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Scott Cooper, owner of
Bethany, Connecticut-based
Cooper New England Sales,
upholds his company's
culture and core values.

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models

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2020 PME Rep of the Year: Cooper New England Sales

Culture is key for the Bethany, Connecticut-based manufacturers rep.



OUR COVER THIS MONTH

Bethany, Connecticut-based Cooper New England Sales makes an easy case as *PM Engineer's* 2020 Manufacturers Rep of the Year award winner. The 47-year-old firm emphasizes customer service by making customers feel they're being called on by somebody who is a neighbor or a friend. The company also prioritizes its internal culture and core values. Read more about Cooper New England Sales on Page 28. **Photo by Mike Ross Photography**

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2020 PME Rep of the Year: Cooper New England Sales

Culture is key for the Bethany, Connecticut-based manufacturers rep.

When a company's culture changes drastically over the years — to the point where the staff no longer recognizes the company's core values from when it first started — it may be time for those staff members to move.

Gary Cooper, founder of Cooper New England Sales (CNES), worked 19 years for another rep agency. He went out on his own in 1973 because the culture at that company had changed dramatically and many of the key people left.

"That is the kind of thread that runs through what we do now; the importance of culture," says his son, **Scott Cooper**, current owner of the rep firm.

That emphasis on culture is what makes this company *PME's* 2020 Rep of the Year. When the company was started, it was literally one man covering the entire New England region — Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Maine, Vermont and New Hampshire — for the first three years. Gary Cooper then began to hire some salespeople slowly after that.

A unique approach

"I came into the business in 1988, and at that time, there were four people in the company," Scott Cooper says. "It was a very smooth transition, and I give my dad all the credit in the world to have the foresight to give me enough rope to let me run and do my own thing without letting me go crazy.



Scott Cooper, owner of Cooper New England Sales, holds a photo of his father, Gary Cooper, and himself taken at a trade show in 1994.

"A lot of times you hear about companies struggling to go from the first generation to the second," he notes. "It was because of him that we were successful in doing that. He really took the right approach, but let me make my own mistakes where I had to, and then there were times where he thought I was going to make a mistake and it turned out that I was right. He was a great



Massachusetts PHCC Show, March 7, 2020. This was the team's last time together as a group before the virus hit.

mentor, and he was never too proud to admit when he was wrong. I've learned that from him, and that's something I've taken forward with my team today."

Currently the company has a total of nine team members, and each of the territories differ like night and day, Scott Cooper adds, saying there are some areas that are very urban and fast-paced, and other areas that are more rural, more remote and slower-paced.

"You have to be mindful of who you're calling on, and sometimes be a little bit of a chameleon to adapt to your setting," he says. "Likewise, the styles and trends sometimes differ in these different areas. Depending on where you are, it can be more contemporary, it could be more traditional. We see the whole gamut in our territory, in terms of the temperament of the customer, the way they like to be sold to, as well as what the different styles and trends may be."

The company's staff is spread out through the territory, and those that reside in the different areas each call on the local customers. Scott Cooper wants to make sure his customers feel like they're being called on by somebody who is a neighbor or a friend versus somebody who's dropping in from out of town.

"Our culture and our core values are what make us unique," he says. "We work as a team; we commit to improve and grow; we act with honesty, integrity and enthusiasm; we treat everyone with respect; we act professionally; and we think win-win. Those values

