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**Kurt Bassuener  
and Bill Goodreau**  
MWS Associates, Inc.  
**Tapping Into the  
Hunting Market**

**Agreeing on Market  
Development Fees**

**Work as a  
Team With Your  
Principals' Staff**

Plus Legally Speaking  
**Putting Humpty  
Dumpty Back  
Together Again**



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# Tapping Into the Hunting Market

BY JACK FOSTER



According to Conservation Force, a Metairie, Louisiana-based organization whose stated purpose is “to expand and secure conservation of wildlife, wild places, and our outdoor way of life,” hunting in the United States generates \$25 billion dollars in retail sales and more than \$17 billion dollars in salaries and wages each year, while creating sales tax and state and federal income tax revenues for government agencies and public services of all kinds.



Firmly positioned in the middle of this multi-billion-dollar market is MANA member MWS Associates, Inc. According to Kurt Bassuener, who together with Bill Goodreau, heads the Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, rep firm, “We service the hunting and outdoor industries, which are very specialized. Every member of our team is a passionate outdoorsman. We are blessed to be able to combine business with our passion and to sell specialty products in which in-depth product knowledge is critical. Our agency services all channels within our industry from small independently owned ‘mom and pop’ retailers to national omnichannel retailers and everything in between.”

Currently covering 37 states, MWS Associates specializes in servicing all levels of trade from in-

dependent retail, outdoor specialty retail chains, farm and home, distribution, and e-commerce. Describing his beginning as a rep serving this unique market, which dates back to 1989, Bassuener recalls, “After a short stint with another agency, I started a 28.5-year career with Mike Wieck Sales. After I enjoyed a long career there working as a territory/key accounts manager and then VP of marketing, Mike decided it was time to step aside and enjoy retirement. I became more involved with the day-to-day operations of the agency for a number of years in order to make the transition as smooth as possible. Once a date was set for Mike Wieck Sales to shut down, MWS Associates was started.”

After Wieck’s retirement in 2018, Bassuener formed



Opposite: Kurt Bassuener (top), and Bill Goodreau, head the manufacturers’ representative firm MWS Associates, Inc. Above: The team at MWS Associates (left to right): Britt Huey, Brad Snyder, Scott Darnell, Brian Cassium, Dave Noll, Cody Bassuener, Kurt Bassuener, John Volkman, Deb Bassuener, Adam Flod, Bill Goodreau, Seth Stevens, Tim Humphreys, Dave Roberts, Dustin Youtz, Billy Hudalla, and Josh Byrd.



MWS Associates with Goodreau, a long-time associate at Mike Wieck Sales.

### Start-Up Challenges

Looking back to his agency's beginnings, Bassuener says, "As those who have done it before know, there is a great deal that goes into starting a new business. You're faced with everything from forming the corporation to legal, accounting, insurance, software, contracts, hiring, etc. It was a daunting task to say the least."

Having faced and met those start-up challenges, today MWS comprises 17 total team members including two owners, 14 territory managers, and one office manager. That team covers a 37-state territory which includes basically all states east of the Rocky Mountains.

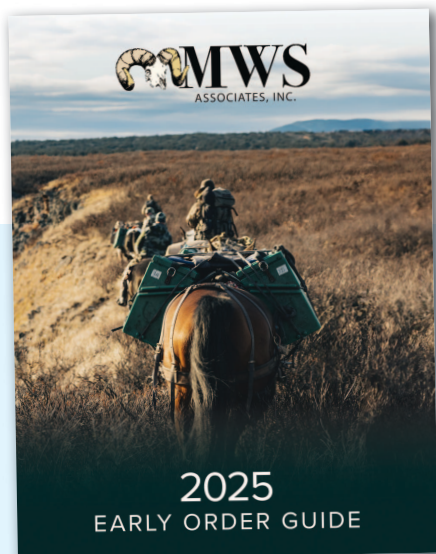
When it comes to maintaining or adding to the staff that serves that multi-state territory, Bassuener explains that "We've been blessed to have zero turnover other than by retirement. I have worked with many of our team members for more than 20 years; previously at Mike Wieck Sales and now with MWS Associates. We originally covered a 24-state territory and expanded into the Southeast region in 2018 and the TALO (Texas, Ar-

kansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma) in 2019. We added four regional managers to cover those territories, all of whom were seasoned industry professionals. We found our new team members through industry contacts. We do, however, receive resumes on a near-weekly basis from people looking to combine their talents with their passion by finding a career in the outdoor industry. We don't sell widgets. We sell cool, technical products and to do so, you need a high level of technical knowledge and experience. Not everyone possesses a high level of professionalism, sales ability, ethics, organizational skills, and product knowledge. It's a rare combination and we are fortunate to have the team we do."

### Finding Principals

If that's how MWS finds and retains its valued personnel, here's how it does the same when it comes to locating prospective principals. "Our industry is a small one and industry connections account for most of the prospective new principals we talk to. We receive a lot of calls from principals after they research recommended rep agencies after talking to their retail customers. We also focus a great deal of attention on our website and

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Further promoting its brand, MWS Associates produces a 64-page Early Order Guide that includes all of its manufacturers' early order specials along with a branding page for each, a territory map and bio for each of the agency's team. According to Kurt Bassuener, "We mail it annually to approximately 1,200 retailers within our territory. We are the only rep group in our industry that produces and mails a catalog like this, and it is an extremely useful tool to promote the brands we represent and feature their pre-book programs."

