in Colorado and northern New Mexico and an \$8.2M account portfolio. I'm proud to have earned this position in such a short time. Yet, I wish more women would recognize that the same opportunity is available to them in the distribution industry.

Make the Right Career Choice

A recent Women in Manufacturing Study found compensation and challenging or interesting work are the most important factors to women looking for a career.

So how does this measure up? In a given week, one day I'm wearing a parka on top of a mountain, conducting a fastener safety seminar at a Vail resort; another day I'm 1,000 feet below ground at a gold mine, wearing an LED-lighted hard hat and steel-toed boots discussing hydraulics and transfer hoses; and another day I'm standing with a client in front of a chemical cabinet in his weld shop, we're wearing safety glasses and talking ignition components.

And as for sales rep compensation, the sky truly is the limit. It's one of the few roles in which your compensation is proportional to the effort and dedication you demonstrate.

More support for women exists today with Lawson's Women's Affinity Group which includes quarterly webinars and events for learning and networking, and an online community for sharing of industry related information, sales and marketing ideas, and motivational information; and associations such as Women in Supply Chain, Women in Manufacturing, and W.I.S.E. (Women Industrial Supply Executives), an exclusive networking group within the Industrial Supply Association.

It's a great time for women to join the industry. Success is more than possible and the benefits for women working in this field are numerous.

Spelling Out Success

So, what does it take to be successful in distribution sales? The same tenacity, trust building, and motivation to learn that's required of selling in any other industry. I gained a lot of my product knowledge from formal Lawson training, my peers, and Lawson partner suppliers. But the majority of my product knowledge came from my customers while working in the field.



Ashley Johnston,
Lawson Products District Sales Manager

One of my sales reps, Wendy Wormal says, “I’m excited and willing to learn new skills and information. Lawson is a fertile ground for continuous learning as it supplies approximately 300,000 products to a wide variety of industries.” Wendy came to Lawson from the health and fitness industry where she had her own business.

Having begun my Lawson career selling to the military market (and working around armored vehicles, tanks included), I empower my team with strategic and tactical knowledge. Successful selling requires leadership and mutual respect. My team knows it’s okay to fire a customer if respect is not present.

To be successful in this industry, sales reps need to be great problem solvers, multi-taskers and strong communicators. This opportunity is more than selling products; Lawson sales reps help improve their customers’ profitability. That requires collaboration and the ability to see subtleties in complex situations.

With frequent and consistent communication and on-site visits, sales reps come to understand their customers’ challenges and the opportunities to improve their customers’ productivity and efficiency. They ensure the needed parts are easy to find and stocked according to the customers’ usage. Beyond that, successful sales reps often help customers solve problems, leading to great efficiency.

Being a good listener and empathy helps, too. I always tell my sales reps that when a customer says “no,” it means they simply need more information to make an informed decision. Don’t let the “no” discourage you. Ask more open-ended questions, and really be present, with eyes and ears open.

Seize the Opportunities

I tend to take an analytical approach to things, both at home and at work. So when Lawson Products implemented Lean 6 (Sigma), I was all in. 6 is an approach to problem solving that’s consistent and data driven with focus on improving customer service. I served on a Lean 6 team that sought to improve the company’s sales representative hiring process. The result was a stronger understanding of what attracts sales reps, especially female sales reps, to the industry and what they need to be successful.

Our sales reps enjoy the entrepreneurial opportunity that comes with all the support and resources associated with being a company employee, including Lawson’s comprehensive benefits offering, training, and professional development opportunities. They love the opportunity to work from home and determine their own schedules. Plus, they have the opportunity to build a career in which their drive and discipline helps them realize their goals. Exactly what many women I know desire.

Associate with Winners

Lawson Products was recognized by Selling Power as one of the 50 Best Companies to Sell For. Key to the company’s growth is hiring and training sales reps and putting power of information in their hands so they can be successful.

As a district sales manager, my responsibilities include hiring, training and development, new account acquisition, customer retention, and more. I’m ready to see more female applicants, to continue to serve as a mentor and share the wealth of opportunity that lies in this industry for motivated women.

My success is directly related to the investment I make in the people around me.

Ashley Johnston joined Lawson Products in 2008 as a Military Sales Specialist and was named District Rookie of the Year in 2009. In 2013 she became the company’s first female District Sales Manager, and in 2014 was named Lawson’s District Sales Manager of the Year. Contact Ashley at ashley.johnston@lawsonproducts.com.

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