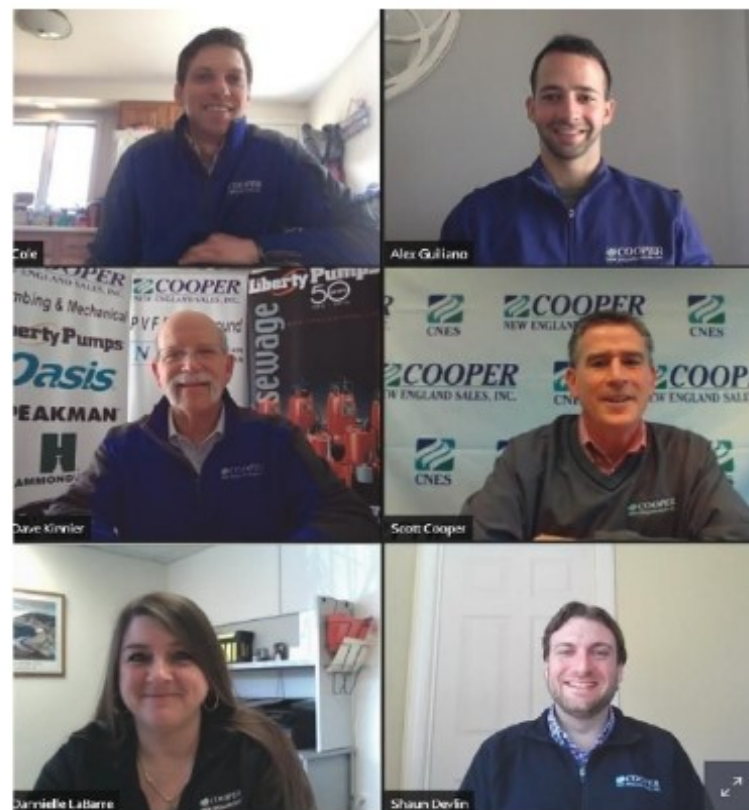
are hard-wired into everyone on our team. We believe it and it guides us every day. It's who we are."

All about teamwork

Hiring has been a tricky process, but Cooper is happy with the staff he has now.

"When you're a manufacturer's rep, it's a tricky dance, because you can't recruit your customer's people, and usually you can't recruit your manufacturer's people either," Scott Cooper says. "We don't want to take people from our competitors because frankly, we have our own way of doing things, and we've found we usually don't love the people we get when we've taken from a competitor."

"We prefer to bring people on from either the trade side of the industry or from outside the industry — people with sales experience being on the road," he adds. "You name it, we've tried it. It's been a mix of everything: Career fairs, word of mouth, working with a recruiter, etc. The people we have here come from all those different avenues. It is without a doubt the hardest part of my job — to bring



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the people on. Over the years, we've learned to be very picky, which makes it even harder."

Dave Kinnier, sales leader, CNES Sales, has been working with Scott Cooper for more than 25 years.

"It's a relationship built on honesty, integrity and mutual respect for each other," he says. "We both have different selling styles, so we are always able to bounce things off one another. We all really believe in the team concept, and I am enjoying helping the new members of our team learn and grow. Scott is a leader that cares about the people he works with. He continues to provide a long term vehicle for both personal and financial growth."

Having been with the company for more than 13 years, **Dannielle LaBarre**, customer service representative, believes in the team the company has put together.

"We enjoy working together," she says. "I think it is very important for a team to work well with each other. Our sales team does such a great job, not only educating our customers, but those in the office as well. If one of us needs to know how something works, we know we can call any one of them. We also have a great leader who helps us find our strengths and encourages us every day to do the best job we can."

"For the past 20 years I have seen Cooper New England Sales keep their family-owned business core values, yet continuously evolve to present products for today's ever changing needs," says **Mary Lucibello**, office administrator. "It has been a fun challenge to work as a team that is committed to improvement and growth."

Market breakdown

For Scott Cooper, about half the company's time is spent with the wholesale distributor, and the other half of the time with what Cooper considers to be the influencers: Engineers, contractors, project owners, developers, code officials, etc.

"You're not doing yourself justice, and you're not doing justice to your manufacturers, if you're not penetrating those other areas of the mar-

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ket," he says. "And it shows, because our business growth has been very evenly distributed."

The rep company's first line was a company called All-Power Pumps, which is now out of business. The oldest line — 40 years — is Liberty Pumps. Another line that is almost as old is GPK Products/Indiana Seal, a specified fitting line in the waterworks utility side.