**“I have worked with many of our team members for more than 20 years; previously at Mike Wieck Sales and now with MWS Associates.”**

are close to launching more updates soon. For us, our website’s purpose is twofold: 1) to advertise/market our agency and 2) to be our online resume.”

Bassuener adds that in the agency’s negotiations with principals, “We haven’t had experience when it comes to receiving retainers or shared territorial development fees from manufacturers. That is not a common practice in our industry. We do, however, require a higher commission level for new companies for which a great deal of pioneering is needed.”

#### **Understanding Reps**

He adds, “Our better manufacturer partners are very appreciative of what we do and how important we are to their business as a whole. Some, not as much. Largely, I don’t believe that they totally understand what we do, how hard our team works, how complex our job is or how strong our relationships are with our customers. I always welcome principals to travel with our guys. They usually walk away with a new understanding and appreciation and are exhausted after a few days of travel.”

Staying on the subject of relations with principals, Bassuener adds, “Looking back over the years, I’ll acknowledge that we should have been more proactive in seeking different manufacturer/principal partners early on in our company (and with our previous agency). We had a very strong ‘book’ to start with, but we had a few that were not ideal partners. I’ll admit we had a tendency

## **MWS Associates File**

**Location:** Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin

**Founded:** 2018

**Website:** [www.mws-associates.com](http://www.mws-associates.com)

#### **Products and Services:**

Specialize in the outdoor and hunting markets.

**Territory Covered:** The 37 states east of the Rocky Mountains, including Upper Midwest, MINK, TALO, Southeast and Northeast.

to be too loyal to long-term partners while not admitting when it was best to part ways and find a better partnership. We took loyalty to a fault.”

In addition to relying heavily on its website to deliver the MWS message to principals and customers, Bassuener adds that social media is also a valuable component used to deliver the agency’s sales and marketing message. “Our company has two Facebook pages: one that is open to the public and the other, a closed group. Our closed-group account is used for posting new product information, specials, rebates, product reviews, instructional videos, etc. It has proven to be a quick and effective tool to reach a portion of our customer base.

“Although not technically social media, we focus on e-blasts to our customers as well. Our database allows for us to categorize all of our accounts and thus be very targeted to ensure our e-blasts are always relevant to the recipients.”

Acknowledging that technology in the presence of everything from web pages to social media has changed the way business is conducted, Bassuener went on to say that nothing works better than in-person contact with people. “An unbelievable number of changes have occurred in my nearly 35 years within the industry. Hav-

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## “We look at our retailers and manufacturers as partners and if our partners are successful, we will be too.”

ing said that, our approach is still that a ‘boots on the ground,’ ‘face-to-face’ relationship-based formula in which we focus on our customers’ and principals’ best interests works best for us. We look at our retailers and manufacturers as partners and if our partners are successful, we will be too. With that said, we continually look at technology to make us more efficient and to be more valuable to our partners. If you are not moving forward, you are going backward. We constantly evaluate how we are doing things and ask how we can improve our business and how we can become more valuable to our partners. We go by the philosophy that there is always room for improvement.

“As our retailers have become more sophisticated, our infrastructure, systems and team have as well. That includes everything from the software (MarketTime) we use for order writing, product data management, reporting and commission reconciliation to the skills needed for account management.”

### Reporting Demands

He adds that another change he and his agency have encountered is that “Reporting demands from our manufacturers have increased exponentially. We spend a great deal of time filling out sales reports and updating on account status. This takes much, much more of our time than in the past.”

Obviously, MWS and Bassuener have successfully negotiated the above-mentioned changes quite well. At the same time, he notes there are still some things that can weigh heavily on his mind. “There are always concerns. One major concern is our key principals/manufacturers being bought by private equity. Been there, lived that. Thankfully, we are blessed to work in an

industry where most companies are privately held and owned by people who are passionate about their business. Private equity is concerned about profit alone, mostly short-term and it often destroys the culture that a company was built on.

“Another current concern we face is the overall state of the economy. Inflationary effects limit disposable income, and we sell products that are ‘wants’ not ‘needs.’ We are seeing downward pressure on some categories of goods. Consumers in many cases are settling for mid-tier goods vs. top-tier or scaling back purchases altogether.”

Then there is the concern of having a succession plan in place for the agency. According to Bassuener, “We have a basic plan in place. We know who is next in line for succession after Bill and I retire and have discussed the elements with them. I’d add that MANA has some great resources in this area, and I look forward to better exploring all options before choosing a pathway. Our key manufacturers know our approximate timeline and successors. We also have a plan in place in case something happens to either Bill or me. The transition would go smoothly.”

Speaking of MANA and the agency’s membership in the association, he adds that “The previous agency that I worked for was a MANA member for years. I really just overlooked joining when we started MWS Associates. MANA is a great resource for all things manufacturers’ rep related. It offers insight into every aspect of our business. The independent sales rep business is unique in many ways and to have a resource like MANA is invaluable.”

*MANA welcomes your comments on this article. Write to us at [mana@manaonline.org](mailto:mana@manaonline.org).*

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