CNES is one of Liberty Pumps longest standing independent rep agencies, says Liberty's **Randy Waldron**, vice president of sales and marketing.

"Over the past four decades, the Cooper agency has helped build the Liberty brand into one of the strongest pump lines in the New England market," he says. "They were small, just like we were, and our two companies have grown alongside each other over the years. They have adapted well to a lot of the changes within the industry. That has made them very progressive navigating a lot of the changes within our distribution channel over that time frame — and in

our products as well. Our products have advanced, becoming more technical and complex, and they have been able to adapt to representing those products over the years. They've earned this award and we are very proud to have them represent us."

Other lines include: Organized Living, Neptune, Krowne Metal, North American Pipe, Hammond Valve, Foremost Bath, Copperhead Industries, Riifo PEX, Kraus USA, Lateral Connection, Oasis Lifestyle, Midland Industries and Speakman.

"Just like when we hire a new team member, the first thing we look for in a line is if this line is a fit for us," Cooper notes. "Do we think we can work with the sales management team from that manufacturer? And also, how does it fit in with our existing lines? Is it going to tie in with the products that we represent? If it's going to take us too far out of what we do, we're probably not the right candidate for them."

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The company's staff is spread out through the territory, and those that reside in the different areas each call on the local customers.

"The Cooper New England group puts in the work for our customers, with continued support and a customer first attitude," says **Joe Hoffman**, national sales manager, GPK Products/Indiana Seal. "Hard work pays off. The business is about relationships, and that's what Cooper New England is about. A huge congratulations to them on this achievement."

"This is well-deserved honor for a close-knit group of professionals," says **Nick Giella**, national sales manager, Krowne. "Cooper New England has played a vital role in developing Krowne's business in the New England market over the past 10 years. They have a true team mentality that promotes collaboration and highlights the strengths of each individual contributor, building deep relationships with distributors and contractors throughout their territory. They always seem to have a 'next up' opportunity for us to focus on together. Their ability to keep pushing forward is something we value immensely."

Aiming for growth

Cooper's goals for the company go back to its core values. He hopes to see growth, but the company itself wouldn't look drastically different from who they are today.

"We'd simply be a better version of who we are today, digging deeper into the channel where the in-

fluencers play and still partnering with distributors," he says. "But again, what we're finding is we're spending more time with the distributors who work with us, support our lines and help us open doors. It's a two-way street."

He also thinks it is important to invest more into the professional development of team members. He sends his inside people for different offsite trainings relative to computer technology and customer service. Once a sales person has been with the company for three years, he sends them for professional certification (Certified Sales Professional, CSP). Those more senior members, who have been with the company 10 years, he sends to get their CPMR (Certified Professional Manufacturers Representative) designation.

"We've also been investing in our ability to deliver training and demonstrations into the field," he says. "Especially now with everything that's going on with the virus and video technology, even though we had started doing some of that already. A lot of specifiers we've been calling on, we're already doing lunch and learns for them remotely. So I can see that growing. We have also invested in a new product demonstration trailer, which is ready to go on the road this spring, as soon as the virus situation subsides."

At the end of the day, Cooper believes in always going the extra mile.

"We get the extra touches in," he says. "We follow up with people, make the extra phone call, send the extra email, make the extra visit to the job site, etc. We do whatever we need to do in order to make sure everyone who works with us has a good experience."

Customer service after the sale is critical and Cooper sees it as one of the key differentiators in the market.

"We have to service everybody," he says. "When you're a manufacturer's rep, that's the number one thing that you can control. So we're obsessed with it. We really train; we invest and reinvest, and train some more. It is very, very important. I can tell you there's not a week that goes by when I'm on the road with my guys that I don't get a compliment from a customer about what a great job our office is doing. If you do a good job for people, you get rewarded." **pme**